

Breaking norms of society

[Society](#)



“ Norms are rules which specify appropriate behavior in a given range of social contexts. A norm either prescribes a given type of behavior, or forbids it” (Giddens 1997, p. 583). The importance of norms in our society is not negotiable. Those who follow the norms of our society have better chances to find stable social position, and will hardly lose it. Those who do not treat social norms properly or neglect them risk being rejected by the society within which they exist. However, as we live in extremely diverse society, breaking the norms of society does not always lead to uniformly negative reactions.

My experiment has proved this assumption. It is not rare that informal (folkway) norms go against the formal (legal) norms of the specific society. For example, many nations still praise the principles of vengeance against the legal ban on murder. In his book, Newman spoke about the military obedience and the legal limits of warfare in the hands of a military. For a military during the war, “ one legal justification for killing is warfare” (Newman 2006, p. 18), but this does not mean that killing should be massive and meaningless. I had a chance in my life to get acquainted with the people of Russian origin.

I always kept to the thought that Russian people preferred drinking alcohol during their parties, and when I was invited to their party I was prepared to that. I was already looking for excuses because I did not drink. However, it was the informal norm that each guest had to taste the host's home-made alcoholic beverage. No one evidently knew or even imagined that I would be able to refuse and to simply neglect that long lasting informal tradition. Yet, I did refuse. In addition, I simply did not like drinking. I felt uncomfortable,

because I knew that I was breaking an important norm, and still I could not step over myself.

As I later understood, different nations treated their informal traditions in a similar way: they preferred when other people followed them even against their will. Legal norms are frequently neglected or are not respected, but not to follow informal traditions often means not to be accepted into particular society. Moreover, I was extremely interested in tracing the reactions of other people towards my behavior. When I was offered a drink, I refused. I was surrounded by Russian people, and my refusal was extremely surprising to them. Later I noticed that the different people displayed different reactions in terms of my refusal.

I spent the rest of the party with them, and I was hearing them talk about me here and there. Some people openly expressed their displeasure with my behavior as they were talking to each other. The host of the party came up to me and whispered that I should not have behaved as that. I also heard that some people still did not reject my position, and they were even trying to justify my conduct. No one with the exception of the host has expressed his view openly. None of the Russian guests ever tried to explain me why my conduct could be negative or why I would have to follow their traditions.

Ultimately, I was never invited to this house again. From the viewpoint of sociology, norms are rather complex sets of meanings for a particular society. As I have later understood it was extremely important for the Russian host that I followed their principles and informal traditions. The fact that I was never invited to their house again told much to me, but the reactions of people at the party had told me even more. First of all, I now

realize that the reaction of people at breaking informal norms is never uniform, even when these people belong to one particular society, the norm of which was broken.

It is very probable that they had also broken their own norms for various reasons, and breaking social norm once may turn into the regular process of routinization. Once people “ have taken the initial step, they are in a new psychological and social situation in which the pressures to continue are powerful” (Newman 2006, p. 25). One important fact meant a lot to me: none of those who supported me in my behavior openly expressed his position to me. This was evidently another way not to break the norms of the society in which they found themselves, and not to face the risks of being rejected.

When my Russian acquaintances stopped contacting me, I understood that I was not accepted into their society due to my refusal to drink. Probably, they could accept such conduct within their circles, but not from a person who was actually alien to their traditions as I was. I still realize that if I appeared in similar situation once again, I would have to analyze the informal traditions before I came into a new society, and would openly explain to other people why I would not perform certain actions. Conclusion

That type of experiment had led me to several serious conclusions. First, societies treat their informal traditions more obediently and more thoroughly than they treat the commonly held legal norms. In my case, there were no legal norms which would make me drink, yet I was not accepted into the Russian society again. Second, the reaction of other societal members at breaking folkway norms is never uniform. In this context, there are far

reaching sociological implications for such conduct: even when people accepted my position they never expressed it openly.

This meant that for a person to be within his own society was much more important than expressing his own thoughts and ideas which went against the norms and traditions of that particular society. I have expected that the reaction of people towards my conduct would be somewhat different: I anticipated that they would be open with me and would even try to explain why my behavior was wrong or to what consequences it could lead. However, they tried to create an impression that they were indifferent towards what I had done.

Their indifference was only surface, because in their minds they were trying to weigh all pros and cons of my actions. It was evident that the way people treated their folkway traditions ultimately determined the way they behaved towards those who broke those traditions. The host of the party was one of those for whom informal traditions were extremely important: he was the only one to express his displeasure to me. References Giddens, A. (1997). *Sociology*. London: Polity Press. Newman, D. (2006). *Sociology: Exploring the architecture of everyday life*. 6th edition. Pine Forge Press.