

Breaking Social Norms

To explore the power of social norms, you are asked to complete this participant-observation assignment. Social norms are the various prescriptions for socially accepted or expected behaviors. For example, it is expected that you face a certain way when you get on an elevator. It is expected that when talking with someone you leave a comfortable distance between the two of you.

For this exercise, you are to choose a social norm that prescribes a specific environmental or ethical behavior and then violate it. Your violation must be witnessed by others. You may do this in groups or two or three, but you must write up the one-page reflection independently.

Turn in a one-page (single-spaced page using 1" margins and 12-point font) summary and reflection of the norm you violated, the way you felt and the reactions of people around you.

1. Describe what you did to break the norm. Describe the situation, and what is normally expected, and what you did that was not consistent with those expectations.
2. Describe other people's reactions to what you did. Did you think they behaved the same way they would have if you had not broken the norm? Or did they respond differently? Did they ignore you? Did they sanction you, and if so, how--verbally? Non-verbally?
3. Describe how you felt. Did you "chicken out?" at some point? Start laughing? Blush? Was it fun? Exhilarating? Mortifying? Did you feel like your behavior looked natural or staged and deliberate as you were breaking the norm?
4. Describe anything else of note that occurred. Is it possible that your perceptions of what other people were thinking were biased by the fact that you were embarrassed? Did anyone else follow your lead (i.e., did you set a NEW norm, by breaking an old one)?

IMPORTANT: You may violate any environmental norm you choose, as long as you don't risk harming yourself or others, and as long as your behavior doesn't reflect badly on the University or this class. You should not do anything that breaks a law, disrupts a class or public event, hurts or threatens others, or includes taking or damaging other people's property.

Due: Oct. 11 in class
Points: 15 points

Source: This assignment is drawn from one designed by Prof. Hodges at the University of Oregon (<http://pages.uoregon.edu/sdhodges/456/pap1-456.htm>).