

Exercise on Violating Social Norms

You will complete this assignment *in place of* coming to class this Wednesday, October 28th.

Assignment Due: Monday, November 2nd, at the beginning of class. Your assignment must be typed and printed.

Although everyday norms underlie all we do, they remain largely unnoticed and unquestioned. The best proof of the existence of these norms lies in our reactions when they are violated. The following suggestions for proving the existence of norms are based on an exercise used by sociologist Jodi O'Brien at Seattle University.

You must select one of the following norm violations:

- *Make a purchase in a department store, and offer to pay more than the listed price. Try to convince the clerk that you think the merchandise is worth the price you are offering.
- *Talk to yourself in a public place. (You will probably want to plan ahead a little in terms of what you will be talking about so that you don't run out of things to say to yourself.)
- *Stand or sit close to a stranger during the course of an ordinary conversation (such as engaging in conversation while waiting in line to pay for something, while sitting in a commons area on campus).
- *Select an occasion – going to class, going on a date, going to the library—and dress differently from the expected “uniform.” Treat your attire as absolutely appropriate to the circumstances. (Remember, your clothing has to be noticeably violating the normative dress code.)
- *In a restaurant offer to pay for your meal before you order it and then order everything in reverse: order dessert first, then the main course, then appetizers, then drinks.

It is particularly important that this behavior be neither flagrantly bizarre—such as going to class dressed as a chicken-- nor a violation of the law. Such acts do not address the power of the subtle, unspoken norms that, symbolic interactionism argues, make social life orderly. Also, do not do anything that might seriously inconvenience or humiliate someone else or put you in danger. Finally, make sure the norm has something to do with keeping order in face-to-face interactions. For instance, coming to class 10 minutes late violates a social norm, but it does not disrupt interactional order. Above all, remember to treat your violation as perfectly normal. You must give the impression that what you are doing is perfectly acceptable and ordinary.

As you conduct your exercises, record your own feelings and reactions as well as those of the people around you.

- A) What were people's initial reactions?
- B) What did they do to try to “normalize” your behavior?
- C) How did you feel breaching this norm?
- D) Was it uncomfortable? If so, why?

E) If possible, try also to debrief your subjects afterward: Tell them what you were really doing, and then interview them regarding their interpretations of the experience. You are likely to collect additional information on how people attempt to “explain away” unusual and strange circumstances and how they attempt to restore order to the situation.

F) What are the implications of these sorts of “experiments” for understanding human behavior and the nature of social order in this society?

What you will turn in to me (must be typed):

- 1) the norm violation – details of how you carried out the violation
- 2) time, date, and place the violation occurred
- 3) answers to Questions A-D above
- 4) address any/all responses of subjects who were debriefed (Question E above)
- 5) answer Question F above