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How Norms Depend on the Presence and Status of Observers: The Relational Contingency of Everyday Behaviors in 90 Societies

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Abstract

Norms are fundamental to social life, but basic questions about how they are affected by social context remain. Specifically, how do normative constraints depend on the presence and status of observers, and how do such relational contingencies vary across cultures? Using data from more than 25,000 individuals across 90 societies, we test several hypotheses linking normative constraints on everyday behaviors (like arguing, laughing, cursing, kissing, and crying), to the presence and status of observers. We find that behaviors widely viewed as appropriate in private become more constrained in the presence of others (an observer effect), and even more so when those others are higher in status (a status effect). Both observer and status effects are culturally universal, but the observer effect shows more variation across cultures. In particular, we find that observer effects are larger in societies that emphasize individualizing moral foundations, that is, avoiding harm and unfairness to others, because these societies are more permissive of actions when others are not around. The relative stability of status effects across cultural contexts suggests a universal tendency to defer in social hierarchies. These findings shed light on the relational contingency of everyday norms and underscore the role of such norms in the maintenance of social order and reproduction of inequality.

Keywords

social norms, status hierarchies, cross-cultural sociology, moral foundations, social psychology

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Introduction

A foundational issue in the social sciences is how societies achieve social order, that is, patterned and coordinated social life (Hechter and Horne 2009; Wrong 1994). The classic solution to the problem of order centers on the power of social norms: the shared rules that constrain behavior and make social life predictable (Bicchieri 2016; Coleman 1990; Hechter and Opp 2001; Parsons 1937). Norms set expectations and order interactions, thereby producing social order (Horne and Mollborn 2020).

Classic sociological accounts emphasized how norms become internalized: people adopt social expectations as their own and thus behave appropriately even when unobserved (Mead 1934; Parsons 1951; see also Hitlin and Vaisey 2013). These internalization approaches allow for the contextual nature of norms (e.g., that a specific behavior is permitted in private but not in public), but more contemporary work centers the role of observers and fellow interactants in explaining the emergence and persistence of norms (Coleman 1990; Horne and Mollborn 2020). In these accounts, norms typically exist because behaviors create costs or benefits for others; these externalities make the presence of observers central to norms.

Following externality-based approaches, we argue that norms constraining many everyday behaviors are not fixed, context-free rules but relationally contingent (Horne and Mollborn 2020): whether a behavior is judged acceptable depends critically on who is present and where those observers sit in interactional hierarchies. Two basic but largely unexamined features of social contexts capture this contingency. First, we argue, the presence or absence of observers matters: behaviors permissible in private become constrained when others are present. Second, the status of observers matters: higher-status others are generally more socially valued (Ridgeway 2014) and tend to elicit stronger demands for deference and respect than do

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peers (Anderson 2025; Berger, Cohen, and Zelditch 1972). As a result, norms can reflect and reproduce existing inequalities. Together, observer and status effects show how social observers activate and amplify different normative constraints on otherwise similar acts.

We make a second contribution by addressing whether and how these relational processes vary across cultural contexts. Cross-cultural work has shown that norms vary in systematic ways across societies (e.g., Eriksson et al. 2021; Gelfand et al. 2011). But prior work has not addressed whether culture moderates the effects of observer and status effects on norms. Drawing on theory and research distinguishing "individualizing" moral concerns (avoiding harm or unfairness to others) from "binding" moral concerns (respect for authority, group loyalty, and purity) (Graham et al. 2011; Haidt 2008), we ask how observer and status effects vary with a culture's moral priorities.

To test our arguments, we analyze data from a recent large-scale experiment on *everyday behaviors* (e.g., arguing, talking on a phone, crying) involving over 25,000 individuals across 90 diverse societies. The study of constraints on everyday behaviors was central to early sociological work on norms (e.g., Garfinkel 1964; Goffman 1963). Although attention in moral psychology has shifted to moral norms (e.g., Graham et al. 2011; Haidt 2008), much of social life is governed by rules surrounding mundane behaviors. We follow more recent studies that investigate constraints on these types of behaviors (e.g., Gelfand et al. 2011; Przepiorka and Berger 2016).

Across behaviors and societies, the data reveal a clear and remarkably consistent pattern. For the everyday behaviors we study, normative constraints are activated by observers: behaviors that are permissible in private become substantially less acceptable when others are present. Moreover, the presence of higher-status observers, namely those who occupy higher rank in an organizational hierarchy, produces an additional tightening of constraints beyond that elicited by peers. Finally, while both observer and status effects appear to be culturally universal, we find cultural variation in observer effects. Specifically, observer effects are stronger in societies and among individuals who prioritize individualizing morality. This is because these societies and individuals are especially permissive of behaviors that occur when no observers are present. The status effect, on the other hand, shows less cultural variation. Thus, whether observers matter differs by culture, but culture matters less for whether status amplifies observer effects.

These findings advance theory and research in three ways. First, they document the relational contingency of normative constraints on a wide class of everyday behaviors. Second, they extend theories of status into the domain of norms, highlighting how normative constraints reflect and reproduce social hierarchies. Finally, they link these interactional processes to broader cultural variation in moral priorities.

The Presence of Others as Drivers of Normative Constraints

Classic sociological theories of norms emphasized internalization: through socialization, external rules become incorporated into the self, such that people follow norms even when unobserved (Mead 1934; Parsons 1951). This tradition helps explain why people often behave honestly in anonymous settings (e.g., Cohn et al. 2019). Internalization approaches allow for the possibility that individuals internalize context-specific norms (e.g., "one should not do this behavior in public, but it is okay in private"). But more contemporary perspectives underscore the importance of externalities—the costs or benefits behaviors impose on others (Coleman 1990; Horne 2009). From this account, norms emerge to regulate behaviors that affect observers or other interactants.

If norms exist to manage these externalities, then the presence of others should be decisive for a wide range of behaviors: actions tolerated in private may become inappropriate once others are present.[1] Despite the centrality of this issue to sociological theory, we know surprisingly little about how the

mere presence of others shapes normative judgments of everyday behaviors. Our first contribution is to bring this overlooked question into focus.

Status as a Source of Normative Constraint

Beyond whether anyone is present, the status of observers should also shape normative expectations. Prior work shows that status affects the diffusion and enforcement of norms. For instance, high-status individuals' behaviors establish expectations about how much group members should contribute to collective actions (Simpson, Willer, and Ridgeway 2012), have greater influence over smoking norms (Robalino and Macy 2018), and act as catalysts for successful social interventions to change bullying norms (Paluck, Shepherd, and Aronow 2016). Similarly, high-status individuals are more likely to enforce rules, and low-status individuals are more likely to be sanctioned for norm violations (Bowles and Gelfand 2010; Winter and Zhang 2018).

We argue, however, that status also matters prior to enforcement by structuring how behaviors are judged in the first place. Specifically, research shows that higher-status others are more socially valued (Ridgeway 2014; Ridgeway and Markus 2022; Thye 2000) and viewed as more deserving of deference (Anderson 2025; Berger et al. 1972) than their lower-status counterparts. From an externalities perspective, the perceived "costs" of behavior should be greater when those affected occupy higher-status positions, such that status acts as a multiplier of externalities. If so, we should expect stricter norms governing behaviors in front of high-status others compared to peers, suggesting a mechanism through which norms reflect and reinforce social inequalities.

Audience and Status Effects across Cultures

We expect that all cultures will tend to constrain behaviors to a greater extent when others are present. Similarly, although the particulars of status (e.g., whether a given characteristic is associated with high status) are culturally determined, basic status processes appear to be culturally universal (Ridgeway 2019). Thus, we expect to find both observer and status effects across cultures. However, the strength of these effects may vary across cultures.

Moral Foundations Theory (Graham et al. 2013; Haidt 2001) argues that similar behaviors will be judged differently when audiences rely on different moral foundations. Two broad classes of foundations are central. *Individualizing foundations* prioritize fairness to others and not harming others, whereas *binding foundations* prioritize group loyalty, obedience to authority, and purity.[2] Cross-cultural research shows that societies can be usefully conceived as varying along a single dimension, namely the extent to which they prioritize individualizing versus binding moral foundations (Strimling et al. 2025). Furthermore, Eriksson and colleagues (2025) show that this dimension can be fruitfully applied to explain norms constraining everyday behaviors.

Prior work suggests that societies that prioritize individualizing versus binding foundations tend to be permissive of individual expressiveness in general (Eriksson et al. 2025). But our focus is on whether and how observer and status effects are moderated by individualizing versus binding foundations. Because individualizing foundations emphasize avoiding harm or unfairness to others, we should expect larger observer effects in societies that prioritize individualizing morality. Specifically, when others are present, societies that prioritize individualizing morality should constrain behaviors. But if no one is around to be affected by a person's behavior—and thus others cannot be harmed or negatively affected—that act should be more permissible in more individualizing societies.

The same logic also applies at the individual level: people who more strongly endorse individualizing foundations place greater weight on harm-avoidance and fairness-to-others, both of which become

more normatively relevant when others are present. We therefore expect that societies and individuals that prioritize individualizing versus binding foundations will show larger observer effects.

It is less clear whether or how societal and individual differences in individualizing versus binding morality will moderate status effects. On the one hand, as noted above, research shows that higher-status individuals are viewed as worthier and are more socially valued. From this perspective, societies (and individuals) higher in individualizing morality may be particularly disapproving of behaviors that harm, or that are unfair to, higher-status others. Alternatively, given that binding morality typically emphasizes respect for authority structures (Graham et al. 2013), we might expect status effects to be stronger in cultures that place more emphasis on binding morality. Whether and how individualizing versus binding morality moderates status effects is thus an open question.

The foregoing arguments suggest the following hypotheses:

> **Hypothesis 1:** Across cultures we should observe more normative constraints on behaviors when others are, versus are not, present (*observer effects hypothesis*).
>
> **Hypothesis 2:** Across cultures we should observe more normative constraints on behaviors that occur in the presence of higher-status others, versus peers (*status effects hypothesis*).
>
> **Hypothesis 3:** Observer effects will be stronger in societies and among individuals that prioritize individualizing (versus binding) moral foundations (*cultural variation in observer effects*).

Given competing arguments for whether and how individualizing versus binding moral foundations will moderate status effects across cultures, we empirically investigate but do not offer a hypothesis for how status effects will vary across cultures.

Methods

Data and Participants

We use data from the Global Study of Everyday Norms (GSEN), conducted between July 2023 and May 2024 by members of the Global Social Norms research network (https://www.globalsocialnorms.org/). The dataset includes 28,313 participants (age 18 or older who provided consent and committed to give thoughtful answers[3]) from 90 societies (see Figure 1), spanning diverse cultural, geographic, and linguistic contexts. We recruited participants via social media, email, survey organizations, and class announcements. Compensation depended on the research site and included monetary payment, vouchers, and course credit. The samples include university students and non-students.

Although we refer to "society" or "culture," our data are based on convenience samples, collected at specific research sites within each society. To ensure our samples allow for meaningful cross-cultural comparisons, the GSEN dataset contains several measures specifically included to assess the extent to which the data parallel those from representative samples in each society. Table A1 in the online supplement shows that correlations between these measures in the GSEN and the World Values Survey are large and positive, indicating that cross-society variation captured in our samples tracks variation in nationally representative samples on the same constructs.[4]

The GSEN included three different modules: one that manipulated the types of situations in which behaviors occurred (Eriksson et al. 2025), one that manipulated the gender of the person acting (Eriksson et al. 2026), and the observer context module used here, which manipulated the presence and status of observers using a within-subjects experimental design. Across all three modules (totaling 15 distinct conditions), the GSEN measured the appropriateness of 15 different behaviors (detailed below), for a total of 225 unique scenarios. Each participant rated up to 60 scenarios across the three modules.

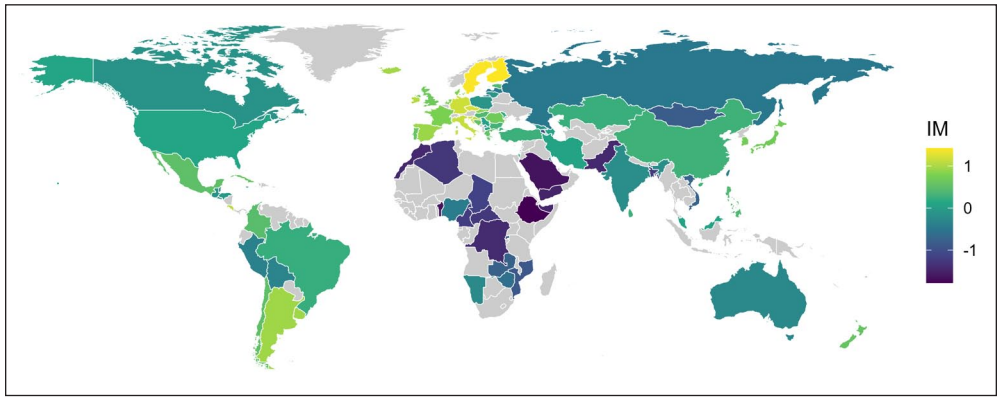

Figure 1. Individualizing versus Binding Morality (IM) Scores in the 90 Societies That Participated in the Study.
Note: As examples, samples with the most binding scores are Ethiopia (–1.78), Saudi Arabia (–1.65), and Benin (–1.63); samples with the most individualizing scores are the Czech Republic (1.22), Sweden (1.41), and Finland (1.42).

We use data from the 25,384 participants who rated at least one scenario from the observer context module. Participants rated between 1 and 23 (9.8 on average) of the 45 behavior × observer context combinations (15 behaviors × 3 observer contexts). Society-level sample sizes range from 16 participants in Mongolia to 988 in Pakistan (median society $N = 242$ participants). Participants were adults age 18 or older with mean age 27.3 (SD = 11.7); 57.8 percent are women, 33.4 percent are men, 1.8 percent other, with 7.1 percent missing data on gender. Among participants, 54.9 percent are students, 23.5 percent are non-students, with another 21.6 percent missing data on student versus non-student status. Sample characteristics for each research site are given in Table A2 in the online supplement.

Experimental Design

The three observer contexts were higher-status others ("in front of management/professors"), peer observers ("in front of colleagues/classmates"), and no observers ("when no one else is around"). The dual referents language (e.g., "management/professors") was deliberately chosen to span working-adult and student respondents. The status manipulation is based on relational comparisons rather than the absolute equivalence of roles across societies. For instance, the status condition ("in front of management/professors") is intended to capture locally meaningful high-status roles. We do not assume these roles have identical meanings across societies. Instead, our primary analyses focus on contrasts between peers and higher-status observers, thus allowing study participants to map these categories onto culturally meaningful hierarchies.

Of the everyday behaviors included, 12 were taken from prior work on everyday norms (Gelfand et al. 2011; see also Price and Bouffard 1974), including arguing, laughing, cursing, kissing, crying, singing, talking, flirting, listening to headphones, reading a newspaper, bargaining, and eating. An additional three (resting, shouting in anger, and using a mobile phone) were added, for a total of 15 behaviors that vary in expected social impact (e.g., reading a newspaper versus shouting in anger) and cross-cultural relevance (Eriksson et al. 2025; Gelfand et al. 2011). These are everyday, publicly observable, non-flagrant behaviors that can plausibly be performed in the presence of others, and that may be normatively contested in some situations and some societies. They are not representative of all normatively relevant behaviors. For instance, they do not include behaviors with strong externalities or moral weight (e.g.,

theft or violence) or behaviors that nearly everyone would consider permissible only in private (e.g., sex acts and many personal hygiene behaviors). Our findings therefore speak specifically to social contingencies of ordinary everyday behaviors, rather than normatively or morally relevant behaviors in general.[5]

For our dependent measure, participants were told: "we are interested in your judgement of the appropriateness of some particular behaviors in some particular settings." For each behavior × observer context combination, participants were asked to "indicate how appropriate or inappropriate it is" on a scale from "extremely inappropriate" (1) to "extremely appropriate" (6). Responses capture participants' own normative evaluations. We rescaled responses from –2.5 to +2.5, with more positive values denoting higher levels of approval.

We also measured the extent to which participants prioritize individualizing versus binding morality using a nine-item scale that presents participants with a series of dilemmas. (See Table A3 in the online supplement for the full scale.) For instance, one item reads: "What do you think is the right thing to do in a situation when someone must either (A) cause pain to someone or (B) be disloyal to their kin?" Participants responded on a five-point scale (Definitely A, Probably A, Can't say, Probably B, or Definitely B). We code these items so that higher values represent a greater prioritization of individualizing concerns (item A in this example) over binding concerns (item B). This approach thus measures the relative prioritization of a given moral foundation when individualizing and binding foundations are in conflict, a typical approach for assessing value hierarchies (Greene et al. 2001; Murphy, Ackermann, and Handgraaf 2011). For brevity, we refer to this measure as IM. We impute ratings that were missing on each item (between 2.8 and 4 percent; see Part B of the online supplement for details on missing data). To obtain separate individual- and society-level measures of IM, we estimated a two-level confirmatory factor analysis using *lavaan* (Rosseel 2012). Details of this approach, and information on scale reliability and convergent validity, are given in Part B of the online supplement.

Control Variables

For control variables, we used the Human Development Index (HDI; UNDP 2024) matched to the survey year and standardized across societies. We also control for religiosity, given its association with individualizing versus binding morality (Eriksson et al. 2025), measured with the item "How strongly do you believe in God (or gods)?" on a scale from 0 to 100. We control for religiosity at the individual (standardized within societies) and society level (with the average score subsequently standardized). We also control for age (standardized globally), gender (coded 1 for women, 0 for men/other), urban/rural residence (coded 1 for rural and 0 for urban), and student status (coded 1 for student and 0 otherwise).

Analytic Strategy

To isolate the effects of observer context, our analytic strategy proceeds in several steps. We combine descriptive contrasts with multilevel modeling to examine both within-society and cross-societal patterns. Our primary analyses center on two focal contrasts, computed from respondents' appropriateness ratings: *observer effects*, or the difference in appropriateness ratings when a behavior occurs in front of peers versus when others are not present; and *status effects*, or the difference in appropriateness ratings when a behavior occurs in front of higher-status others versus peers.

Mixed-Effects Modeling of Appropriateness Ratings

We estimate models separately for each behavior rather than aggregating behaviors into a single outcome. This choice reflects our interest in norms as behavior-specific

rules versus manifestations of a single latent dimension of behavioral constraint. Aggregating behaviors would impose homogeneity assumptions about the meaning and regulation of qualitatively distinct acts (e.g., crying versus bargaining) that are neither theoretically warranted nor, as we will see, empirically supported. Our goal is thus not to estimate an average effect across behaviors, but to assess the consistency and variation of observer and status effects across different behaviors.

To account for the nested structure of the data (individuals within societies), we estimate mixed-effects models using the *lme4* package in R (Bates et al. 2015). The intraclass correlation coefficient across the 15 behaviors ranged between 2.5 and 12.6 percent, indicating non-trivial between-society variance. For each of the 15 behaviors, we estimate models of the form

$$Y_{ic} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{10} Peer_{ic} + \gamma_{20} Hi_Status_{ic} + u_{0c} + u_{1c} Peer_{ic} + u_{2c} Hi_Status_{ic} + \varepsilon_{ic}$$

where Y_{ic} is the appropriateness rating for individual i in country c. The model includes fixed effects for observer context (with no observers present as reference), random intercepts by country (u_{0c}), and random slopes for observer context effects (u_{1c} and u_{2c}), allowing both the baseline appropriateness and the magnitude of observer/status effects to vary across societies. We estimated marginal means and pairwise contrasts using the *emmeans* package (Lenth 2023) with asymptotic degrees of freedom, appropriate for the large sample sizes in multilevel models.

Cultural Moderation by Individualizing versus Binding Morality (IM)

To assess moderation, we estimate models that include interactions between observer context and IM at both the individual and society levels. This allows us to test whether IM moderates observer and status effects. We estimated moderation models separately for (a) observer effects (comparing no observers versus peers conditions) and (b) status effects (comparing peers versus high-status conditions). The moderation model was

$$\begin{aligned} Y_{ic} = {} & \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{10} ObsContext_{ic} + \gamma_{20} IM_{ic} \\ & + \gamma_{01} IM_c + \gamma_{30} ObsContext_{ic} \times IM_{ic} \\ & + \gamma_{02} ObsContext_{ic} \times IM_c + u_{0c} \\ & + u_{1c} ObsContext_{ic} + u_{2c} IM_{ic} + \varepsilon_{ic} \end{aligned}$$

This specification includes (1) main effects of observer context and individual- and society-level IM, estimated as factor scores in a two-level confirmatory factor analysis (see Part B in the online supplement); (2) cross-level interactions between observer context and IM at each level; and (3) random slopes for both observer context and individual-level IM. Including random slopes for individual-level predictors is critical in multilevel models to avoid inflated Type I error rates for cross-level interactions (Heisig and Schaeffer 2019).

Robustness Checks with Control Variables

To assess the robustness of IM effects, we include controls for religiosity (both individual- and society-level belief measures), given its correlation with individualizing versus binding morality (Eriksson et al. 2025). We also control for HDI to ensure results are not simply driven by societal-level differences in wealth and education. Additionally, we include controls for gender, age, and urban/rural residence. Missing values on gender and urban/rural residence were imputed using two-level binary imputation. Finally, we examined student status as a control variable; however, due to the high rate of missing data (21.6 percent), student status was not imputed. Instead, we conducted a separate robustness analysis that includes student status and its interaction with observer context together with complete cases analysis (see Tables A6 and A7 in the online supplement). Control variables were standardized to facilitate comparison of effect sizes.

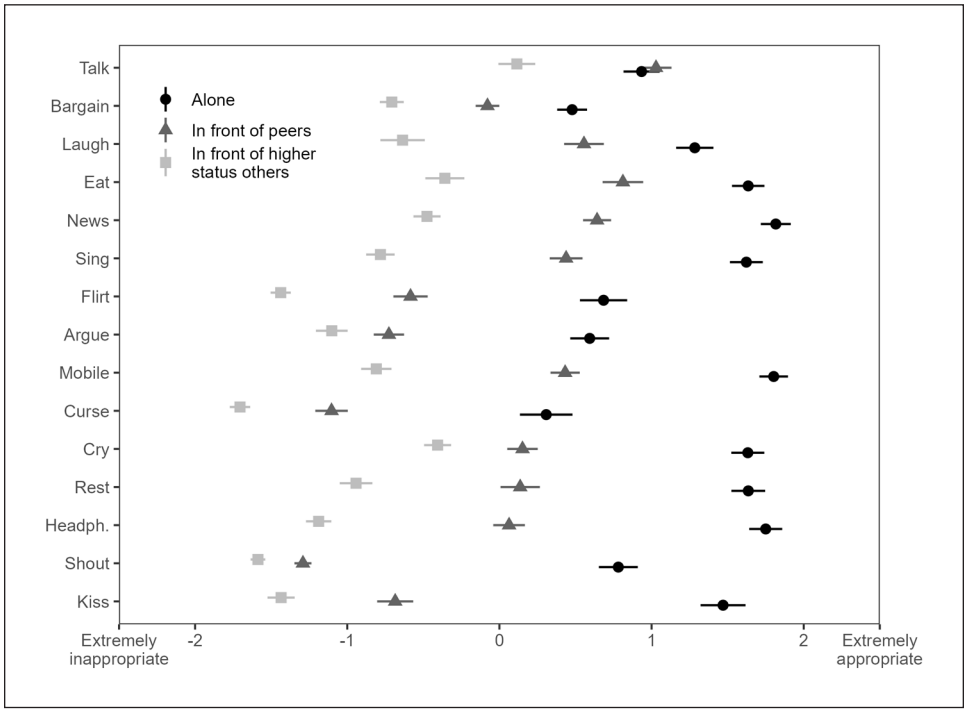

Figure 2. Appropriateness Ratings of Behaviors across Observer Contexts.
Note: Ratings are measured on a scale from –2.5 to 2.5. Estimated marginal means (with 95 percent confidence intervals) are shown for each behavior when performed alone, that is, no observers are present (black circles), in front of peers (dark gray triangles), and in front of higher-status others (light gray squares). Estimates are derived from mixed-effects models with random intercepts and slopes by society to account for nested nature of the data. Behaviors are ordered by the observer effect. The figure shows that, with only two exceptions (talking and bargaining), behaviors are rated as most inappropriate when performed in front of high-status others and most appropriate when performed alone.

All multilevel models were estimated using restricted maximum likelihood (REML) and converged normally. We report unstandardized coefficients with 95 percent confidence intervals based on the Wald method. For moderation effects, we interpret coefficients as the change in the observer context effect per one-unit (or one standard deviation, for standardized controls) increase in the moderator.

Results

How Observers Alter the Appropriateness of Behaviors

Figure 2 shows aggregated ratings, across societies, for all behaviors in the three observer context conditions. The figure shows that all behaviors are considered appropriate when observers are not present. For all but one of the 15 behaviors (talking), norms are more stringent in front of peers than when no observers are present, supporting Hypothesis 1. Estimated across all societies, this effect ranged from –0.56 (for bargaining) to –2.15 (kissing) points on the five-point appropriateness scale for the remaining 14 behaviors. The difference between the average appropriateness ratings when no observers are present versus in front of peers was negative in all 90 societies for eight of these 14 behaviors and negative in the vast majority of societies for the remaining six behaviors. In short, these results provide clear and remarkably consistent evidence that, for the everyday behaviors we consider here, the presence of others leads to normative constraints.

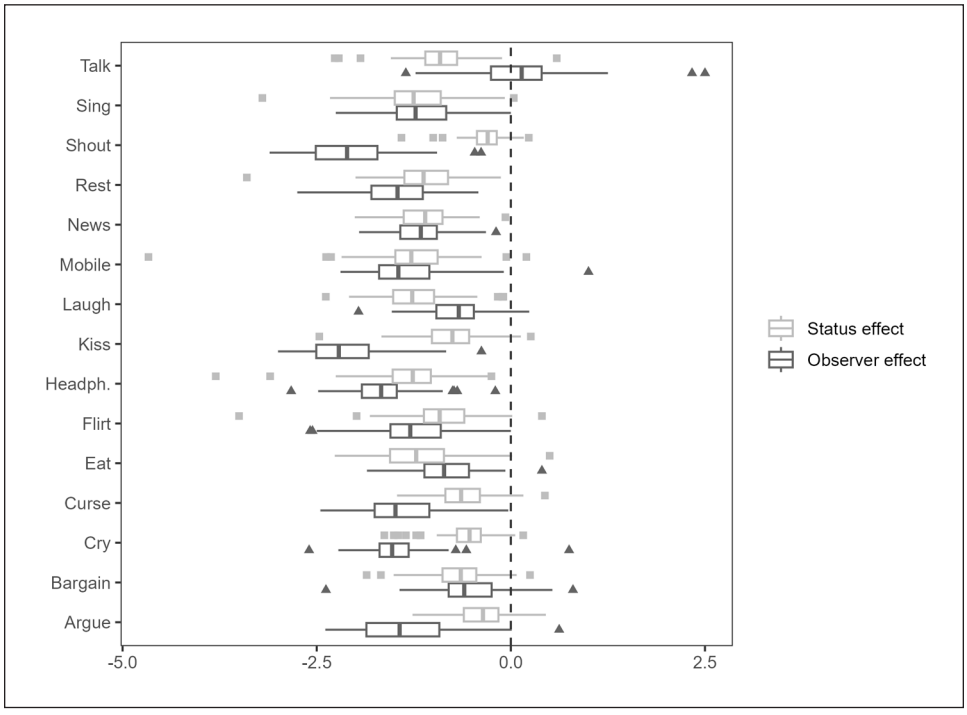

Figure 3. Cultural Variation in Observer and Status Effects.
Note: The observer effect (dark gray triangles) represents the difference in appropriateness ratings for behaviors performed in front of peers versus when alone (no observers are present); the status effect (light gray squares) reflects the difference between ratings for behaviors performed in front of higher-status others versus peers. Boxplots show the distribution of these effects across societies: the central line indicates the median, the box spans the interquartile range (IQR), and whiskers extend to 1.5 × IQR; dots represent outliers. The near total absence of data to the right of the dashed line (indicating no effect) shows that the direction of the observer and status effects are nearly universal.

The observer effects just described also provide a baseline for status effects, that is, normative constraints on behaviors in front of higher- versus equal-status others. These findings reveal an additional layer of normative constraint, with all 15 behaviors being more constrained in front of higher-status others across most societies (see Figure 3). The size of these effects ranged from –0.30 (for shouting) to –1.25 (for listening to music in headphones). These results clearly and consistently support Hypothesis 2.

Observer and Status Effects across Societies

The results above show that both observer and status effects are nearly universal; here, we ask whether there is cultural variation in the strength of these effects and, if so, why. First, as shown in Figure 3, we find some cultural variation in both observer and status effects. But the boxplots reveal that observer effects are generally larger in magnitude and display greater cross-cultural variability than do status effects. Status effects are more consistent across societies, as reflected in the comparatively narrower boxes and whiskers.

Earlier we argued that individualizing morality emphasizes the importance of avoiding negative consequences (harm and unfairness) for others. Following Hypothesis 3, we expect larger observer effects in societies and among individuals that prioritize individualizing foundations. On the other hand, we noted competing arguments for whether and

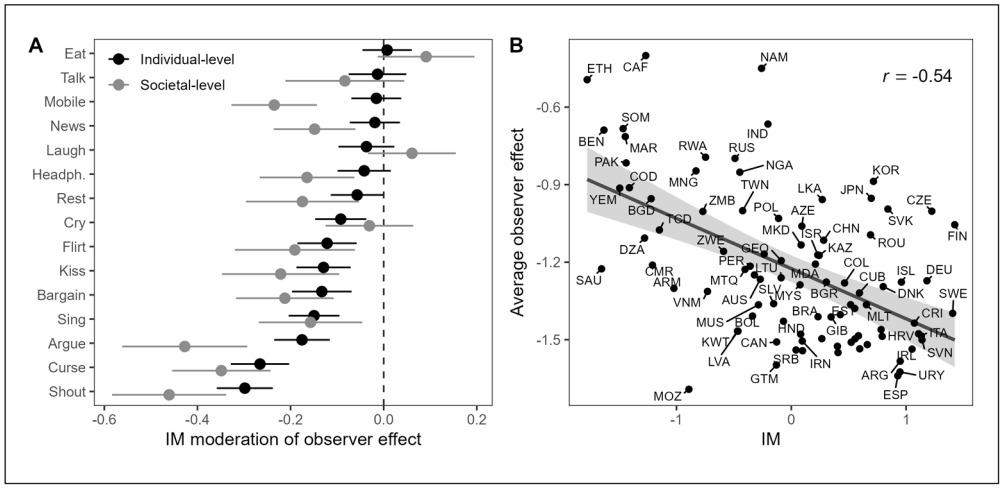

Figure 4. Moderating Effect of Individualizing versus Binding Morality (IM) on Observer Effects.
Note: Panel A illustrates, for each behavior, the moderating effects of IM (individualizing versus binding morality) at the individual and societal levels on the observer effect (peers versus no observers present) for each behavior, with ellipses representing 95 percent confidence intervals. Points are coefficient estimates from mixed-effects models that include interactions between observer context and IM at both levels; horizontal bars are 95 percent confidence intervals. Panel A shows stronger observer effects given more individualizing morality for nearly all behaviors, for the individual- and societal-level measures. As further illustration, Panel B depicts the society-level association between IM and the average observer effect, with societies identified by their three-letter ISO country codes.

how a relative emphasis on binding moral foundations would affect the strength of status effects.

How the Observer Effect Varies with Individualizing versus Binding Morality (IM)

We consider IM at both the individual and societal levels. Figure 4A shows clear evidence for the prediction that observer effects are larger in societies, and among individuals, that prioritize individualizing morality. For the individual-level measure, observer effects are larger for people with more individualizing values for all but one behavior (eating). For the societal-level measure, observer effects are larger in magnitude for people from individualizing societies for all but two behaviors (eating and laughing). The latter association is illustrated in Figure 4B, which plots the average observer effect against IM of societies ($r = -0.54$). In the online supplement, Table A4 shows these effects are robust to controls and Table A6 shows that they hold in an analysis of complete cases that includes student status as a control. The latter analyses show that student status effects are generally positive, indicating more approval of the behaviors by students. However, for most behaviors (12 of 15), we do not observe any interaction between student status and the observer manipulation, suggesting the treatment effect of observer presence does not depend on student status.

Larger observer effects in more individualizing societies could be driven by greater approval when others are not present, greater disapproval when others are present, or both. Figure 5 shows appropriateness ratings for the three observer contexts in high- and low-IM societies. The figure shows that the larger observer effects in higher-IM societies illustrated in Figure 4 are driven by greater approval when observers are not present, rather than greater disapproval when observers are present. This is consistent with cultural prioritization of individual liberty, so

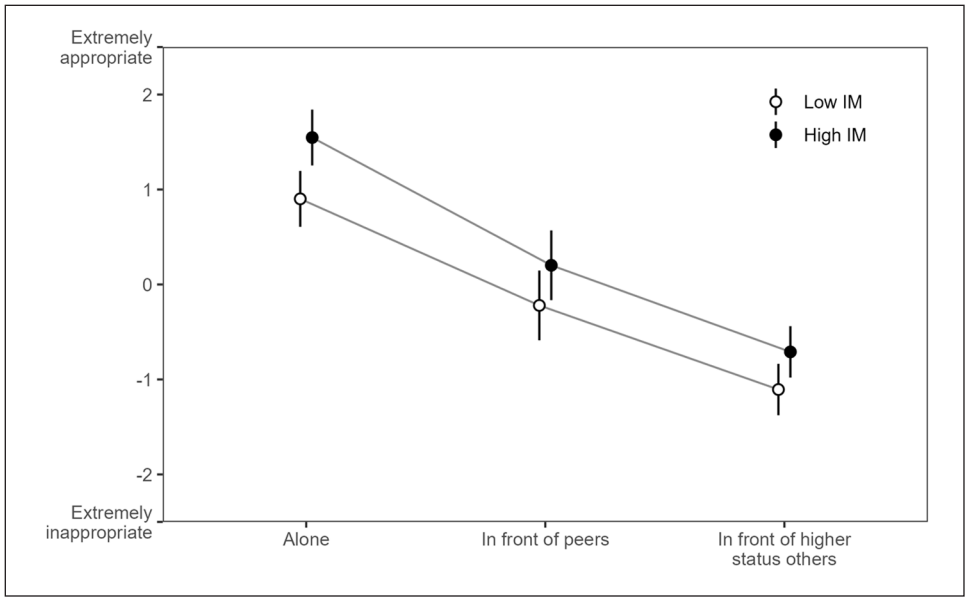

Figure 5. Mean Appropriateness Ratings by Observer Condition and Societal Individualizing versus Binding Morality (IM).
Note: For each observer condition (*x*-axis) the *y*-axis shows appropriateness ratings averaged across the 15 behaviors. Open and filled circles mark the mean values in the 45 societies below the median on societal IM (low IM) and the 45 above (high IM), respectively. Estimates are estimated marginal means from a mixed-effects model fit taking both society and behavior nested structure into account; error bars are 95 percent confidence intervals. The figure shows that the stronger observer effect in higher-IM societies illustrated in Figure 4 is driven primarily by greater approval of behaviors when alone.

long as others are not negatively affected, in individualizing societies (Graham et al. 2011).

How the Status Effect Varies with Individualizing versus Binding Morality

Status effects show a different pattern of moderation by IM (Figure 6A). At the individual level, people with higher individualizing values show larger status effects for all but two behaviors (eating and arguing), consistent with the argument that status acts as a multiplier of externalities in cultures that prioritize individualizing morality. At the societal level, however, we find no relationship between average IM and the magnitude of status effects (Figure 6B).

This pattern—an individual-level effect combined with a null societal-level effect—implies that compositional and contextual effects operate in opposite directions. In our multilevel models, the absence of a contextual effect would produce equal coefficients at both levels; when they differ, the difference represents the contextual effect (Enders and Tofighi 2007). The null societal coefficient therefore suggests that while individuals who prioritize individualizing morality show greater status deference, living in a society where such values predominate is associated with weaker status effects, net of individual values—and these opposing tendencies approximately cancel each other out. We return to this pattern in the Discussion. These findings remain robust when controlling for religiosity, HDI, and demographic variables (see Table A5 in the online supplement). Table A7 in the online supplement further confirms these findings in an analysis of complete cases that includes student status.

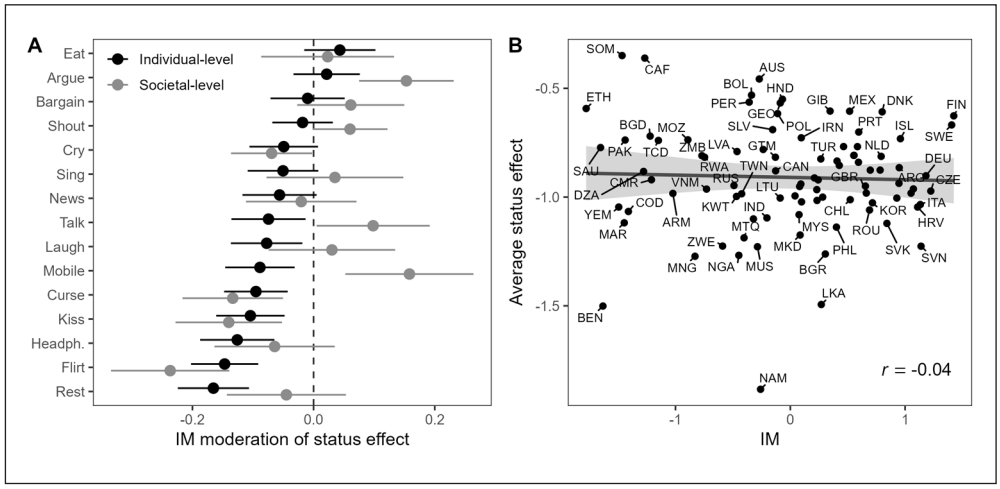

Figure 6. Moderating Effect of Individualizing versus Binding Morality (IM) on Status Effects.
Note: Panel A illustrates, for each behavior, the moderating effects of IM (individualizing versus binding morality) at the individual and societal levels on the status effect (higher-status others versus peers). Points are coefficient estimates from mixed-effects models that include interactions between status context and IM at both levels; horizontal bars are 95 percent confidence intervals. Panel B depicts the null association between IM and the average status effect at the society level, with societies identified by their three-letter ISO country codes. The finding that individuals higher on individualizing values show larger status effects, but that societal-level individualizing values do not affect the strength of status effects, implies contextual effects, as discussed in the main text.

Discussion

We set out to examine how interpersonal contexts shape normative constraints on everyday behaviors. Using data from over 25,000 respondents across 90 societies, we find strong evidence that, for the behaviors we study, norms are not fixed rules that apply independent of circumstance, but are instead relationally contingent (Horne and Mollborn 2020). Behaviors that are permissible in private become constrained when others are present, and even more so when those others occupy higher positions in a status hierarchy. These results point to the fundamentally social nature of norms governing everyday behaviors: it is largely the observer and their status that activates normative expectations.

Our arguments and findings make three contributions to a sociological understanding of norms. First, they shed light on a simple but important issue in the social sciences, namely how the mere presence of others shapes normative judgments about the appropriateness of everyday behaviors. Our results suggest that for the class of everyday behaviors we studied, normative constraints are primarily activated by the presence of others. This aligns with externality-based accounts of norms (Coleman 1990; Horne 2009), where the costs or benefits to observers prompt social regulation.

That normative constraints are about limiting behaviors when others are around may seem obvious, especially from an externalities approach. But to our knowledge, this basic effect has never been demonstrated across a range of behaviors. Moreover, the extent to which the presence of others matters varies across cultural contexts. Societies and individuals that put greater emphasis on binding forms of morality draw less distinction between whether others are present when judging the appropriateness of behaviors, compared to societies and individuals that prioritize individualizing morality.

Second, we show that the status of observers matters: across societies, higher-status observers elicit stronger normative constraints than do peers. This extends theories of status

beyond their more typical domain of influence to constraints on everyday behaviors. In doing so, our findings underscore that norms are not merely about abstract rules of propriety, but about relational hierarchies of worth and deference (Horne and Mollborn 2020). In particular, these results are consistent with Ridgeway's (2014, 2019) work on interactional inequality, suggesting that variation in normative constraint is a key mechanism through which everyday deference and status hierarchies are reproduced.

Third, although both observer and status effects appear to be cultural universals, our analyses reveal systematic cross-cultural variation in the magnitude of these effects. Whether observers are present matters more in societies that prioritize individualizing moral foundations, consistent with the argument that a key driver of normative constraints in individualizing cultures is whether others may be negatively affected by a behavior. That we also found these effects when operationalizing individualizing morality at the individual level suggests the result is not driven by confounding variables at the societal level, providing strong evidence for the robustness of the effect.

Importantly, larger observer effects in more individualizing societies were driven by greater approval when others are not present (Figure 5). This is consistent with prior work showing that individualizing morality prioritizes individual liberty (Graham et al. 2011), as long as others are not harmed. Differences across cultures are smaller in the presence of others (Figure 5), suggesting that stronger constraints in public settings are a consistent feature across societies.

Unlike our findings for observer effects, we found a difference between how individual-level values and societal context affect status effects. Specifically, respondents who prioritized individualizing versus binding morality showed larger status effects. But the moderating effects of individualizing morality disappeared at the societal level. As noted above, this highlights the importance of distinguishing compositional from contextual processes.

We suggest two (non-competing) mechanisms that may drive the negative contextual effect, where living in a more individualizing cultural environment attenuates the individual-level tendency toward status-based deference. First, perhaps in societies that place greater cultural emphasis on binding morality, status hierarchies carry heavy collective normative weight, given binding morality's emphasis on authority (Graham et al. 2011; Haidt 2008). In those societies, even individuals who do not personally value individualizing morality may still expect others to defer to high-status persons, given broader cultural norms or collective pressures governing hierarchy and authority.

Another possibility is that individualizing societies promote more egalitarian norms. In this account, while individuals who prioritize individualizing morality believe others should defer more to higher-status others, more individualizing societies may feature competing cultural norms prescribing equality or the attenuation of hierarchies. This may limit the extent of status-based deference. Future research might investigate whether one of these mechanisms, or some other process entirely, best explains how and when culture moderates status effects. That said, we think the more important finding is the near-universality of both status and observer effects across the societies we studied.

Future research could also examine how these effects operate in more moralized or politically contested domains, rather than the everyday behaviors we studied. For instance, does the presence and status of observers matter more, or less, for moral norms? Addressing this question would help delineate the scope of the effects reported here. Another direction is to examine how sanctioning sustains these norms, combining vignette-based cross-cultural data like ours with experiments measuring norm enforcement.

It is also important to delve deeper into the structural bases of the effects we observed. For instance, our status condition combined several analytically distinct, but empirically intertwined, dimensions of hierarchy, most notably status, but also evaluative authority

and power. Both classical theory (Weber 1978) and contemporary work (e.g., Magee and Galinsky 2008; Thye 2000; Willer, Lovaglia, and Markovsky 1997) distinguish status from power, but also emphasize that these dimensions co-occur in nature and jointly structure expectations of deference in everyday interactions. Our manipulation therefore does not isolate a "pure" status effect, but instead captures status as it ordinarily exists, embedded in multidimensional relational hierarchies. Future research could orthogonally manipulate the relative status and power of observers to further clarify how distinct bases of hierarchy shape normative judgment.

Similarly, we manipulated whether actions occurred in the presence of equal or higher-status others, but not lower-status others. The sociological theories of status we built on suggest we should expect a weakening of norms in the presence of individuals lower, versus equal, in status. But a competing hypothesis is that any context where interactants are differentiated by status may produce greater constraints on those involved. Which of these patterns occurs is an open question.

Conclusions

Norms place powerful constraints on everyday social behaviors, but our findings show that these constraints depend critically on the presence and status of observers. Everyday behaviors that are innocuous or approved of when done in private become constrained in public and constrained even more in the presence of high-status others. These patterns hold across cultures, but the strength of observer effects varies with societies' moral foundations.

Theoretically, this work highlights the importance of an agentic understanding of social constraints (Horne and Mollborn 2020), where norms are relationally contingent rules rather than universal imperatives, at least for the everyday norms we investigate here. This deepens our understanding of how these relational contingencies shape two outcomes that are fundamental to sociology and related disciplines: social order and social inequality. Social order requires constraining individual action that may negatively affect others to achieve mutually beneficial cooperation, as reflected in the powerful observer effects we observed. At the same time, the status effects we observe underscore the role of normative constraints in reproducing existing status hierarchies. Because everyday behaviors are frequent, often visible, and regularly evaluated, even small differences in their regulation may have durable effects on social order and inequality.

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Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability

The data and analysis scripts required to replicate the results reported in this article are available at https://osf.io/rde2s/overview?view_only=702b9c509d3744e7b462f9ce7ce0bbce.

Notes

1. Some behaviors constrained by norms, like littering, create negative externalities even when no one is present at the time the action occurs. (Even if I litter only when you are not around, you still experience the cost of dirty sidewalks later.) But other behaviors, like cursing or displays of affection, generally do not create externalities for anyone who is not present to observe them. We address the latter types of behaviors here.
2. We use the terms "individualizing" and "binding" foundations because they are established in the moral- and cultural-psychology literatures. These terms can be understood sociologically as reflecting a distinction between liberal-expressive values, which prioritize individual autonomy in the absence of direct harm, and structural-deferential morality, which prioritizes the maintenance of social hierarchies and institutional traditions.
3. Specifically, participants read: "We care about the quality of our survey data. To get the most accurate measures of your opinions, it is important that you thoughtfully provide your best answers to each question in this survey. Do you commit to thoughtfully provide your best answers to the questions in this survey?" Those who answered "I will provide my best answers" or "I can't promise either way" were allowed to continue with the study; those who responded "I will not provide my best answers" were not. A total of 1,870 people who started the survey were not allowed to continue due to their responses on this question, because they were under age 18, or because they did not provide consent. An additional 2,022 participants dropped out directly after the screening questions and did not provide any data.
4. Relatedly, Eriksson and colleagues (2025) show that differences between students' and non-students' responses for the individualizing values measures are small and non-significant. Our robustness checks also show that our key findings do not depend on student status.
5. Three behaviors we studied (kiss, flirt, and bargain) require one other person. Two behaviors (talk and argue) generally require one other person but can, in principle, be self-directed. Our "no observer" condition asks

people to rate behaviors "when no one else is around." We believe participants understood "kissing when no one else is around" to mean no one other than the two people kissing, and similarly for flirting and bargaining. Tables A4 and A5 in the online supplement report results for each behavior separately; findings for these behaviors are not particularly distinct from other behaviors, offering evidence that (1) participants interpreted these items as we intended, and (2) these potentially ambiguous items are not driving our results.

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