

**Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink**  
**“International Norm Dynamics and Political Change” (IO, 52 no.4)**

This article reviews scholarship on norm and related ideational arguments, justifying and explaining the use for ongoing IR theoretical research.

**Firstly**, it charts the turn away from norms and normative concern and the subsequent return in recent years in IR.

The behavioral revolution and its enthusiasm for measurement in 1970s, which turned away, however, although neglecting normative concerns meant that the discipline to which norms returned in 1980s was forcing ideational scholars “to think much more rigorously about issues of research design, theoretical clarity, disciplinary cumulation, and parsimony” (890).

It raises three areas in which conceptual clarification is most pressing:

1. *Definitions*

- The necessity of keeping distinctions between, for example, “norms” as a set of behavioral rules and “institutions”.
- How the evaluative and prescriptive character of norms opens the way for a “long-overdue conversation with political theory and ethics” (916) by showing how the world “ought to be” becomes how the world “is”.

2. *Relationship between Domestic and International Norms*

- eg. Norms justify laws: an analogy can be drawn between how domestic norms become domestic laws, and how international norms acquire international force.

3. *Whether norms are agents of stability or change?*

**Secondly**, it examines the **evolution and influence of norms**.

**A. Emergence**

The origins and emergence of norms have two common elements:

1. *Norm entrepreneurs*, driven by ideational commitment, persuade state actors by constructing cognitive frames, while competing with other normative interests.
2. *Organizational Platforms*, for example NGOs, social movements and civil society networks which provide an arena in which norms can become institutionalized.

A “**tipping point**” is then achieved when a “critical mass” of states is persuaded.

*2 tentative hypotheses:*

- does not occur until one third of total states adopt the norm
- relies on critical states: those without which the achievement of the substantive norm is compromised

## **B. Mechanisms: “Norm cascade”**

This is the socialization of other states to become norm followers through

1. Legitimation – international legitimacy contributes to domestic legitimacy
  2. Conformity – belonging to the international group
  3. Esteem – pride about the adoption of an accepted norm
- 2) and 3) derive from psychological discourse (“peer pressure”) where individuals act out of personal motivation which affects national outcomes.

## **C. Internalization**

Norms become “taken-for-granted” with the result that they are both powerful and hard to discern. Therefore, often ignored by political scientists.

*What norms matter under what conditions?*

Finnemore and Sikkink suggest various hypotheses to be tested:

*Legitimation:* states in domestic turmoil or insecure about their international position will adopt norms readily

*Prominence* of norms and the actors promoting them

*Norm characteristics,* both clarity/specificity (norms that have evolved into acceptable propositions) and substantive (norms about human equality, physical integrity etc)

## **Thirdly, it examines the relationship between norms and rationality**

The claim is that actors strategize rationally to reconfigure preferences, identities, in social context – what they call “**strategic social construction**”. Norms and rationality are deeply intertwined. However, they acknowledge that an analysis of the relationship could run either way: “one could model rational choice as producing social knowledge as easily as one could model social context as a background for rational choice, depending on the empirical question being researched” (911).

The article highlights 4 areas of debate that the unpacking the relationship between norms and rationality would help to clarify: materialism, utilitarianism, choice and persuasion. It is argued that understanding choice depends on an understanding of social norms and rules that structure that choice.

The sharpening of these debates, it is claimed, will stimulate new conversations in IR theory.