Taking the Pressure: Unpacking the Relation between Norms, Social Hierarchies and Social Pressures on States

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International life is rife with social pressures on states. A myriad of norms set standards of behavior for states, ranging from gender equality expectations to sovereign credit standards and norms of conduct in conflict. Norms are garnered to exert social pressure in transnational advocacy campaigns that "name and shame" underperformers and norm violators (e.g. Keck and Sikkink 1998; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Price 1998; Busby and Greenhill 2015; Friman 2015). Inter-governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, private actors and some states also increasingly use performance indicators and rankings as a lever of social pressure to promote change in countries' performance or institutions (e.g. Kelley and Simmons 2015; Cooley and Snyder 2015). There are now hundreds of such indicators, most of which were created after 1990 (ibid).

States manage these pressures in various ways. States may recognize and give in to normative pressure, they may design strategies to give the appearance of norm abidance while minimizing costly or disruptive change, they may try to modify the norms themselves in order to improve their performance, they may reject the legitimacy and viability of the norms altogether and propose alternatives standards, or they may simply ignore the standard (e.g. Cooley 2015). States may even turn social stigma into a point of pride, turning norm transgression into a virtue (Adler-Nissen 2014). State adaptations to norms may furthermore come in stages or sequences, combining some of the responses listed above over time (e.g. Keck and Sikkink 1998:26; Risse, Ropp and Sikkink 1999). Indeed, a broad research agenda on international normative pressure has developed to describe state responses and to explain the variation in how states react to social pressure and shame.

In this article, we take a step back to ask a more fundamental question: what, more specifically, is it about social pressure as such that may prompt states to modify their behavior? What generates shame and embarrassment? An interest in exploring this question is something which should unite scholars across theoretical divides, as social pressure has developed into a major and broad research agenda in international relations (IR). A common point of departure in existing literature on social pressure is that public exposure of a gap between international normative standards and deeds renders the targeted state as a transgressor or underperformer, which produces embarrassment, shame or status anxiety (e.g. Keck and Sikkink 1998; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Shame can also be generated by public attention to hypocrisy, a gap between stated commitments and actual behavior (e.g. Finnemore 2009; Friman 2015; Busby and Greenhill 2015). In either case, shame and anxiety are understood to be produced through attention to and mobilization around these discrepancies between word and deed.

In this article, we argue that prior scholarship has paid insufficient attention to the central role of social hierarchies in producing social pressure. States do not simply respond to the exposure of a gap between a norm or commitment and actual deeds – they react to being compared as inferior or superior to other states by means of norms. Placement of states in a social hierarchy is a key dynamic in social pressure and in the generation of shame, we thus argue. As we will show below, prior literature on social pressure has tended to handle comparative normative judgments in two

ways. A number of scholars observe the importance of international status in passing, alluding to international social hierarchies without further elaboration. For instance, in Keck and Sikkink's groundbreaking work on the mobilization of shame, they make a brief claim that "moral leverage may be especially relevant where states are actively trying to raise their status in the international system" (1998:29). The recent scholarship on performance rankings likewise note in passing, without further development, that states "will be especially concerned when an international ranking highlights their hierarchical standing, either through 'naming and shaming' or by judging them against a peer state, rival, or regional grouping" (Cooley 2015:6). Second, although not explicitly employing the concept of hierarchy, scholars have also argued that norms "draw a line between normal and abnormal" (Epstein 2014:302), suggesting that a simple binary hierarchy is at work when social pressure is exerted. In short, the attention to social hierarchy in scholarship on social pressure is often parenthetical and generally approach social hierarchies in a binary manner, as a differentiation between states that meet standards and states that do not. A better developed understanding of more complex hierarchies is necessary to advance the understanding of social pressure in international life, we contend.

Departing from Towns' (2010 and 2012) explicit call for a conceptual link between norms and social hierarchies, we argue that the scholarship on social pressure would benefit from paying more attention to the centrality of social hierarchies in the dynamics and effects of social pressure on states. It is through international hierarchy – the ordering of states as superior and inferior – that social pressure is exerted and states are prodded into action. States positioned at the top or in the middle of social hierarchies can be expected to respond differently than states positioned at the bottom, as prior scholarship has shown. Developing Towns' claim, we then contend that social hierarchies come in several forms. Reflecting on the dynamics of these social hierarchies is important in and of itself, in our view, as it provides a deeper understanding of how norms generate shame, embarrassment or status anxiety. The primary aim of this article is thus to linger on the link between norms, social hierarchy and social pressure.

That said, understanding social hierarchies may also give us added purchase on explaining the varied ways in which states manage the social pressure of being rankedInternational social hierarchy may haveexplanatory force, we thus contend, along with the factors already identified in prior literature. In this article, we raise some of the ways that states may be expected to manage the pressure of social rankings – they may reject, seek to modify or accept the norm and hierarchy in question. We leave the more systematic empirical testing of the relation between different kinds of social hierarchies and the ways in which states manage norms for future papers, however.

The central claim in this article is that norms exert social pressure on states through the hierarchical relations they establish between them. In short, we then argue that norms differ from one another with respect to how they rank order states along two key dimensions. The first dimension has to do with whether the norm entails *relative* or *absolute* standards of assessment. Relative norms create zero-sum hierarchies wherein the improvement of some states necessarily entails the degradation of others. Such norms generate social hierarchy whereby states are pushed into intensely competitive dynamics, with states at the top, middle and bottom of the hierarchy paying close attention to the actions of others. In terms of how states manage these competitive social pressures, we suggest that unless a state has an actual shot at performing better than many others, relative norms may encourage alternatives to compliance, such as trying to modify or reject the norms and propose alternatives whereby the state in question would rank more favorably.

. In cases of absolute standards of assessment, in contrast, states are ranked based on how well they meet a set standard, with each state's relation to the norm understood to be independent of the

performance of others. Because absolute norms create hierarchy through set benchmark standards (rather than using the relative performance of states as the measuring rod for assessment), they hold out the possibility that every actor can rise to a higher-status position if all requirements are met. Importantly, with absolute norms, the social pressure to change is exerted primarily on those of lesser rank. States that have met the standards are largely off the hook and can simply maintain and gloat instead of finding ways to manage the pressure of poor rankings. However, there may be less incentive for those of lesser rank to reject or try to change an absolute norm and more incentive to attempt to meet the standard, as all actors could in theory meet an absolute norm. The dynamic can furthermore be expected to be less competitive, as the ranking of one state does not logically depend on the ranking of another.

The second dimension concerns whether a norm rank-orders and puts social pressure on states by *differentiating (heterogenizing)* them into distinctive categories or by grouping them *within one (homogenizing)* hierarchically ordered category of states (or both). Social hierarchy can take the form of inequality between states whose difference is emphasized or between states whose similarity is emphasized while they are nonetheless ranked along a continuum. Heterogenizing norms may encourage rejection and resistance among states defined as deviant. Homogenizing norms, which rank states while constituting and reproducing a sense of similarity, may in contrast result in states being more willing to modify their behavior.

In sum, a focus on social hierarchies – with dynamics that vary along our two central dimensions – provides a better understanding of what it is that exerts social pressure on states. Unpacking and illustrating this is the primary aim of this article. In doing so, the article also points to an additional set of factors that may help explain why states manage social pressure in distinctive ways. Again, putting these explanatory factors to a more systematic empirical test is beyond the scope of this article – ours is a first attempt to identify hierarchy factors that may be fruitful to explore further. To fulfill its aims, the rest of the article is divided into four sections. The first will discuss existing scholarship on international social pressure and how this scholarship has approached social pressure and international hierarchy. The second section then discusses a hierarchy-centered approach to social pressure, elucidating theoretically why hierarchy is so central for understanding the force of norms. The third section proceeds to distinguish conceptually between hierarchies and social pressure generated by absolute or relative norms, on the one hand, and by heterogenizing or homogenizing norms, on the other. Although the primary aim of this section is also conceptual, it will end with brief empirical illustrations of the four kinds of hierarchical dynamics that norms engender. The article ends with a concluding discussion of the importance of a hierarchy-centered approach for how states manage social pressure, sketching out some promising directions for future, more rigorous empirical research.

Norms and Social Pressure: The Missing Link of Hierarchies

Interest in the importance and dynamics of social pressure in international life dates back many decades. In the context of debates about international stratification in the 1960s, Helge Hveem highlighted the importance of social "blame" in international interactions (Hveem 1970). Hveem postulated that "high prestige or 'good reputation' is of some value to all actors in the system, and that consequently they will seek 'praise' to avoid 'blame'" (Ibid. p 49). Some twenty years later, Oran Young similarly argued that state representatives "are sensitive to the social opprobrium that accompanies violations of widely accepted behavioral prescriptions. They are, in short, motivated by

a desire to avoid the sense of shame or social disgrace that commonly befalls those who break widely accepted rules" (Young 1992:176/77). Since then, interest in the dynamics of social pressure on states – the pressure exerted through the distribution of social rewards and punishments (Johnston 2001:499) – in international politics has increased exponentially. Particularly since the late 1990s, after the publication of Keck and Sikkink's influential *Activists Beyond Borders* (1998) which drew attention to "the mobilization of shame," the politics of honor, status, social sanctions, shaming and stigmatization has become not only a large but also a vibrant area of inquiry, engaging scholars from range of theoretical approaches within IR (e.g. Young 1992; Klotz 1995; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Price 1998; Risse, Ropp and Sikkink 1999; Thomas 2001; Finnemore 2009; Lebow 2006 and 2008; Krebs and Jackson 2007; Krook 2016; Hafner-Burton 2008; Adler-Nissen 2014; Erickson 2014 and 2015; Zarakol 2014; Friman 2015). However, as we will contend in this section, there is not sufficient emphasis on social hierarchies as the mediating link between norms and social pressure in this IR literature. To the limited extent that hierarchical structures of norms have been considered in IR work on social pressure, hierarchies have largely been conceived of as binaries, and more complex gradations of rank have been overlooked.

To some scholars, social standing has importance in its own right – states act to salvage a tarred reputation as an end in itself, in response to being shamed as underperformers or pariahs (e.g. Erickson 2014 and 2015, Adler-Nissen 2014). For others, shaming and other forms of social pressure are a weak tool for change. Instead, social pressure primarily changes state behavior when it puts into play material rewards or punishments (e.g. Busby and Greenhill 2015. Keck and Sikkink 1998 also highlight the importance of material leverage). In this line of argument, states respond to social opprobrium when it generates a risk of economic harm or reduced security. Our aim is not to try to adjudicate between these different approaches. What we want to point out is that despite the disagreements on how and the degree to which social pressure operates on states, there is recognition that social pressure matters in world affairs across theoretical divides. Though to varying degrees, states are increasingly treated as social entities, embedded in an international context which invites scrutiny and enables the deployment of social pressure.

Virtually all analyses of shame, dishonor and stigma (or their companion concepts, such as honor and status) furthermore rely on some conception of hierarchy among states. Most of the interest has centered on how positions of states in various *material* hierarchies have affected their susceptibility to social pressures, however. Hveem (1970:56) was quite explicit about the relation between blame and material hierarchy, arguing that "the *stratification* of international systems is an important variable in the whole setting of blame tolerance and blaming effects" (emphasis in original). He argued that "topdogs" could withstand much more blame than "underdogs" "because they have so vast resources to draw compensation from or to deter blame with" (ibid, 55). Like Hveem, much scholarship continues to assume that the hierarchies of most relevance are material and not in need of much theoretical elaboration (e.g. Keck and Sikkinik 1998; Finnemore 2009; Busby and Greenhill 2015, Friman 2015). The argument about the importance of material hierarchy in social pressure is two-fold. On the one hand, lacking conventional capabilities, weak actors at the bottom of the hierarchy can turn to the strategic use of rhetoric, including naming and shaming campaigns, to exercise influence over more powerful states. On the other hand, materially weak states are also more susceptible to social pressure. As Cooley (2015:4-5) explains, "small states that are economically dependent on international donors or capital flows will care more about international rankings than states that are economically self-sufficient or relatively insulated from international lenders."

Some constructivist and critical approaches have in turn also addressed the social dimensions of hierarchies among states, pointing to the generation of in-groups and out-groups, vanguards and laggards as a dynamic in social pressure that prompts state action. In the large scholarship on international norms, some limited attention to social hierarchies in the mobilization of shame around norm transgression often appears (e.g. Keck and Sikkink 1998; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Greenhill 2010). For instance, Keck and Sikkink (1998:29) argue briefly that "countries that are most susceptible to network pressures are those that aspire to belong to a normative community of nations," suggesting a hierarchy at play between insiders and outsider. Greenhill (2010:133) similarly argues that states come under "pressure to accept the prevailing norms to gain acceptance from their peers and maintain their status within the community." However, in the norms scholarship, social hierarchies tend to be conceived of only as binaries between normative community insiders and outsiders. More complex gradations are thus overlooked. It is furthermore important to note that the attention to social hierarchies is parenthetical – one has to look long and hard in the literature to find these brief passages. These binary hierarchies are generally implied or mentioned in passing rather than highlighted, and the importance of social hierarchy for normative pressure has neither been highlighted nor fleshed out.

If the norms scholarship has paid insufficient attention to social stratification, social hierarchy has been a favorite starting point for the various critical approaches to international relations (e.g. Campbell 1992; Doty 1996; Rumelili 2004 and 2007; Hobson and Sharman 2005; Jabri 2012). In this line of work, the social nature of hierarchies and their constitutive function in producing the social identities, positions and roles of various actors in international politics are emphasized. These scholars have largely derived a conception of hierarchy from post-structuralism's emphasis on the construction of meaning through binary Self/Other oppositions (e.g. Campbell 1992, Doty 1996. They have lingered on how discourses in international affairs are premised on the construction of mutually exclusive and hierarchical subject categories of Self and Other, where the standards are relative and complicit in maintaining the superiority of Self over the Other. Such a conception of hierarchy remains prevalent in the recent studies on the "stigmatizing" and "infantilizing" effects of norms (Epstein 2012, Adler-Nissen 2014, Zarakol 2014). Importantly, critical approaches also address hierarchy as a primarily binary phenomenon of Self and Other, insiders and outsiders, thus overlooking other types of social hierarchies that establish more complex gradations.

In our view, it is also unfortunate that critical scholarship has disavowed the concept of norms, as the concept is one important analytical tool in the study of social meaning and practice in international affairs. The focus has instead been the cultural, racial, colonial, and gender hierarchies embedded in discourses or representations in international relations. This is curious, as the link between hierarchies and norms is quite established in disciplines such as sociology and gender studies. By establishing standards of appropriate practice, norms intersect with social and political categories to maintain their hierarchical juxtaposition. Feminist research on heteronormativity, for example, has underscored how heterosexuality norms play a central role in maintaining both the subordination of women to men and marginalized masculinities to hegemonic ones (e.g. Jackson 2006, Schilt and Westbrook 2009). However, within IR, neither the norms literature nor the critical hierarchies scholarship have done much to analytically connect international norms with social hierarchies.

To be sure, in some more recent scholarship, relations between norms and hierarchies have begun to emerge. Without explicitly employing the concept of hierarchy, scholars have drawn attention to how norms set the stage for the 'infantilization' (Epstein 2012) and 'stigmatization' (Adler-Nissen 2014; Zarakol 2014) of those actors on the receiving end of normative influences. In a recently

published set of articles on norms and post-colonial perspectives, a key point of consensus was that norms 'split a complex political reality into wholly good and bad' (Gallagher 2014: 333). Towns (2010 and 2012) has been most explicit in calling for a conceptual link between norms and social hierarchies, showing how norms ascribe differential values to actors and thus both rely upon and generate social rank. Her account is an important starting point, but the distinctive ways in which norms and hierarchies relate remains underdeveloped in her broader claim.

To sum up, most prior scholarship on social pressure in international politics rely on a conventional notion of material hierarchies and fail to develop a conception of norms-based social hierarchies. That said, there is some suggestive attention to the social hierarchies embedded in normative pressure, but the link between norms and hierarchies has not been adequately emphasized and theorized. There has also been a lack of attention to distinctive types of social hierarchies in international relations, which we suspect may have bearing on how states manage normative pressure. In the remainder of the article, we begin with laying out the basic premises of hierarchy-centered approach to social pressure, drawing on insights from sociology to highlight some of the social theoretic assumptions that support conceptually linking norms and social hierarchies. We then suggest that norms and hierarchies are fruitfully conceived along two main analytical dimensions: whether the standard generating hierarchy and social pressure is articulated in absolute or relative terms, on the one hand, and whether the standard is homogenizing or heterogenizing of the identified actors, on the other. This discussion helps distinguish between standards set out as absolute benchmarks, theoretically open for all to meet and standards set out as relative, zero-sum expectations, a distinction that has important implications for the kinds of hierarchies entailed. Our discussion also helps disentangle norms that engender homogenizing dynamics (identifying targeted actors as similar) or heterogenizing dynamics (identifying actors as different).

A Social Hierarchy-Centered Approach to Social Pressure

Basic Premises

Much scholarship locates social pressure in the public exposure of a gap either between a norm and the actual deeds of a state or between stated commitments to a norm and actual behavior, what is often referred to as hypocrisy (e.g. Keck and Sikkink 1998; Finnemore 2009; Busby and Greenhill 2015; Friman 2015). The claim that target states are pressured by being identified as norm transgressors or hypocrites is not without merit, we concede. Clearly, states may respond to being named and shamed as a hypocrite or wrongdoer, as an actor that fails to live up to a stated shared standard. However, a focus simply on the gap between norm and deed overlooks what may be a more fundamental dynamic in how social pressure is generated by norms: norms exert social pressure on states through the hierarchical relations they establish between them.

To develop this argument, we start with the standard IR definition of norms as standards of behavior for a stipulated category of actors (Katzenstein 1996). Norms are inter-subjective and require attention to shared meanings and interpretations. We then find inspiration in the hierarchy-centered work on norms by social theorists in the late 1960s and 1970s. These scholars embraced Durkheim's famous principle that every society is a moral community, in order to argue that hierarchies are endemic and essential to society (see Dahrendorf 1968, but also Cancian 1975 and Giddens 1979). The German social theorist Ralf Dahrendorf, in particular, has traced the origin of hierarchy to the very nature of societies as value-laden communities. Since societies are constituted

and regulated by inescapable evaluative expectations (norms), Dahrendorf concludes that in any given historical society,

> whatever symbols they may declare to be outward signs of inequality, and whatever may be the precise content of their social norms, the hard core of social inequality can always be found in the fact that men as the incumbents of social roles are subject, according to how their roles relate to the dominant expectational principles of society, to sanctions designed to enforce these principles. (Dahrendorf 1968:167).

The starting point of Dahrendorf's claims about social hierarchy is norms – which are "always related to concrete social positions" (Dahrendorf 1968:167). As standards of behavior, norms require some sort of assessment of the extent to which behavior conforms to expectations. Norms ascribe social value to conformity with these standards, and by doing so, order actors as superior and inferior to one another in complex pecking orders with regard to their level and degree of norm abidance (Parsons 1951:69). Indeed, it is important to underscore that actors do not simply conform with or transgress norms – compliance and noncompliance, acceptance and contestation is more often a matter of degree. When norms set standards, they distinguish between desirable and undesirable behavior, better and worse practices, what is normal and abnormal, for a particular social position or kind of actor. In doing so, they enable assessments of not just whether but also the degree to which actors comply. These evaluative and ordering aspects of norms inextricably tie them to social hierarchies – with norms, there is social hierarchy, and with social hierarchy, there are norms. In a mutually constitutive relation, norms draw upon and reproduce social hierarchies, as well as construct and shape them. New norms can become embroiled in existing normative hierarchies, or they may help generate new ones.

All norms, regardless of their scope, degree of universality/particularity, level of social acceptance or moral desirability, inevitably construct social hierarchies, even if limited in scope. For example, the universally circulated norm of sovereignty has consolidated into a fundamental institution of international society, ordering sovereign, less sovereign and various forms of non-sovereign polities in a hierarchical manner. Even those norms that are premised on principles of absolute equality, such as the norm of gender equality, distinguish between more and less gender-equal societies and states (e.g. Towns 2010). As Towns (2010 and 2012) has argued, in setting standards, each norm constructs social positions of varying degrees of norm abiders and violators, vanguards and laggards, and ascribes differential values to them. These normative hierarchies, which situate actors in a pecking order of super- and subordination, are a fundamental means of social pressure. Norm advocates invoke these orders to pressure laggards and criticize violators *as lesser states than those with better performance*. Implicitly or explicitly, comparative performance evaluations of states are often at the center of international social pressure.

In previous work, Towns (2010 and 2012) has pointed to the centrality of international social hierarchies in the global diffusion of state institutions and policies with respect to the political status of women. She placed primary focus on the social location of a state in a hierarchy, arguing that states that are represented as lesser or at the bottom of a hierarchy are subjected to more pressure to change. As a result, she contends, and although recognizing that states may manage their positions in normative hierarchies in multiple ways, new policies may emerge "from below," among states situated as "inferior" to others in order to raise their status. We see Towns' contribution as an important starting point in the development of a hierarchy-centered approach to social pressure. However, her account treats social hierarchies as unidimensional. Below, we will show that social hierarchies vary along two central dimensions, and that attention to the dynamics in these dimensions gives us not only a better understanding of social pressure but also some additional insight as to why states may manage social pressure in different ways.

Before we turn to the discussion of the two dimensions, a caveat is in order. In this article, we do not analytically disentangle social from material hierarchies as if these were distinctive in kind. We recognize that scholars make different assumptions about the relation between materiality and the social, but we are confident that scholars with different assumptions than ours can nonetheless find the discussion below useful. Whether material or ideational, we approach all hierarchies as social because they entail meaning-laden relations of super- and sub-ordination among states (Hobson and Sharman 2005). Norms render material differences meaningful by ascribing differential values. For example, the number of aircraft carriers becomes meaningful only in the context of norms about great-power status and behavior (e.g. Wendt 1999).

Social Hierarchies: Two Dimensions

That the international normative universe is populated by a large variety of social standards is self-evident. In addition to generic norms of statehood, there are norms setting standards of behavior in different issue areas (e.g. torture, gender equality, corruption) and norms that are distinct for different categories of states (e.g. great power norms, norms for developing countries). As also noted above, all of these draw upon, reproduce and help generate international hierarchies by evaluating actors with respect to the degree to which they conform to these standards of behavior, ordering them accordingly. However, we argue that norms differ from one another with respect to *how* they evaluate and order, that variation along two key dimensions – relative/absolute and heterogenizing/homogenizing – shapes the type of hierarchical structures and social pressure norms engender, as well as how states manage this social pressure. After a discussion of these two dimensions, we will provide brief empirical illustrations of four normative hierarchies and the dynamics these entail.

1. Relative or Absolute Standards

Social hierarchy is always relative, in the sense that it is only in the relative comparison that the existence, form and degree of hierarchy can be established. However, the comparison can be made by means of an absolute standard which is represented as fixed and hypothetically open for all to attain or a relative standard whereby actors' behavior is assessed directly in relation to one another. For lack of better terminology, we label these variants relative and absolute norms.

When norms involve relative standards of assessment, the improvement of one actor is understood as directly and sometimes even causally related to the deterioration of another. The more successfully one actor lives up to the standard of the norm, the less successful another is in doing so - improvement for one actor necessarily entails worsening conditions for another. One can think of many illustrative examples. A relative grading system is a case in point. The norm to be a good student is set out for all students in a class. If the grade distribution is relative, set on a scale from A-F so that only 20% of a class may receive an A, 20% a B and so on, each student's performance is rated in relation to the others. One student's gain literally becomes another's loss. What is more, even though the norm of being a good student is set out for all students, it becomes an impossibility for all to achieve if measured by the relative grade standard of assessment. If the grade standard is set in this manner, 20% will receive an F grade and 20% a D grade in each class. The hierarchy and differentiation of rank between good and poor students is built into the structure of the norm.

As we will flesh out further in the brief case discussion below, business friendliness norms is one example within international relations of relative norms and the social pressure these entail

Standards such as low labor costs, high labor skills or ease of moving capital out of or into the country are not absolute benchmarks but rather use the performance of other states to determine what counts as "low," "high" or "ease." If some states manage to press down labor costs further, then other states – whose absolute performance may not have changed at all – may suddenly find themselves in a less favorable position than previously.

A distinct form of social pressure operates here. The social hierarchies constituted by norms with relative standards rely on social competition, with each actor instructed to carefully watch the position and behavior of others.. States concerned with attracting Foreign Direct Investment are forced to pay attention to the activities and position of others, in order not to fall behind or become less attractive. To be consistent with such relative norms requires being better than others, succeeding only by rising above them. In order to improve one's condition or avoid falling to the bottom, an actor thereby *has to* take an interested in what others are doing. It is not sufficient to assess one's performance against one's own history or some abstract standard of behavior. The desire to remain a strong national economy given the social rules of the global market necessitates an interest in the performance of others and strategic responses to the economic tactics of other states. Not even actors at the top can be certain of their position within these types of hierarchies. In terms of how states manage these competitive pressures, we expect those that perform well in relative terms to embrace and even promote the norm. However, among those that rank less well, unless a state has an actual shot at performing better than many others, relative norms may encourage alternatives to compliance. Those of lesser rank and with poor prospects of improving their relative position may reject or try to modify the norm, proposing alternatives whereby the state in question would rank better. For example, states that are ranked low on certain indices of business-friendliness tend to downplay their significance especially if they perceive little possibility of improving their standing, and instead selectively point to their rising status in other indices (Schueth 2010).

Norms can also involve absolute standards of assessment, using fixed benchmark criteria rather than the relative performance of others as the basis of evaluation. This is the kind of standards that most of the norms scholarship has addressed or assumed to be at work. Here, each actor's relation to the norm is understood to be independent of the performance of others, and there is in this sense no alleged relation between the actual performance of others and an actor's fulfillment of the standard. Grades in a class can be assessed in this manner. If the criteria for attaining an A grade are set as absolute benchmarks, then all students could potentially fulfill the norm for being a good student. To be sure, to set out the standards for a good student, there needs to be criteria for what would constitute poor performance leading to a D or an F grade. These criteria need only be hypothetical, however. With absolute norms, it is not a logical necessity that some students must fail for others to succeed. There is no necessary hierarchy among actual, contemporaneous actors built into the logic of an absolute norm.

It is unusual that all actors are able to live up to an absolute standard equally well, for many reasons - an absolute standard may have developed on the basis of certain actors' performance and thus remain biased towards them, some actors may be better endowed with relevant resources to fulfill expectations, and so on. It is nonetheless certainly a logical possibility that an actor's behavior is only assessed against the benchmark criterion itself, in which case the performance of others would be uninteresting. The hierarchy is simply established between the benchmark levels and the actor's performance.

Many norms in international relations set up benchmark standards to differentiate high performers from laggards. For example, under UN Millennium development goals, states have committed to devoting a certain percentage of their GNP to development aid. Meeting the benchmark automatically positions the state in the higher-value social category, without having to outperform others. Human rights norms are also generally premised on absolute legal and administrative standards, allowing each and every state to eliminate torture, for example. This is likely why the IR scholarship on norms and human rights seems to assume that norms function as absolute benchmarks, overlooking relative standards as well as the hierarchies entailed.

The gap between norm and deed can exert social pressure here. However, we contend, even when the norm is absolute and thus not premised on relative performance, actors are still often compared with one another and ranked based on their behavior. Students in a class with absolute grades may compare their own performance with that of others, either with particular others or the whole class with the help of the overall grade distribution. States may compare gender ratios in government. The tendency to compare performances means that absolute standards of assessment also often come to produce comparative dynamics among actors.

However, compared with relative norms, absolute standards generate less competitive comparative behavior. In other words, absolute standards entail different social pressure than do relative standards. Hierarchies premised on absolute standards ascribe value based on the degree to which set benchmarks are met, meaning that relative comparison and competition is not built into the structure of the norm. . With absolute norms, the social pressure to change behavior is furthermore exerted primarily on those that end up as lesser ranked. These states are the ones identified as not or not fully meeting the standards, ranked behind other states that do or do so better. And because absolute norms do not use the relative performance of the actors as the measuring rod for assessment, they hold out some hope that every actor – including those poorly ranked – could rise to a higher-status position. There may thus be less incentive for those of lesser rank to reject or try to change an absolute norm. In contrast, states that have met the standards are largely off the hook. They may pay attention to the ranking in order to boast or promote the norm, but they do not need to find ways to manage any pressure from their ranking. .

It is also important to keep in mind that there are no objective yardsticks by which norms can be categorized as having absolute or relative standards. The meaning of a standard of behavior is never given and is always open to reinterpretation. What are considered by some as norms with absolute standards can be regarded as relative by others. Standards of democracy, according to many interpretations, are absolute, resting on free, fair, and competitive elections, separation of powers, and fundamental freedoms. It is possible for every state to meet the benchmarks of democracy if it adopts the necessary institutional reforms. However, some non-democratic societies and their political leaders consider the standards of democracy to be relative, shifting and culturally biased in a way that always ranks Western societies above others (Koelble and Lipuma 2008). They thus question the very possibility that the hierarchy of democracy allows them to advance to the status of a full democracy.

2.   Homogenizing or Heterogenizing Standards

The second structural dimension concerns whether a hierarchy is established by standards that set up states as distinctive in kind (heterogenizing) or among states identified as within the same category of being (homogenizing). Our working assumption is that similarity or difference between states is not given. Differentiation refers to the social process by which actors "become dissociated

from one another, so that specific activities, roles, identities, and symbols become attached to them" (Yoffee 2005:32, cited in Donnelly 2012: 152). Most extant studies of norms and/or social hierarchies have focused on what could be termed heterogenizing or membership norms, the articulation of behavioral standards of inclusion in a category of being such as civilization, international society or legitimate great power. Critical scholars have pointed out that since standards of inclusion simultaneously name and *exclude* those that do not conform, they clearly also differentiate - between the 'civilized' and 'barbarous,' the 'European' and 'non-European,' and so on (e.g. Rumelili 2004, 2007; Towns 2010 and 2012; Zarakol 2011; Hagström 2014; Adler-Nissen 2014). Lacking better terminology, we label this a heterogenizing norm.

Heterogenizing hierarchies, and particularly *binary* ones, have been subject to a lot of scrutiny in international relations. Critical scholarship has clarified the operation of self/other dichotomies in which the Self is set up as superior to the Other. The hierarchy that emerges here is a simple binary one, with the Self set up as superior to the Other. To be sure, many critical scholars have more recently expressed dissatisfaction with the reduction of the wide variety of the ways in which states construct their identities vis-à-vis one another to the proto-type of an antagonistic Self/Other relationship (Berenskoetter 2007; Abizadeh 2009; Rumelili 2004, 2007; Hansen 2006). What we take from this discussion is that in analyses of social pressure, it is important not to become conceptually blind to more complex and unstable hierarchies. Many heterogenizing hierarchies indeed take the form of multi-positional stratifications. These could be trichotomies, such as the stratification between civilized, barbarous and savage polities in nineteenth century international society, which generated a host of liminal, in-between positions (Rumelili 2012).

Heterogenizing standards exert a particular form of social pressure on states. Heterogenizing hierarchies unleash, and in turn are held together by practices of differentiation and, quite often, securitization between the different categories. The actors in higher value categories are ontologically dependent on the presence of Others in lower-value categories, and they draw on and support norms to actively produce Others as of lesser value. For example, there cannot be a civilized state in the absence of a savage, and therefore in order to maintain the hierarchy and their own high status, civilized states have to mark out and distinguish themselves from certain other states as savages that do not abide by shared standards. States that are positioned as of lower rank are in turn subjected to what is often intense and securitized social pressure. They may manage this pressure in several ways (Adler-Nissen 2014), but we expect that states subjected to this form of heterogenizing social pressure are more likely to contest or seek to modify a norm than they are to accept it (Sioh 2010).

Whereas heterogenizing norms rely heavily and expressly upon difference, homogenizing norms order actors by positioning them within a single social category and validating their shared identity.[1] A sole focus on heterogenizing norms may make it appear as if states or other social beings classified as 'same' are validated as of equal value. This is indeed the tendency of much critical scholarship. Problematically, this overlooks the ranking effects of norms within an identity category, whereby actors are assessed on how well their behavior conforms to the expectations for that social position. For instance, liberal democracy is a category with related norms of behavior through which states can be differentiated as liberal or illiberal. Although a state such as the US is classified as a liberal democracy, the problems with the past several US elections and the growing influence of money in US politics have led to increasing criticisms of the US based on these standards. Recent electoral practices have proven the US to be *less* democratic than other liberal democracies, critics charge (e.g.

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[1] Donnelly (1998:11) has discussed a similar dimension, identifying some standards as "inclusive" (applying to states within a given group) and others as "exclusive" (applying to relations with actors outside a given group).

Matthews 2007; Black 2014). Homogenizing standards downplay difference but nonetheless rank, identifying states as essentially similar but better and worse at meeting a standard.

There is surprisingly little scholarship on homogenizing hierarchies in international politics.[2] Pouliot's 2011 study of the small and peculiar world of UN diplomats discusses the existence of "international pecking orders" in these terms. In the UN context, Pouliot concludes that basic diplomatic resources (size, experience and leadership of the diplomatic mission as well as its level of governmental support) seem to be the central standards. However, for the purposes of our article, although the term pecking order is suggestive of a homogenizing ranking hierarchy, Pouliot's study does not provide much detail as to what the implications are of this order for how the diplomats behave – what kind of status-seeking behavior do they engage in, given the nature of and their place in the pecking order? There is indeed a need for more scholarship on homogenizing rank and their implications for state behavior.

The diplomatic pecking order described by Pouliot is of a less formalized variety. But other hierarchiesare more formalized. The annual UN Human Development Reports, treating all states as belonging to the category "human development generator", set up clearly specified indicators to formally rank in numerical order the performances of each state. As mentioned in the introduction, there is a growing number of such ranking indexes (Cooley 2015, Kelley and Simmons 2015). Other examples include the ranking of states on a single scale of perceived corruption by Transparency International, or the ranking provided by the Inter-Parliamentary Union on the level of women in government. Stratification can of course also be less formalized and take the form of rather fuzzy better and worse assessments of states deemed same in kind.

A different form of social pressure is exerted through homogenizing norms. While hierarchies set up by heterogenizing norms are held together by relations of differentiation and often securitization, hierarchies generated by homogenizing norms are held together by relations of mutual recognition and expressions of similarity. States are represented as belonging to a shared identity category – human development generator, gender equality provider – even as they are hierarchically ordered based on the degree to which they meet the norm in question. We expect states of different rank to be more likely to accept homogenizing norms (even as actors attempt to improve their particular position within the hierarchy). In cases when states nonetheless reject homogenizing norms, they tend to be contested less vigorously than heterogenizing ones.

Just as hierarchies premised on absolute and relative standards never exist in ideal form and cannot always be fully distinguished in practice, both heterogenizing and homogenizing social pressure is often at work simultaneously. Each identity needs to be defined against difference, contrasted with other forms of being. While the standards of liberal democracy generate inequality of rank among liberal democracies, liberal democracy simultaneously takes on meaning by defining and being differentiated against the non-liberal or undemocratic states (as well as against non-states). Whenever these differentiations are value-laden, they entail hierarchical ordering. Reflecting this tension between sameness and difference that is manifest in value assessments, Dahrendorf (1968: 167) contends that "the selection of norms always involves discrimination… against social positions that may debar their incumbents from conformity with established values."

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[2] Joenniemi (2009) and Berenskoetter (2007) have studied how relations of community and friendship between states are also maintained by practices of differentiation.

Four Kinds of Social Hierarchies: Empirical Illustrations

Table 1: Types of social hierarchies

Relative Standards

	Ex: Cold War great-power hierarchy on racial equality	Ex: contemporary hierarchy among states as more or less business-friendly	
Heterogenizing **Standards**			**Homogenizing** **Standards**
	Ex: Hierarchy between EU members, candidates, applicants and nonmembers	Ex: contemporary rankings of states' levels of women in politics	

Absolute Standards

The conceptual discussion above, of absolute/relative and heterogenizing/homogenizing norms, generate the possibility of four distinctive social hierarchies with varying forms of social pressure (see Table 1). States positioned in hierarchies generated with relative and heterogenizing norms face a hostile competitive dynamic which differentiates between in-groups and out-groups. Here, we expect states that are relatively well ranked and positioned as one group to manage the pressure by embracing the norm, whereas those with poor prospects of improving their rank and which are positioned as another group will either reject (and provide alternative norms) or seek to modify the norm in order to improve their standing. States positioned in hierarchies produced by relative and homogenizing norms, in turn, also all have to handle a competitive and relative dynamic. However, the competition is more amicable. Those performing well are expected to comply with and support the norm, whereas those that are lesser ranked face competing pressures. On the one hand, there is pressure to comply in order to remain part of the group. On the other hand, if the relative character of the norm is coupled with poor prospects for advancement, there is pressure to reject the norm and seek alternatives. Here, we expect those of poor prospects of improving their rank to find creative alternative ways to manage the pressure, so as to increase the prospects of rising in rank but without putting the shared identity at risk.

There are also two hierarchies with absolute standards. When facing absolute norms, states are confronted with social pressure of comparison which is less competitive than that entailed in relative norms. The pressure is furthermore primarily exerted on those of lesser rank. When the norm is absolute and heterogenizing, we expect those at the bottom to be less inclined to embrace and comply with the standards that set them apart, even if the absolute nature of the benchmark

standard hold out promise that any state could in principle meet expectations. However, when standards are both absolute and homogenizing, we expect those lesser ranked to be more willing to manage the social pressure through compliance, all else equal. We will now further explore these claims with brief empirical illustrations.

A Relative and Heterogenizing Social Hierarchy: Great Power Standards

In international politics, standards for great power status can be used as an illustration of a social pressure that is relative and heterogenizing. States differ from one another with regard to their material capabilities, yet, as Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein (1996:34) argue, "the security environments in which states are embedded are in important part cultural and institutional." Clearly, the degree to which this is understood to be so varies along familiar theoretical lines within IR. At this point, however, most IR scholars agree that power status in international relations is at least to some extent constructed by norms and intersubjective understandings (for scholarship that approaches power politics primarily in social terms, see e.g. Katzenstein 1996; Wendt 1999; Suzuki 2008). In addition to "brute" material capabilities, a number of social standards have thus come to be important for setting aside great powers from lesser ones.

One set of norms that became important for Cold War powers were those of racial equality (e.g. Lauren 1983; Layton 2000; Dudziak 2011). Although China was alone in introducing and supporting a principle of racial equality at the Dumbarton Oaks Conference of 1944, the Soviet Union joined a number of Latin American and Asian states at the 1945 San Francisco Conference in support of racial equality (Lauren 1983:16). This became the starting point of decades of competitive comparative posturing between the United States and the Soviet Union around norms of racial equality and human rights. The USSR used the issue prominently in anti-American propaganda, pressuring the U.S. by drawing attention to lynching and racial segregation at every opportunity. For instance, the Soviets used the race problem to challenge the US at U.N. debates over Hungary in 1957 (e.g. Layton 2000:98). "The Soviets hit the United States repeatedly, not only for permitting the 'racists' to abuse its own citizens, but also for daring to reproach others while 'its own hands were dirty" (ibid).

Put in our analytical language, during the Cold War, international racial equality standards became embedded in relative and heterogenizing dynamics, approached in zero-sum terms and using other states – whose difference was emphasized – as the measuring rod of relative advantage. The issue was not meeting some abstract benchmark of racial equality. The issue was how one great power came out in comparison with the other. For the US, having a worse record on racial equality than the Soviet Union became seen as a serious problem for US influence in what was then referred to as the Third World (Layton 2000:97-98; Dudziak 2011). Relative standards entail intense competition based on the necessity of outperforming others in order to comply with the norm. When this is coupled with heterogenizing processes, as in the emphasis on difference between "democracy" vs "socialism," rivalry over norm compliance may be particularly intense. This came to have effects on US civil rights. According to Dudziak (2011), the US first tried to manage the pressure by attempting to turn the story of race in the US into a story of the superiority of democracy over communism and by silencing critical African-American voices. This strategy of rejecting the norm and turning to alternative ones is one we would expect when states face shame through norms that are relative and heterogenizing – such a dynamic provides competitive momentum for relying on state difference to reject the norm as one that does not apply to this type of state. However, over time and with the growth of the domestic civil rights movement, ultimately the most effective

response to these negative comparisons was to achieve social change at home, Dudziak concludes. "In this context, efforts to promote civil rights within the United States were consistent with and important to the more central U.S. mission of fighting world communism" (Dudziak 2011:12). Thus, even though the difference between the US and the Soviet Union was consistently emphasized, the US eventually responded to its tarnished image with norm compliant change.

A Relative and Homogenizing Social Hierarchy: Business-friendliness Norms

Not all relative norms are heterogenizing and reliant on difference, however. An example of a relative but homogenizing normative hierarchy is that entailed in the business-friendliness norm. The economy, much like security, is a social institution consisting of standards of behavior that change over time. In the contemporary logic of the global economy, business-friendliness has become key to national competitiveness. A well-known international assessment of business-friendliness is the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index (EDBI), which ranks states from 1 to 189 (Doing Business 2016). The norm of business-friendliness and the indices through which it is measured are premised on relative standards. Countries are ranked in relation to one another in terms of various measures, such as the time and cost of starting a business, the nature of regulations, and the protection of property rights (Doing Business 2016). Whereas the norm of business-friendliness is set out for all market-based states, the standards are relative and clearly do not afford all states to succeed on the same terms. The idea that investors and entrepreneurs move where conditions are *more* favorable is premised on there being *less* favorable national environments. Thus, just as with great power standards, a relative logic is built into the norm of business-friendliness.

Our theoretical framework leads us to expect that norms with relative standards generate fierce competitive pressures to outperform others. In case of business-friendliness, all states are forced to pay attention to the performance of others. Those ranked well have to guard against others seeking investment, whereas lower ranked emerging economies struggle to find new ways to attract business and investment (Schueth 2010: 58). This social pressure is amply reflected in the state reactions to and media coverage of the EDBI rankings. For example, in reporting the 2016 results, an Indian media source boasts that in 2016 India has risen 12 spots to 130 while Pakistan has fallen 10 spots to 138 (Indian Express 12/25/2015). A Pakistani source laments the position of the country in 2013 and encourages the government to follow the best practices of Singapore, the top ranking country in EDBI rankings (Pakistan and Gulf Economist 11/17/2013). The Republic of Georgia's investment promotion and advertising campaign relied on strategic comparisons of EDBI rankings, such as "Georgia vs. Germany: where is it easier to start a business?' and 'Georgia vs. China: Which country is the world's number one reformer?' (Schueth 2010: 68-9).

However, the relativeness of the norm of business friendliness makes it impossible for all states to succeed at the same time. Therefore, states often act strategically to promote indicators where they enjoy high rank or rising status, and downplay other indicators where they face poor prospects of improving their ranking. For example, in promoting itself as a business-friendly investment destination, Georgia downplayed its low and stable ranking in the Global Competitiveness Index and capitalized on its rapid ascent on the EDBI (Schueth 2010).

Even though market economies are obviously implicitly contrasted against non-market states, business-friendliness is primarily a homogenizing norm, which ranks actors that are considered to be similar in kind. Consequently, in contrast with heterogenizing norms, the norm of business-

friendliness is largely accepted by ranked states occupying different positions in the hierarchy, and the hierarchy is held together by relations of mutual recognition and respect. Although there is competitiveness and necessary winners and losers built into the logic of the standard, the homogenizing aspect is critical in keeping international economic relations largely free of securitization. Low scores of business-friendliness, for example, may discourage international investors and donors, but they do not lead to outcasting on the grounds that the state is a threat to the health of the international economy.

An Absolute and Heterogenizing Social Hierarchy: EU's Copenhagen Criteria

Since 1993, membership in the EU depends on the fulfillment of Copenhagen criteria, a set of absolute standards spanning democracy, human rights, minority rights, free market economic rules, and legal compliance. The European Commission, which monitors candidate countries' compliance with these membership norms through annual progress reports, sets absolute benchmarks for individual candidate countries and declares conditions as having been met or unmet in terms of these standards. At the same time, however, these standards serve to differentiate among states as members and nonmembers (as well as to position them into various categories in-between, as "candidates," "accession countries," and "neighbors"). At a single point in time, therefore, non-member countries on the periphery of the EU are situated in different status positions. For example, currently in the Western Balkans, Croatia is at the top as a member state, Serbia is ranked below as an accession country, Macedonia is below Serbia as a candidate country not yet negotiating accession, and Bosnia Herzegovina is at the bottom as not even a candidate although enjoying a membership prospect. Thus, the membership norms of the EU constitute heterogenizing hierarchies premised on absolute standards.

Our theoretical framework leads us to expect that absolute standards exert a particular type of social pressure on states, motivating lower-ranked actors to rise up in the hierarchy of states by striving to meet the standards. This expectation has certainly been validated in the success of EU's enlargement policy in the 1990s by spurring a rapid wave of political and economic transformation in Central and Eastern Europe (Schimmenfennig and Sedelmeier 2005). The credibility of the EU membership carrot, which has been noted in the literature as the decisive factor driving normative change in the EU periphery, is premised on the fact that EU conditions are based on absolute standards. Candidate country governments have implemented politically costly reforms knowing that once certain absolute standards are met, membership will be granted.

What has been less emphasized in the literature on EU enlargement are the social pressures generated by the heterogenizing aspects of EU membership conditionality. In Turkey, the social pressures caused by the heterogenizing aspect of EU membership norms have often triggered the opposite reaction. In its decades-long quest to become an EU member, Turkey's governments have often reacted to being placed in a lower status position relative to other states by charging the EU with cultural discrimination and stalling domestic reform processes. For example, in 1997, when Turkey's bid for candidacy was rejected by the EU on the grounds that "the political and economic conditions for candidacy are not satisfied," Turkey's Prime Minister Yilmaz declared that "even if we satisfy all their conditions, they will not change their minds about membership. The reasons they put forth do not reflect the true reason behind Turkey's exclusion, which is religious discrimination" (Milliyet, 12/16/1997). It may be that the pressure of both being ranked low and deemed different mitigate the motivation to comply with absolute norms.

An Absolute and Homogenizing Social Hierarchy: Standards on the Status of Women

Absolute norms can also entail a homogenizing dynamic. Contemporary rankings of states' levels of women in politics are but one of many examples of absolute norms that rely on sameness in generating hierarchy. The international norm of having no less than 40% women in national legislatures is approached as a fixed benchmark expectation for states. Understood as an absolute yardstick, the ability of any one state to meet such standards of gender equality is understood to be unrelated to the performance of other states. Rwanda's having 64% female legislators does not make the legislatures of Sweden or Norway any less gender equal, even if it means that these states no longer have the highest ratios of female legislators in the world.

This norm has encouraged many states, where women otherwise have low status, to adopt sex quota measures to increase the number of women in parliament (Krook 2006, Bush 2011, Towns 2012). There are now multiple rankings of women in politics, perhaps most notably by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), which allow for comparisons among states. In advocating for or debating gender quotas and other measures, state representatives and other political actors regularly refer to states' positions in these rankings (Towns 2012). Social pressure does not derive simply from charges that a state fails to meet the expectation of having 40% women – social pressure is exerted by pointing out that states rank poorly in comparison with others. However, the dynamic is much less competitive than in cases with relative norms.

The standards set out by the IPU and others do not centrally rely on differentiation among states. All states for which data is available are ranked, and all states are expected to include a larger share of women in politics. This homogenizing dynamic may be one important clue to why states of all stripes have adopted legislative gender quotas. Had this norm instead been set out in heterogenizing terms, differentiating between, say, Western and Islamic states, our guess is that it would be much more difficult for quota advocates to find traction in Islamic legislatures.

Concluding remarks

We have argued that if we are to really understand the operation of social pressure in international politics, we need to unpack the relationship between social pressure, norms and social hierarchy, a relationship that is largely left implicit and underexplored in the existing literature. Hierarchy is a requisite component built into the logic of norms: norms inevitably generate comparative judgment and rank states as superior and inferior. In turn, norm exert social pressure on states through the hierarchical relations they establish between them.

Unpacking the relation between norms and social hierarchy has been the central aim of this article. We have argued that norms differ from one another in terms of the nature of hierarchical relations they establish between actors. Norms can be premised on relative or absolute standards, and order states by separating them into distinct social categories or ranking them within a single category. We have illustrated this variation by comparing four norms, norms of great-powerhood, business-friendliness, EU membership, and status of women.

We have also discussed how different kinds of hierarchical relations generate different types of social pressure dynamics. These dynamics also vary with respect to different positions in the hierarchy. Relative norms generate a much more competitive dynamic than do absolute norms because compliance with relative norms requires being better than others whereas absolute norms require the meeting of a fixed standard. Heterogenizing norms exert social pressure in the form of

stigmatization and securitization of lower-ranked states, whereas homogenizing norms validate them as sharing a similar identity.

Our conceptual analysis of the interplay of norms, social hierarchies and social pressure dynamics offers a new vantage point to the analysis of state responses to norms. Some states respond to social pressure by rejecting the norm or modifying the norm, and others by accepting the norm and complying with its standards. Existing scholarship has identified a series of factors that help explain different state responses, including the material and political costs for targeted states, characteristics and resources of the norm advocates, coherence with domestic norms, and so on. The conceptual analysis we provide in this article paves the way to a more structural approach, even if the social hierarchical structures we have explored are dynamic and open to change. First, we expect that whether a social hierarchy is absolute or relative, homogenizing or heterogenizing also affects how states respond to pressure. Second, we expect that a state's position in a social hierarchy also affects its susceptibility to social pressure,

We hope that our conceptual analysis serves as an invitation to scholars to investigate more systematically how states situated in structurally different social hierarchies respond to social pressure. In this article, we offer a number of admittedly undeveloped claims that are in need of more elaboration and empirical exploration. We expect that the intense competition characterizing relative norms induce a race to the top in meeting and surpassing the standards. However, as relative norms do not provide any guarantees that compliance will engender a rise in status – all states cannot succeed on the same terms, and other states may meet the standard even more successfully – there are also incentives for those at the bottom of the hierarchy to reject the legitimacy of the norm and promote other standards in its stead. Standards that are both relative and heterogenizing are particularly prone to this development, because lower ranked states are also stigmatized. Absolute norms, in turn, hold out the promise that everyone may succeed in meeting the standard. All else equal, there is thus less incentive to reject the standard as such, particularly when absolute norms also entail homogenizing forces, and thus validate lower-ranked states as sharing a similar identity. However, we also expect less competitiveness around such norms and less motivation on part of states that meet the absolute benchmarks to seek higher standards.

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