Normativity

What is normativity?

Normativity, generally defined, is the individual and social phenomenon of designating some actions, behaviors, circumstances, or outcomes as good, desirable, or permissible, and others as bad, undesirable, or impermissible. What underlies these designations are social and cultural reference points, values, or standards (i.e., norms), which we use to evaluate or make judgments about actions or situations.

What is the conceptual relevance of normativity to TDR?

As discussed above in "Role(s) of researches," conventional scientific research typically regards science as value-free, pursuing a single, objective understanding of an empirically knowable world. Positivist science uses reason, logic, and empirical observation to generate new knowledge, and distances itself from choices or decisions that are influenced by societal values and political processes. In TDR, however, research is more closely aligned with constructivist social science philosophies that recognize that all science is framed by human values and choices that reflect those values and norms. Principles of robust and rigorous research still apply; Like all research efforts, TDR relies on systematic, logical, and appropriate methodological approaches; testable hypotheses or clear questions; careful data collection; critical analysis; and transparent reasoning and interpretation of findings. The difference between conventional research and TDR sits in understanding that the partiality and decisions that frame the research and its outcomes are based in the norms of the various actors involved.

Recognizing and integrating normativity into TDR is particularly important, because we can expect that different disciplinary researchers and non-academic partners will have somewhat different norms that shape their viewpoints, interests, decisions, priorities, and choices. Whose norms prevail in a decision-making setting reflect the distribution of power across a group. Recognizing diversity does not mean differences have to be reconciled (see "Pluralism"), but it can help foster positive conversations about how normative similarities and differences might shape the project and its outcomes. Conversely, lack of diversity also needs to be considered; values and norms that are too closely aligned can create an "echo chamber" that is not robust to external critique.

What are the implications of normativity for TDR practice?

Normativity in TDR practice requires a commitment to recognize, reflect on, and make conscientious decisions about the values and norms that shape a project. This is usually most effective when individuals have an opportunity to reflect on their own normative positions and stances, and share their insights with the team. For example, while some norms may be implied in the assumptions examined in a process (see "Theory of change"), digging deeper into the values, ethics, or moral stance that underpins those assumptions can build better understanding among collaborators.

Normativity is implicit in all our decisions and activities, but in a TDR context it is particularly useful to consider normativity in relation to the design of the research project. Questions that research teams may ask to surface the normativity implicit in their project include:

- What is being studied? (What are valid research questions? What parts of complex social-ecological phenomena are included? What is excluded? Why?)

- How is it being studied? (What methodologies and methods are being used? Who or what is included or excluded by this choice?)

- How are data or other information interpreted? (Which concepts or theories are taking priority? Why? Who is interpreting the data, and who is not?)

- Which action steps are proposed or enacted? (What norms are evident or implied in the solutions?).

Where values are different and may be contested, teams will need to gauge the impact of divergent norms and whether some form of reconciliation between them should be attempted. Sometimes simple recognition is enough to allow groups to move forward; other times more proactive responses, such as mediation or reconfiguring team roles or membership, may be needed. Overall, however, examining and recognizing diverse norms across a project is a healthy foundation for building a strong team.

Further reading:

- Navigating through normative dimensions. In: td-net toolkit. Available at: https://naturalsciences.ch/co-producing-knowledge-explained/methods/key_issues.

- Miller, Thaddeus R. 2013. Constructing Sustainability Science: Emerging Perspectives and Research Trajectories. *Sustainability Science* 8 (2): 279–93.

- Scholz, Roland. 2017. The Normative Dimension in Transdisciplinarity, Transition Management, and Transformation Sciences: New Roles of Science and Universities in Sustainable Transitioning. *Sustainability* 9 (6): 991.