

# Social Norms for Behavior Change: A Synopsis<sup>1</sup>

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Have you ever noticed how behaviors—both good and bad—tend to be contagious? The actions and opinions of others, called social norms, influence our own behavior to a great extent (Ajzen, 1991; Heberlein, 2012; Perloff, 2017; Stern, 2018). The term social norms is used extensively to refer to a wide variety of influences on human behavior. With a closer look, social norms can be untangled to reveal nuances that are important to understand to use social norms effectively as behavior change tools. A criticism of some social norms work is that different facets of social norms are either ignored or lumped together, which can reduce or nullify their potential impact (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). This publication was developed to address the opportunity to apply social norms more effectively. The purpose of this document is to discuss some of the important distinctions and definitions associated with social norms, so Extension professionals and other types of nonformal education practitioners can improve the efficacy of their behavior change interventions. Social norms are highly relevant for Extension professionals and other practitioners because they influence and intersect with policy, system, and environmental changes. Norms can be seen in how the public responds to a public health crisis, adapts to climate change, or recognizes and prioritizes inequality in our society. The intended audience for this publication is Extension professionals and other types of nonformal education practitioners whose work influences human behaviors. This publication may be considered an advanced resource for those who are already familiar with basic principles of social norms.

## Introduction to Social Norms

Many of today's complex issues can only be solved if a lot of people get involved, and social norms are an integral piece for generating the public participation needed to solve contemporary challenges (Steg, 2016; Yamin et al., 2019). People make a variety of decisions based on social norms, but in general, they do not recognize that they do so (Cialdini, 2005). Social norms are a collection of perceptions about what behaviors are considered appropriate, normal, and expected in a given situation (Ajzen, 1991; Heberlein, 2012; Perloff, 2017; Stern, 2018). Essentially, social norms are the unwritten rules about how to behave.

To illustrate the power of social norms, consider a bus ride you may take in your everyday life. Let's say you are the first passenger on a public bus. It is early in the morning, and you don't expect it to get crowded. A single passenger you don't know gets on, and out of dozens of empty seats, they choose the one right next to you. Does this seem strange? Would you be concerned? This could be the script for a hidden-camera reality TV show, and most likely you would wonder why the stranger was sitting so close. In this case, the stranger broke an unwritten rule, or social norm.

The power social norms have in influencing behavior is "rooted in the human desire to belong to one's community" (Yamin et al., 2019, p. 3). Social norms differ across times, cultures, behaviors, locations, and subgroups. For example, in some cultures it is considered highly inappropriate to wear shoes indoors, while in other cultures this is commonplace. Social norms are not deterministic; we make choices about which ones are important to us and which ones we can consistently follow. Some norms conflict, and often norms are undergoing change. We may change our attitudes and behaviors along with them.

**Example:** To illustrate the concept of social norms in an Extension context, let's say a new resident moves into a community where you conduct horticultural programs. While the rest of the yards on the street are heavily wooded with native pines, the neighbor decides to take down all the trees and plant a non-native plant that requires intense amounts of watering. The new neighbor's landscape changes the appearances of the street and looks out of place compared to the rest of the wooded homes. The new resident's yard may seem strange and appear as if it does not belong because the new neighbor broke an unwritten rule, or social norm.

Norms can range from customs, or folkways (e.g., saying *bless you* when someone sneezes), to mores with moral implications (e.g., stealing) and negative norms, or taboos (e.g., photographing a stranger) (Sanchez, 2019). Some norms are formally codified within certain societies as laws (e.g., laws preventing individuals from having more than one spouse) (Sanchez, 2019).

Perceptions of social norms can also differ from person to person, even within the same social group. People vary greatly in where they draw their motivation for action. Some individuals are most motivated by internal benefits such as improved status or pleasure, while others tend to act when a decision benefits the greater good of others and society (Steg, 2016). Social norms also differ greatly by behavior.

While social norms can be informative in understanding engagement or nonengagement in a practice, it is important to emphasize that people “do not act solely on the basis of the popularity of a behavior” (Lapinsky & Rimal, 2005, p. 128). Some often overlooked nuances can be used to better understand important distinctions. First, this publication will describe an important distinction between *injunctive* and *descriptive* norms. This document is then organized by concepts pertaining to three approaches to social norms: generalized, expectancy-based, and value-expectancy frameworks. The end portion of this publication describes concepts of private versus public norms, perceived and actual norms, and applications to behavior-change interventions.

## Injunctive and Descriptive Norms

Social norms can be differentiated into injunctive and descriptive norms (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990).

- *Injunctive norms* refer to what others want us to do or want us to avoid doing. Injunctive norms are prescriptions (or proscriptions) of social expectations that come with anticipated social sanctions (i.e., approval or disapproval). People are motivated to align with injunctive norms because they want to receive others’ approval or avoid others’ disapproval (Bergquist & Nilsson, 2019). *Injunctive norms are those actions we think should be done.*
- *Descriptive norms* refer to what others do, or the behaviors they engage in. Conversely, descriptive norms can also include the behaviors people do not do (Bergquist & Nilsson, 2019). People are motivated to conform to descriptive norms by a desire to adapt to a situation (Cialdini, 2005). When people follow a descriptive norm, they are taking a decisional shortcut and choosing an option that is likely to be effective for the given situation (Cialdini et al., 1990). *Descriptive norms are those actions we see or perceive others doing.*

**Example:** If an Extension client thinks the rest of their neighbors would approve of them following best practices for lawn irrigation by only watering their yard in the early morning hours, they perceive an *injunctive norm* associated with watering their lawn in the morning. If they believe most of their neighbors water their lawn early in the morning themselves, they perceive a *descriptive norm* of following best practices for lawn irrigation.

Importantly, injunctive and descriptive norms do not always align with one another. A group that is important to your Extension client may want them to do something but not necessarily do it themselves. Following the example provided just above, your client’s neighbors may strongly approve if they water only in the morning (an injunctive norm), but at the same time, they may water in the afternoon (a descriptive norm).

As mentioned above, social norms can be understood, or measured, through a *generalized, expectancy-based, or value-expectancy* framework.

## Generalized Normative Beliefs

A generalized social norms framework is a summation of social norms drawn from many people. This is the most common approach to social norms, and this framework captures these influences as:

- Most people who are important to me want me to.... (this is a direct measure of injunctive norms)
- Most people who are like me do.... (this is a direct measure of descriptive norms)

This generalized social norms framework can be distinguished from the next two frameworks in that they generalize broadly to all the influential people in someone’s life. In contrast, expectancy-based and value-expectancy social norm frameworks incorporate the concepts of referent groups.

## Expectancy-Based Normative Beliefs

An expectancy-based normative belief framework is additive; this approach considers expectations or behaviors from specific groups of people important to an individual. Those groups are known as referent groups, or the people who matter to an individual when they make decisions (Bicchieri, 2017). People generally belong to multiple referent groups that influence their behaviors unequally. Expectancy-based normative beliefs integrate referent groups as follows:

- Most of my colleagues want me to.... (this is an expectancy-based injunctive normative belief)
- Most of my family members want me to.... (this is an expectancy-based injunctive normative belief)
- Most of my colleagues do.... (this is an expectancy-based descriptive normative belief)
- Most of my family members do.... (this is an expectancy-based descriptive normative belief)

People’s expectancy-based normative beliefs are their beliefs drawn from these referent groups, collectively. A benefit of examining expectancy-based beliefs is that a practitioner can look at relationships with behavior to

compare the influences drawn from different groups to determine the most important referent groups for a given context.

**Example:** If you have a client that moves to Florida from a northern state, they may notice that their neighbors have fruit trees in their backyards and offer them homegrown fruit as a welcome gift. Your client may believe most of their neighbors want them to plant a fruit tree to adjust to the expectations of the neighborhood. This would be an expectancy-based injunctive normative belief based on their experience with a specific referent group (neighbors).

The third framework presented here brings in value-laden constructs of motivation to comply and identification with the referent to weight injunctive and descriptive norms, respectively.

## Value-Expectancy Normative Beliefs

In some cases, people may perceive a strong injunctive norm (i.e., they think important others want them to do something), but they are not necessarily motivated to conform to those expectations. Motivation to comply is a concept that explains the extent to which people want to do what others in a specific referent group want them to do.

Think back to the example about living in a neighborhood where approval (i.e., the injunctive norm) for watering lawns according to best irrigation practices is strong. Two neighbors might perceive the same level of social expectations for watering their lawns early in the morning, but the neighbor who has a greater motivation to comply with their neighbors' approval will more likely water their lawn at the appropriate time. Higher motivation to comply with a referent group leads to more weight being assigned to the injunctive norm drawn from that group.

In the same way motivation to comply can be used to weight injunctive norms, identification with the referent can be used to weight descriptive norms. Identification with the referent is the value someone assigns to each referent group's actions (Branscum et al., 2007; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). Essentially, "individuals who identify more closely with a given social group are more likely to adhere to the norms of that group, partly as a need to fit in" (Dempsey et al., 2018, p. 6). Consider once more those two neighbors for whom the descriptive norm for watering early in the morning is high. In other words, they both perceive equally that most of their neighbors water their yards early in the morning. The neighbor who places higher value on belonging to this group of neighbors (i.e., greater identification with the referent) will be more likely to follow this best practice themselves. Higher identification with a referent group

leads to more weight being assigned to the descriptive norm drawn from that group.

By considering normative beliefs that have been weighted by these value-laden constructs, collectively, we arrive at value-expectancy normative beliefs. Now that the three types of social norm frameworks have been discussed, this publication will end with an overview of concepts of private versus public norms, perceived and actual norms, and applications to behavior change interventions.

## Private versus Public Norms

Different types of behavior will be influenced by social norms in different ways. The level of privacy in which the behavior takes place plays a role here. When a behavior takes place in mostly or completely private situations, where it cannot be observed nor communicated about, injunctive norms are likely to be uninfluential. In other words, people cannot express disapproval or approval for a behavior they are not aware of (e.g., most people outside your household are not likely to be aware you take a very long shower). Further, perceptions of what is normal (i.e., the descriptive norm) may be low as well as uninfluential because people are not observing others' engagement in the behavior (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005).

## Perceived versus Actual Norms

A final nuance important to consider is the difference between actual norms that exist within a social group and perceived norms (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). It is highly unlikely people perfectly interpret what others do or expect, which leads to a difference in how norms are interpreted (Dempsey et al., 2018). This difference means people's perceptions are often inaccurate at some level, but the *perception* is what drives behavior. For example, misperceptions about public health behaviors (e.g., drinking norms) have led to increases in individuals' own negative health habits (Neighbors et al., 2008). Hence, practitioners are encouraged to focus on perceived social norms.

## Applications to Behavior Change

While it is outside the scope of this document to provide details on using social norms to change behaviors, the appropriate application of this tool is extremely important. There are a few overarching concepts for using norms to influence behavior change. Normative influences are extremely powerful, and they are especially interesting because people tend to grossly underestimate how much they are affected by others (Cialdini, 2005). There are two distinct forms of social norms interventions: exposing people to the behavior of others and conveying summarized group norms (Yamin et al., 2019). People need to have at least a minimal level of internal motivation to respond to behavioral interventions; if feelings of personal responsibility are extremely low, this must be

addressed prior to conducting other types of intervention (Silvi & Padilla, 2021). When used as a behavior change tool, social norms are most effective when they are applied close to the actual behavior, and when they are focused on and perceived as being relevant among target recipients (i.e., activated) (Cialdini et al., 1990; Yamin et al., 2019). Many interventions have communicated descriptive norms to motivate individuals to align with what is commonly done. For example, communicating average water use or energy can encourage high resource users to use less water or energy to conform with the norm. Descriptive norms can be especially powerful when the desired behavior is highly prevalent (Yamin et al., 2019). However, this type of intervention can result in a boomerang effect, where lower resource users feel emboldened to use more water or energy to align with the norm. Adding an injunctive message to this type of intervention has been shown to neutralize the boomerang effect (Schultz et al., 2007). Injunctive norms can be especially powerful when they communicate what to do (versus what to avoid) and when combined with specific goals (Yamin et al., 2019).

## Summary

Social norms are strong influences on people's behaviors. Collectively, these concepts can be used to help improve people's lives, the environment, and other facets of society. A major weakness in the social norms dialogue and practice is a lack of specificity regarding the important distinctions that exist within the larger body of social norms concepts. Extension professionals and practitioners are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the nuances associated with social norms so they can more effectively integrate these powerful concepts into educational outreach and communications. For information about integrating social norms into behavior change interventions, see this publication's companion documents.

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