What are Social Norms?
How are They Measured?

by Gerry Mackie and Francesca Moneti
with support from Elaine Denny and Holly Shakya

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I. Introduction

There are many possible reasons why population groups might engage in behaviors that are beneficial or harmful to children. Many of the reasons have to do with factors such as the physical environment in which they live or their economic status. These may determine, for example, their access to health and other services or the availability of clean water. Beyond these reasons, however, there may also be social motivations that explain why a behavior – beneficial or harmful – is common in a group.

The perpetuation of harmful practices, such as not talking with infants or female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), and the creation of beneficial new practices, such as exclusive breastfeeding or marriage at an adult age may have social motivations. They may involve an entire community’s attitudes and beliefs rather than simply those of individuals and their families (UNICEF 2010). For our purposes, there are two broad categories of beliefs: beliefs about the physical world, for example the belief that colostrum is bad for the newborn, and beliefs about the mental world, about people’s desires and expectations, for example the belief that my mother-in-law expects me to discard the colostrum. Most development programs give ample consideration to the former, but comparatively little to the latter which are central to the understanding of social norms.

Beliefs about what others do, and what others think one should do, often guide a person’s actions in her social setting.¹ When one does what others do it can be because one thinks they know best what to do. When one does what one believes others think one should do, it can be because one is motivated to secure the esteem and acceptance of others in the group or to avoid their disesteem and rejection, or by one’s belief that it is legitimate to comply with their expectations. If a harmful practice is social in nature, programs that concentrate on education of the individual, or increase in the availability of alternatives, or provision of external incentives, may not be sufficient. Additionally, a program may need to support the clarification, and sometimes the revision, of social expectations of people throughout the entire community of interest.

The working paper offers an account of what social norms are, with special attention to child well-being, and especially child protection. It also outlines a number of measurement strategies to identify social norms and document their change over time. It does not, however, consider in detail the topic of how to change social norms (see UNICEF 2010).

¹ In this essay the term should refers to what one should do to comply with a social or moral obligation. Unless context indicates otherwise, should does not refer to what one should do solely for benefit to oneself, the prudential.
II. What are Social Norms?

As a first approximation, a social norm is what people in some group believe to be normal in the group, that is, believed to be a typical action, an appropriate action, or both (Paluck and Ball 2010). A social norm is held in place by the reciprocal expectations of the people within that group, which we will also call a reference network. Because of that interdependence of expectation, social norms can be stiffly resistant to change.

Interdependence in Human Actions

The actions of an individual range from the highly independent, to the dependent, to the highly interdependent. Development thinking has tended to understand individual actions of programmatic interest as being independent, or as being one-way dependent, as in the diffusion of innovation. However, there are human actions where what one does depends on what others do at the same time that what others do depend on what one does (many-way interdependence).

In the next Figures, we will illustrate the distinction between more independent and more interdependent action with two stylized development examples (the point is not to make empirical claims, please just accept the stipulations). Adoption of oral rehydration therapy (ORT) is an example of a process of one-way dependence. A parent or care-taker observes that one's neighbor adopted it and it worked well, or hears from credible health care workers that it prevents child death, or finds media messages about its beneficial consequences believable, and adopts it. The Figure below on the left illustrates the cumulative change in attitude towards ORT, and the cumulative change in practice. Attitude changes gradually in the group as individuals are exposed to the practice, and practice trails attitude.

![More Independent Action: Adoption of Oral Rehydration Therapy](attachment:image1.png)

![More Interdependent Action: Shift to Community-wide Latrine Usage](attachment:image2.png)

The Figure on the right uses the example of community-wide adoption of latrine usage to decrease the incidence of disease as an example of strong many-way interdependence.
Unless almost all in the community shift to consistent latrine usage, the benefits of disease reduction would not be realized. Any individual acting alone to build a latrine would incur a cost for no benefit. *Attitude* to adopting latrine usage might shift cumulatively over some period of time. However, due to the necessity of coordinated shift, the *behavior* of adopting latrine usage would be delayed until most are ready to change and most decide to change, and then would onset rapidly. Moreover, after the shift to a new norm and its associated sanctions, some with a negative attitude towards latrine usage may nevertheless adopt it to avoid criticism from others.

**Reasons for Behavioral Regularities**

Understanding how observed behavioral regularities differ from one another in their structure helps us understand how a practice works. If we better understand how practices work, we are better able to propose ways to change harmful ones, or to strengthen or create beneficial ones. The following table by Mackie, borrowing from prior literature including Bicchieri’s (2006) work, displays types of reasons for behavioral regularities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPOLOGY OF REASONS FOR BEHAVIORAL REGULARITIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Not Social</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Norm</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Something an individual might do regularly for her own prudential reasons (not conditional on what others do or think one should do)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Population Regularity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual response to a nonsocial constraint, or selection by a force outside the population (may result from shared physical or economic constraints)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moral Norm</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivated by an inner conviction of right and wrong (moral norms are much less conditional on what others do or think one should do than are social norms.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An Aside on Religious Norms. Religious norms are distinctive because of their reference to divine command, but otherwise they function as social, legal, or moral norms. A religious norm can be a social norm, held in place by empirical and normative expectations and informally enforced; or can be a legal norm, held in place by the formal enforcement of a religious authority; or can be a moral norm motivated by conscience.

Operational Definition of Social Norm

Social norms are mentioned throughout the historical record, beginning with the ancient Greeks and the study of social norms builds on research from various disciplines. In the mid-20th century sociologist Talcott Parsons (1951) conceived of societies as if they were individual organisms that function to survive and reproduce. He assumed that all social norms function for the benefit of society, and he explained social regularities as being due to social norms, with little explanation of what social norms are, how they work, and how they change. A new approach to social norms emerged from economist Thomas Schelling’s reorientation of game theory (1960, 1978), which generated bounteous hypotheses for the explanation of regularities in human action.

Robert Cialdini’s empirical research has shown the importance of a distinction between a descriptive norm (doing what others do) and an injunctive norm (doing what others think one should do). The Theory of Planned Behavior developed by Ajzen and Fishbein provides a way to predict behavior from an individual’s attitude, perceived subjective norm (what she believes about [a] what others do and [b] what others believe she should do and perceived behavioral control (whether she thinks she can bring about the behavior).

Cristina Bicchieri (2006) has developed a theory of social norms combining game-theoretic and psychological approaches. She offers a definition of a social norm based on conditional preferences, empirical expectations, and normative expectations. This definition was put into graphic form by Guillot (2012), whose work we copy and mildly amend.

A social norm

is a pattern of behavior
such that individuals prefer to conform to it
on condition that they believe that
* most people in their relevant network conform to it [empirical expectations]
* most people in their relevant network believe they ought to conform to it [normative expectations]

How do we change current social expectations, create new social expectations, or both?
**Diagnostic Tree.** The following diagram, adapted from Bicchieri 2012 and Mockus 2002, guides the analysis to identify the nature of a behavioral regularity. Focusing on the reasons for its existence, the decision tree can be used to determine if a behavioral regularity is a social norm. It is a social norm when individuals follow it because they see or believe that others around them engage in it and because they believe there is a social obligation to follow it.

![Norms diagnostic tree](image)

**Harmonization of Moral, Social, and Legal Norms.** Carefully distinguishing among moral, social, and legal norms can be important for program design and measurement. In the 1990s Bogotá, Colombia was one of the most violent cities in the world. An innovative municipal administration, led by mayor Antanas Mockus, designed a Citizenship Culture program based in large part on the idea of the harmonization of moral, social, and legal norms.

Mockus distinguishes three regulatory systems, and the main reasons to obey in each. The following table is an adaptation of his scheme (e.g., Mockus 2002).
### III. Ways to Measure Social Norms

A social norm is interdependent between individuals in a reference network, thus exists with respect to the network, and is maintained by the reciprocal expectations of its members. Analysis of social norms requires knowing what an individual believes others do and what an individual believes that others believe she should do – the **empirical and normative beliefs** about others (rather than knowing only the individual's own behavior and attitude). In addition, because an interdependent practice is also held in place by an individuals’ beliefs about what would happen if she complies and if she did not comply, we want to be sure to know her counterfactual beliefs.

### General Considerations in Measuring Social Norms

To identify and measure social practices the two basic questions need to be posed: What do people typically do? What do people think it is appropriate to do?

For more informative data, a number of dimensions could be explored. Table 1 below set them out schematically. Data on the measures pertaining to self are often collected in household or KAP surveys and are in the green cells to suggest that we may already have these. Data relating to the two dimensions that make possible the identification of the presence of a social norm and of its change over time are in the red cells.

**Table 1: Measures Relevant to Observed Regularities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT SELF BELIEVES ABOUT:</th>
<th>Self</th>
<th>Others – 1st Order</th>
<th>Others – 2nd Order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Empirical</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self</strong></td>
<td>What I do Normally measured to determine prevalence</td>
<td>What others do Sometimes measured and important for measuring social norms</td>
<td>What others think I do Normally not measured and not deemed to be of priority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Normative</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self</strong></td>
<td>What I think I should do Often measured, to determine attitudes</td>
<td>What I think others should do Rarely measured and not of top priority</td>
<td>What others think I should do Rarely measured and of top priority to measure a social norm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Investigate Counterfactuals to Discern Causality.** When people are asked why they do something, especially, when asked about a social practice, they often say: that’s the tradition, that’s our custom, that’s how we do things around here. What matters for compliance with a social norm is not just the believed consequences of what would happen if one were to comply, but especially the believed consequences of what would happen if one were *not* to comply. Since direct questions put the respondent on the spot, indirect questions about what would happen to someone around here who did not comply with norm $X$ could elicit more informative responses. Some individuals and populations may not usefully respond to questions about counterfactuals. An alternative may be to tell a culturally compatible story about someone who had transgressed a local norm and faced a consequence, and to ask if the same thing would happen here.

**Identify the Reference Network.** The *reference network* includes everyone who matters to an individual in a certain situation. It could be those with whom one has repeated face-to-face relations, as in a women’s microfinance group. More likely than not it also includes indirect relations, friends of friends so to speak. It could include everyone whom one might encounter in a town. For anyone in Thailand, the reference network for the practice of driving on the left-hand side of the road would include all those whom one would expect to encounter on the roadways of Thailand. It could include fictional characters from stories, live skits, radio dramas or telenovelas (so long as the audience finds them sufficiently relevant in culture and context). It could also include one’s beloved ancestors, a dead parent, total strangers, or future generations.

The structure of ties in a network, and possibly their strength, shape the course of a change. With the advance of social network analysis, we are able to describe exact social relations among individuals, how the structures of relations vary, how the diffusion of social learning or social influence varies in different structures, what counts as a group, and more.

**Sample Strategies of Investigation**

This is a novel inquiry. The sample strategies and surrounding analyses are offered as humble proposals, not as the final word. Both need to be refined in theoretical and practical collaborations with scholars, policy analysts, and field programs.

**DHS or MICS Data Can Suggest the Presence of a Social Norm.** Researchers who would like to understand to what degree community National household surveys have not collected data specific to social norms. However, indicators such as the ones listed below can be used to identify the possible presence of a social norm and to point to where more rigorous inquiry be undertaken. A more formal way to use DHS and MICS data to measure social norms is multilevel modeling, also discussed below.

1. **High spatial or ethnic variation in the practice.** DHS and MICS collect data on the location and ethnicity of respondents, but not data about social relations. Colocation and ethnicity are rough proxies for actual social relations among people. If prevalence of a practice is very high in one place or ethnic group, and very low in another one “nearby,”
that suggests the possibility of a social norm. The more fine-grained the data, the more suggestive the indication.

2. High Discrepancy Between Attitude and Behavior. If many people oppose a practice, but nevertheless follow it, that suggests the possibility of a social norm. It suggests that they could be following it because they believe they have a social obligation to follow it even if they would rather not. The discrepancy could also be due to any number of other reasons and would therefore need to be investigated further.

3. Comparative Persistence of the Practice. Lengthy persistence of a practice can also be determined by simple inspection of DHS and MICS. In a context of “modernization”, a practice that has a longer persistence than other practices suggests the possibility of a social norm.

4. Comparatively Rapid Shift of Practice. Just as they can indicate lengthy persistence DHS and MICS data may also indicate a sudden shift. Footbinding in China lasted for a thousand years, but ended in a single generation, at the beginning of the 20th Century, and never revived. This pattern indicates that the practice was a social norm, with strong reciprocal expectations, causing both sturdy maintenance and rapid demise.

Researchers who would like to understand to what degree community level norms are associated with individual level outcomes are increasingly using multilevel modeling. Answers to questions reflecting the norms of interest are aggregated at a community level reflecting the mean value for that community (Storey & Kaggwa, 2009). These measures are then included in statistical regression models, with the addition of cluster level random intercepts for each cluster in the analysis. If the community level variables are significant in the model, then there is support for the fact that a community effect is actually correlated with the outcome of interest.

Who is the Reference Network? Understanding the structure of the reference network could identify its more influential members and likely paths of diffusion of persuasion and attitude change throughout the network. For survey and focus group research into the beliefs about others, needed for the more modest goal of identifying social norms and measuring their change, we have two options. First, we can ask a respondent what she believes about other “people who are important to me,” either generally, or with respect to the specific practice. A problem with that strategy is that the researcher does not know how each respondent conceptualizes “people who are important to me,” obscuring comparisons. However, if we were only interested in whether the social norm exists from the point of view of that respondent then the problem would be of lesser importance.

Second, we can ask a respondent what she believes about named individuals or role occupants. A problem with asking the respondent for named individuals is that in some contexts it could severely underestimate the reference network, because only a few individuals stand out but the reference group for a social norm can include not only named individuals, but deceased ancestors, role occupants, fictional characters in popular narratives, and a generalized other. The list of influential role occupants can be supplied by the researcher based on formative research or can be supplied by each respondent.
Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) say that results using the two methods are about the same and that the “people who are important to me” strategy is more streamlined, but other researchers have emphasized to us the importance of anchoring these questions using specific roles or people in the reference group. Pre-testing might help to decide what is best in a given context.

**Inquiries into Beliefs About Others.** After establishing respondent’s reference group, the survey can proceed to ask questions about the respondent’s first and second order expectations (normative and empirical) with respect to this reference group. These responses will help show whether a social norm exists and to what degree. Techniques such as ‘matching games’ that use rewards to incentivize more careful thought about others’ empirical or normative expectations (Burks and Krupka, 2010) may contribute to increasing the accuracy of responses.

Are we measuring the abandonment of a harmful social norm or the adoption of a beneficial social norm? It varies by context. In some instances the emphasis is on abandoning the harmful social norm, and the beneficial new norm would be simply the continued monitoring and sanctioning of the norm’s abandonment, perhaps as in the abandonment of FGM/C. In other instances, we would be interested in the abandonment of a harmful social norm, for example a norm of using corporal punishment to discipline children, and the adoption of a beneficial one, say a norm of not using violence. The new norm is not merely the negation of the existing norm and requires the establishment of a new set of practices.

Finally, the harmful practice could be a population regularity and not a social norm. Suppose a group does not use soap, but not using soap is not a matter regulated by social expectations. Here the emphasis is on adopting a beneficial new norm of proper soap usage. Or, when there is an existing beneficial norm, there may be program interest in strengthening it further. In our sample questions we use the general phrase “target behavior.” In a particular application one would substitute either the “harmful behavior” or the “beneficial behavior.” If necessary in the context, one could separately ask the series of questions with respect to each.

For investigation of social norms, a response of “Don’t know” is fundamentally different from one of “No response” and should be coded differently by enumerators. If an individual does an action, and doesn’t know whether others do it or whether others think he should do it, then there is likely little social influence on the individual with respect to that action. This is different from a “No response” answer where the respondent simply does not want to answer the question, perhaps out of insecurity, fear, or a reluctance to discuss a taboo topic.

**Using the Data.** How would we use these data to assess a social norm’s strength and prevalence? Suppose we ask about action X with respect to reference group Y. Suppose an individual gives these answers:
Here, the individual’s action is conditioned by a social norm. She does the action more than half the time but thinks she shouldn’t do it at all. Everyone else does the action, they all think the respondent does it, and they all think she should do it. We can infer that in the absence of social expectations, the individual would not do the action.

When we aggregate answers for a population of 100 at time $T1$ we can take the mean of the responses. We’ll score Always, All of Them, and Definitely as 4; No, Definitely Not, and None of them as 0. In the case below a social norm is strongly in place.

Suppose now there is an effective program in place and the population starts believing that the practice is inappropriate and that others also share the belief. However, since the practice is highly interdependent in nature, at time $T2$ we find this pattern of responses:

Most individuals in the population still do the action and think others do it. Most individuals, however, think that one should not do the action, and think that others should not. But fewer that in $T1$ believe that others think they should do it. This is a vulnerable social norm ready to collapse if a coordinated abandonment is organized. The typical person in the population believes others think he should do the action, when in fact they do not.

As we have seen, with a one-way dependent practice change in individual behavior typically trails changing attitudes in the population. But with a strongly interdependent practice, individual attitudes can cumulatively change with little accompanying change in collective behavior until enough people in the population are ready to make a change.
Investment in continuing activity without behavioral result could be a program concern. The measures described above enable program managers to detect changes in empirical and normative expectations. These indicate progress and predict eventual behavior change. Thus, to monitor change in social norms, it may be important to ask fewer questions at shorter intervals.

**Identifying Social Norms in Conversations or Focus Groups.** Inferences about empirical and normative expectations can be made from conversations or focus group discussions. For example, when a statement of “everyone agrees” or “all my friends also believe this” is associated with statements about what other people do (empirical expectations) and what other people think should be done (normative expectations) it indicates a belief that enough people in the relevant reference hold such expectations.

**Strategies Under Development.** The authors are exploring ways to probe people’s responses to moral norms, social norms, and legal norms. In contexts where multiple systems of regulation apply, it is important to know how they do, how they might conflict, and how they might reinforce each other. This approach is inspired by Antanas Mockus and the NGO he founded in Colombia, Corpovisionarios. Corpovisionarios has administered a Citizen Culture Survey since 2001. The survey has been repeatedly applied, adapted, and refined; and strategies of inference from the data richly developed. The authors have inspected the survey, which is proprietary data.

**IV. Conclusion**

The Project will continue to revise and improve the working paper, with UNICEF headquarters and field personnel involved in policy or program about the organization’s current monitoring and evaluation practices. It will further identify opportunities in currently collected data to identify social norms and measure norms change, and will propose new methods compatible with current practices. As the Project continues, it would experiment with differing methods in specific field circumstances.
Works Cited in Working Paper


