

Social Norms in Organizations

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Summary and Keywords

Social norms are a powerful force in organizations. While different literatures across fields have developed differing definitions and categories, social norms are commonly defined as and divided into descriptive norms, i.e., the most commonly enacted behavior, and prescriptive norms, i.e., the behavior most commonly viewed as acceptable or appropriate. Different literatures have also led to differing focuses of investigation for social norms research. Economic theorists have tended to examine social norm emergence by studying how social norms evolve to reduce negative or create positive externalities in situations. Organizational theorists and sociologists have instead focused on the social pressures which maintain social norms in groups over time, and eventually can lead group members to internalize the social norm. In contrast, social psychologists have tended to focus on how to use social norms in interventions aimed at reducing negative behaviors. Integrating these divergent streams of research proves important for future research.

Keywords: social norms, descriptive norms, prescriptive norms, organizational culture, norm interventions

Introduction

Few topics have attracted such diverse academic attention as the study of social norms. From Muzafer Sherif's seminal text in 1936 to examinations of assembly line rate-busters in the 1940s and 1950s (Dalton, 1948; Likert, 1958; Stone, 1952; Whyte, 1955) to the proliferation of norm interventions and nudges in more recent years (Allcott, 2011; Beshears, Choi, Laibson, Madrian, & Milkman, 2015; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Miller & Prentice, 2016; Paluck, Shepherd, & Aronow, 2016; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008), social norms have been a focus of study from organizational behavior and psychology to sociology and economics. This diversity of approaches has led to a similar diversity of definitions, empirical paradigms, and operationalizations. Social norms are variously referred to as social mores, customs, descriptive norms, prescriptive norms, proscriptive norms, injunctive norms, social information, peer effects, social proof, social information, and social conventions, and while these terms can carry distinctive meanings, the same term can connote different meanings to different audiences and different terms may be used to refer to the same conceptual quantity across different disciplines. The goal of this article is to

review work on social norms, with a particular emphasis on organizationally relevant theories and findings, in order to offer insight into directions for future research.

What is a Social Norm?

All definitions of social norms contain two components. First, a social norm usually connotes the existence or expectation of a behavioral regularity among a population. Second, the presence of a social norm suggests that others in the population are similarly aware of this expectation or behavioral regularity; thus not only does everyone at an organization tend to buy lunch at a restaurant, but everyone knows that everyone tends to do so. Given these two components, the various terms that reference social norms can be conceptualized along two dimensions: prescriptivity and scope.

The best-known distinction within social norms research is that between descriptive and prescriptive norms. Most simply, a descriptive norm is what people do, while a prescriptive norm is what people believe should be done (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990), though several additional considerations have been suggested for each type of norm. In its broadest and weakest form, any pattern of consistent behavior within a group or population can be considered a descriptive norm, from brushing one's teeth to staring up at the sky (c.f. Milgram, Bickman, & Berkowitz, 1969). Many definitions, however, build in a condition such that a descriptive norm is only a descriptive norm when an individual conforms to the norm based specifically on the expectation that a sufficiently large subset of others are conforming to the norm as well (Bicchieri, 2006). This condition, for example, might preclude the consideration of brushing one's teeth as a descriptive norm if an individual would continue brushing his or her teeth even if he or she learned that many others left theirs unbrushed. Brushing one's teeth would thus be a personal preference, or personal norm, rather than a descriptive social norm (Bicchieri, 2006). Fast forming or fleeting descriptive norms are often referred to as fads (Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, & Welch, 1998), while long-term descriptive norms that are unlikely to change are often referred to as conventions (Bicchieri, 2006; Sugden, 1989, 2000).

Descriptive social norms are often thought of as a form of informational social influence in Deutsch and Gerard's (1955) typology because they offer information about what the best or most efficient course of action is in a given situation. There are two reasons people draw inferences about efficiency from descriptive norms. First, individuals can observe the majority behaving similarly and infer that they are doing so as a rational response to an outside exogenous force. For example, if an individual is walking from point A to C and sees most of the crowd progress via route B, she might infer that route B is the fastest route or that other routes are blocked. The descriptive norm is thus a heuristic means of determining the most efficient course. Alternatively, individuals can infer that the majority action is the most efficient not because of exogenous influences (e.g., the alternative route is blocked) but for endogenous reasons. For example, if everyone tends to walk on the right side of the hallway, this becomes the most efficient route, not because the left side is blocked but because coordinating in this instance is more efficient than al-

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ternating between paths. It is due to such cases that economists often refer to descriptive norms as the stable equilibria of coordination games (see Social Norms Emergence section). We will define a descriptive norm as existing any time a sufficiently large¹ portion of the population behaves within a similar range.

Theorists vary in how strong a distinction they place between descriptive and prescriptive norms. Some treat prescriptive norms as an attitudinal version of a descriptive norm. Just as descriptive norms describe the modal or average behavior in a group, the prescriptive norm is used to reference the modal or average attitude towards a behavior (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). For example, Cialdini and colleagues (2006) contrast descriptive and prescriptive (referred to by the authors as “injunctive”) information in an intervention to reduce theft of petrified wood in a national park. The descriptive norm described the common behavior—“Many past visitors have removed the petrified wood from the park”—while the prescriptive norm described the evaluative attitude: “Please don’t remove the petrified wood from the park.” In this case, the attitude reflected in the prescriptive norm contrasts with the behavior reflected in the descriptive norm: most people take petrified wood, but most people agree people shouldn’t remove petrified wood.

Some theorists take this distinction a step further. For them, if a descriptive norm describes a state in which most individuals perform a certain act, a prescriptive norm exists to the extent that these individuals expect each other to perform this act, endow the act with reputational significance, and may be willing to punish those who deviate (Bicchieri, 2006; Birenbaum & Sagarin, 1976; Hechter & Opp, 2001). This definition of prescriptive norms is sometimes used to designate certain actions, such as driving on the right or left side of the road based on the country, as non-prescriptive. Though such actions carry a clear “should” or “ought”—as in, one should drive on the right side of the road in the United States—this is based on the outcome of coordination rather than the outcome of a more moral or aspirational “ought,” which suggests that the former is the result of a descriptive norm and the latter the result of a prescriptive norm (Bicchieri, 2006). Few theorists, however, maintain such a strict division between the two “oughts.”

More common is a distinction of intensity rather than type, such that driving on the right side of the road, although a prescriptive norm, is of a lesser intensity than the prescriptive norm not to harm another person (Krupka & Weber, 2013). At the highest intensity of prescriptive norms (or proscriptive norms if the norm focuses on prohibition rather than encouragement; see Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Hepp, 2009), norms may be referred to as social mores (Anderson & Dunning, 2014; Gibbs, 1965), moral norms (Monin, Sawyer, & Marquez, 2008), or taboos (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). However, scholars vary on whether they consider a moral prescription to be qualitatively different from a prescriptive norm (Kreps, 2015) or merely a more intense form of a prescriptive norm (Gibbs, 1965). We will define prescriptive norms as existing in a situation any time individuals have a shared range of behavior that they evaluate as appropriate or acceptable and use as a standard to evaluate others.

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Researchers have also categorized social norms, both prescriptive and descriptive, by the level of population to which they apply. Most broadly, individuals might refer to norms that differ between Eastern and Western countries (Morris, Hong, Chiu, & Liu, 2015) or describe countries based on their propensity to have a tighter or looser normative climate (Gelfand, Raver, Nishii, Leslie, & Lun, 2011). At this level, researchers generally refer to a cultural norm or a set of norms and values that define a culture. Organizational cultures fall below these international or national cultures in scope. In the same way that the national culture encompasses more than just a set of norms, all research on organizational culture cannot be categorized as research on social norms. Much of it, however, invokes implicitly or explicitly some notion of social norms. For example, in their assessment of fit between personality and organizational culture, O'Reilly, Chatman, and Caldwell (1991) enumerate a series of organizational culture components. While some, such as "careful," are predominantly describing diffuse organizational values, others, such as "competitive," "aggressive," or "long hours," can be considered organizational norms as well as values. For example, an individual in an organization might observe others trash-talking, sharing feelings of professional envy, or even sabotaging one another and infer that inter-employee competition is a descriptive norm in the organization.

Very long-lasting social norms in organizations are frequently referred to as institutionalized, and a separate body of literature examines how institutionalization of what have become arbitrary practices shapes organizational structures and logics (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Dobbin & Kelly, 2007; Selznick, 1996, Zucker, 1977). When social norms apply to multiple situations but are not explicitly bounded by a certain institution or organization, researchers often refer to them as the social climate (Paluck & Shepherd, 2012).

Across each of these broad-scope social norms, one feature remains consistent: a social norm must always have a defined reference group. *Reference group* is a term coined by Sherif (1936) to refer to the set of individuals who form one's frame of reference for a given norm. In an experiment, the reference group may be the other participants or confederates who are visible. In other situations, the reference group might be one's work team, classroom, school, organization, political party, socioeconomic class, race, gender, or nationality. A reference group might be the individuals in one's immediate vicinity who are experiencing the same external situation, in which case one might directly observe others in order to infer the norm. When social learning via direct observation is impractical, individuals may evaluate the reference group from media sources (Paluck, 2009; see Paluck et al., 2015 for caveats).

In addition to the descriptive versus prescriptive distinction (sometimes referred to as the type of norm) and a distinction of the scope of the norm, there are several other features that one can consider when categorizing social norms. Norms can be categorized by their content, such as recycling (Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008), bullying (Paluck, Shepherd, & Aronow, 2016), drinking (Prentice & Miller, 1993), and punctuality (Dannals & Miller, 2017), as well as many, many others. Even norms with the same content can be categorized by the direction or localization of this content. For example, a number of different organizations are likely to have norms around punctuality, but some are more

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strict, with the descriptive norm being to arrive early or precisely on time, whereas others are more lax, with the descriptive norm being to arrive within five to ten minutes of a meeting's start time.

Norms can also be categorized by their strength within a group. Chatman (2010) defines norm strength as the importance or prevalence of the norm relative to other norms within the group. If a social group is defined by a group prototype, such a prototype can be conceptualized as a hierarchy of relevant norms and schemas (Hogg & Reid, 2006). The most critical norms, or those evaluated as having the greatest importance in this hierarchy, are categorized as stronger norms. Norm strength is sometimes also used to refer to the amount of variance present in related group behavior, with greater variance associated with weaker norms and tighter distributions of behavior associated with stronger norms (Sørensen, 2002). Though these two definitions of norm strength may frequently covary in reality, they are conceptually distinct and thus worth distinguishing.

The remainder of this article is divided into three parts, each part devoted to one stage in the life of norms in organizations. The first reviews theories of social norm emergence, including theories of why norms emerge as well as how different groups may develop systematically different norms. The second reviews theories and research on social norm maintenance, including theories of internalization and pluralistic ignorance. The third offers an overview of research on social norm interventions, including using social norms to change counterproductive behavior.

Social Norm Emergence

Social norm emergence, or social norm evolution, receives the greatest attention in economic theory and research. In economic theory, the most pervasive explanation of social norm emergence takes a functional perspective, sometimes referred to as the rational perspective or the instrumental view of norms (Hechter & Opp, 2001). These theories suggest that social norms form to solve social dilemmas by encouraging positive externalities (benefits for others) and discouraging negative externalities (costs for others; Bicchieri, 2006; Schelling, 1980; Ullmann-Margalit, 1977; Young, 1993). As an example, take the prisoner's dilemma, an economic game in which the Nash Equilibrium is for each player to choose to defect from the other, creating negative externalities for each other and leaving neither with the optimal payoff. If one is playing a repeated prisoner's dilemma, then both parties are better off when both parties cooperate repeatedly, creating positive externalities for each other. It would therefore behoove both parties for a cooperative norm to exist that signals to each that cooperation will be rewarded rather than betrayed. Axelrod (1986) argues via simulation evidence that a cooperative norm can emerge and become stable in such situations, so long as a meta-norm is present in which individuals are willing to punish those who fail to punish defectors in the game. Bicchieri, Duffy, and Tolle (2004) suggest that even absent a meta-norm, if one assumes a heterogeneous population of strategic decision-makers with regular updating of strategy, a cooperative norm can emerge in a modeled repeated trust game, where cooperation is similarly

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necessary for optimal payoffs. Alexander (2007) further models how boundedly rational agents, who might only use an updating strategy that copies the most productive strategy they happen to observe, can over time develop stable norms of cooperation, trust, and fairness in different network structures.

Though these models tend to focus only on economic games and their related norms (e.g., fairness, reciprocity, cooperation), it's easy to see how other situations might be modeled in such social dilemmas. For example, one can view standing in line in a crowded marketplace as solving a "tragedy of the commons" dilemma: every individual is better off if they are able to cut in line and become first, but no one will be able to make a purchase if all other individuals cut in line. A functionalist perspective would suggest that the norm of standing in line (queuing), widely recognized as consistent across situations (Milgram, Liberty, Toledo, & Wackenhut, 1986), evolved to solve such a problem. All individuals agree to stand in line and sanction those who cut the line, thus solving the public goods problem. It's easy to imagine such functionalist perspectives applying in organizational structuring. For example, turn-taking in speaking during meetings might emerge as a norm to solve the "public goods" dilemma: everyone wants to offer their opinion, but if everyone speaks at once, no one can offer their opinion.

Functionalist explanations are persuasive but frequently insufficient, because they cannot explain how inefficient or suboptimal norms manifest (Bicchieri & Muldoon, 2014). However, studying norm emergence without such an instrumental framework proves very difficult. Economic theories of norm emergence use tightly defined situations, economic games, in which the possible actions are clearly defined, such as to defect or to cooperate, and the utilities of these actions are similarly clear. Furthermore, within their experimental paradigms, they can control all features of the population, such as whether there is shared history between the players and whether there is a possibility of future interaction. Without such controls, the study of norm emergence is complicated. For example, psychological researchers may try to create a norm in a laboratory, but norms are notoriously hard to create in such environments (e.g., Asch, 1951; Sherif, 1936), both because of the artificiality and the brief time frame. In order to model a longer time frame, economists might run probabilistic simulations (Axelrod, 1986) or serial game interactions where each interaction is only one short decision but neither is a viable methodology once the norm created moves beyond game scenarios. Studies of norm emergence in the real world frequently appear as case studies in which a particular norm emerged in a particular situation and group (e.g., Elias, 1939), but generalizing to a broader theory from such cases is a daunting task.

Several organizational researchers have taken new perspectives on this task. Bettenhausen and Murnighan (1985, 1991) examine how individuals in new groups apply norms observed in previous situations to negotiate new norms for the new group. They refer to this as an experiential anchoring model of norm formation. While this does not attempt to explain norm formation vs. non-formation in the same way that economists might ask why a norm of cooperation emerged in situation A but not in situation B, it does put forward a theory to explain why a specific norm might be more likely to emerge in group A, while a

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different norm is more probable in group B. Their framework is similar to Kahneman and Miller's (1986) Norm Theory, which suggests that norms emerge via cognitive construction of likely counterfactuals. Chatman and Flynn (2001) also examine how features of a new group can affect the emergence of social norms, focusing on demographics rather than past schemas or experiences. They suggest that demographically heterogeneous work groups have greater difficulty establishing strong and cooperative social norms, but that this effect may fade over time as group members develop greater trust in each other.

A major step awaiting social norms research is integrating research on social norm emergence in economics with research on individual appraisals of new situations in psychology. Since Bettenhausen and Murnighan (1991), few organizational scholars have examined how norms emerge naturalistically in teams. Economists have put forward several models describing how norms might emerge as coordination mechanisms, but teams might frequently fail to reach the coordinated equilibrium. By examining what factors might speed or stall the formation of these norms, researchers could make a substantial contribution not just to organizational research but to the integration of scholarship across disciplines.

Social Norm Maintenance

Once a norm has been established in a group it can be remarkably sticky or bizarrely fleeting. Social norm maintenance refers to the processes by which a social norm persists over time in a population. In order for a social norm to be maintained, newcomers must adopt the norm and tenured members of the group must maintain their allegiance to it. What drives the maintenance of social norms within a given group and situation? In answering this question, it is necessary to revisit the reasons individuals conform to social norms in the first place.

Most theories suggest that conformity to social norms in the short term is due to some combination of an individual's desire to avoid the expected social punishment attendant on breaking a norm and an individual's desire to garner the positive social evaluation or status that accompanies some act of conformity. In economic games, the threat of economic repercussions from other group members (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004) or from a third party (Nakashima, Halali, & Halevy, 2017) motivates the establishment of cooperative norms, which are maintained even when the sanctions are removed supposedly by the negative message the earlier sanction conveyed to a would-be deviant. Threats of social exclusion or social judgment can be strong enough to motivate individuals even to deny obvious truths, as demonstrated by Asch's (1951) famous experiment in which hearing confederate judgments induced participants to indicate that a short line was in fact the longest displayed. Individuals may be further motivated to conform in hopes of garnering respect or prestige from other group members (McAdams, 1997). As Hogg and Terry (2000) suggest, prototypical individuals are more likely to be chosen as group leaders, and thus individuals may follow the practice of conforming in order to better advance in organizations.

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We have described various forms of influence that normative forces can exert, but how accurate are group members at identifying the prevalent behaviors and attitudes of their peers? Sometimes not very, it turns out. For one thing, in many cases individuals may rely on prior experiences rather than expend cognitive energy monitoring for changes in the normative climate. Because of this, just as norms bleed over from situation to situation when individuals apply previously accurate schemas (Bettenhausen & Murnighan, 1985), norms may persist in situations even when individuals no longer endorse them. Jacobs and Campbell (1961) modified the experimental procedure used by Sherif (1936) in his famous experiments using the Autokinetic Effect, adding in multiple generations of participants in order to examine this question. They found that arbitrary norms set by the first group persisted even after the original confederates were replaced in the second and third generations. Zucker (1977) further developed this design by adding organizational features to the instructions in certain conditions. By priming participants to act as if they were part of an office or organization, Zucker (1977) demonstrated that arbitrary norms persist even longer than Jacobs and Campbell (1961) would predict when individuals are in a more organizational or institutional mindset. This suggests that in organizations, norms, once established, may be particularly sticky and hard to change, because the organizational context itself communicates an expectation of stability in actions.

Norms are also likely to persist when individuals misperceive the support for the social norm. Prentice and Miller (1993) describe a case of pluralistic ignorance around student alcohol use. In cases of pluralistic ignorance, individuals privately disapprove of the norm but believe that other group members continue to endorse the norm (Allport, 1933). For example, individuals may privately wish to drink less alcohol but believe that their peers endorse the norm to drink more alcohol. This misperception of the norm not only strengthens the norm via direct conformity—individuals are more likely to drink more themselves when they believe others endorse their doing so—but also because individuals who misperceive the norm become more likely to support the meta-norm. For example, even if individuals wish to be drinking less, pluralistic ignorance may motivate them to not only drink more themselves but also subtly enforce the norm on others who are not drinking enough, thereby redoubling the norm's maintenance.

Over time, norms may be maintained because individuals internalize these persistent social pressures from external forces to internal preferences (Parsons, 1951). For example, women may internalize societal conventions of dress so that they become a woman's internal preference for how to dress (Stephan et al., 2008). Few women would suggest that high heels are the most utility-maximizing footwear, and yet the majority of women continue to wear them on a regular basis, particularly for formal or business occasions. Furthermore, though some women undoubtedly acknowledge that wearing high-heeled shoes is only done out of convention, many have internalized the preference for heels to the point where they enjoy wearing them and may incorporate wearing high heels as a part of their identity. It seems improbable that this preference is unrelated to social norms—given that, for example, they may change their minds if a majority of their peers start ex-

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pressing distaste for heels—but it nonetheless goes beyond pure social norm conformity and toward a more basic and internalized preference.

Even absent these naturalistic norm maintenance mechanisms, organizations expend considerable effort to maintain social norms that they believe improve performance. Strong corporate cultures are touted as a good way of inducing compliance in organizations, often obviating the need for costly economic incentives (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996).

O'Reilly and Chatman (1996) outline three features of organizational cultures as mechanisms for social control, the second of which, “managing the informational context” (p. 175) is strongly reliant on management’s ability to construct and reinforce social norms via symbolism and goals. Countless ethnographies and other studies of corporations suggest that organizations from General Motors and Toyota (Adler, 1993) to Procter and Gamble (Collins & Porras, 1994) and Disney (Van Maanen, 1991) develop organizational structures, as well as extensive onboarding procedures, in order to leverage normative pressure to shape employee behavior for profit maximization.

Social Norm Acquisition

There are various reasons both for group members to conform to group norms and for group norms to persist, but how do newcomers learn the relevant norms that ensure the perpetuation of the status quo? The predominant theories suggest that individuals learn social norms via social learning whereby they observe others and enact behavior that others seem to approve of or endorse, while avoiding behavior that they see results in punishment (Bandura, 1973). Individuals use several strategies to determine what others in a situation seem to endorse. Evolutionary theory suggests that individuals sometimes simply adopt the most common observed behavior as an indication of the best or most efficient course of action (Henrich & Boyd, 2001). Some research suggests that instead of the general mean or mode of a group’s behavior, individuals may give special weight to social referents, or individuals with a particular network position that offers them greater attention and therefore influence (Paluck & Shepherd, 2012; Paluck, Shepherd, & Aronow, 2016). Shared by all of these theories is the assumption that individuals are motivated to learn the social norm in the new situation in order to avoid social punishment, one implication of which is that slow employee turnover will enhance the capacity of organizations to maintain norms.

The process of learning and updating one’s perception of social norms offers new avenues for research. While some research suggests that individuals focus on the average or modal behavior, other research suggests that the behavior of some group members is weighted more than others (Paluck & Shepherd, 2012). There are various features of an individual that can give him or her greater influence in determining social norms. Status and visibility are two obvious features, and while theories and research have shown that highly visible individuals are more likely to influence norms (Paluck & Shepherd, 2012), further research is necessary to establish whether these features exert their influence through similar or distinct psychological pathways. Further research is also necessary to

clarify the role of leaders in shaping and conveying social norms. Leaders are both exempt from social norms (Abrams, Randsley de Moura, Marques, & Hutchinson, 2008) and signals of social norms (d'Adda, Darai, Pavanini, & Weber, 2016). By delving into the individual psychology of norm perception, researchers can gain insight into how norms are maintained and evolve over time.

Social Norm Interventions

Often, social norms fail to discourage or may even encourage nonoptimal behavior. Given the power of social pressure to motivate conformity, many researchers, in organizations and other social groups, have used social norm information to intervene and modify behavior. This section reviews the three steps researchers and managers face when designing successful norm interventions. First, they must evaluate whether norms are currently a factor in individuals' decisions. In some cases, individuals might not naturally consider norms as a factor in their decision, making the interventionist's task twofold. Second, interventionists must evaluate the current normative climate in order to determine whether an intervention may be likely to succeed. Third, interventionists must evaluate how the new norm information can be best conveyed to the targets of the intervention. When norm interventions produce null effects (Bohner & Schlüter, 2014) or even backfire (Beshears et al., 2015), it is likely that one or more of these steps has gone awry.

The first step in any psychological intervention is to determine the factors currently influencing the target's suboptimal decisions. Understanding a target's psychology, the basis of what Walton (2014) called "wise" interventions, allows those designing the intervention to determine how various interventions could impact the target. Norm interventions fall broadly into two categories. In one case, individuals who are not currently using social norms as a factor for their behavior are targeted with social norm messages in order to increase the salience of social norms and move these individuals towards more normative behavior. Take, for example, the target behavior of recycling towels to be reused rather than laundered in hotels (Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008). Many hotel-goers would be happy to reuse their towels, thus saving considerable water, but few hotel-goers, when toweling off after the shower, are likely to consider what others like them do with their towels after one use. In fact, they may be unlikely to consider any factors at all, and simply act according to the status quo (Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1991) by dropping the towel on the floor and moving on. This suggests that a norm intervention may have success simply by making the norm salient to a population that is not otherwise considering it. This will not be equally successful in all cases, however. Take, for example, saving for retirement as the target behavior of an intervention. When saving for retirement, individuals likely consider many factors, including what others their age and salary do, the descriptive norm, but also what they feel is financially feasible to put aside given their other and potentially unique budget constraints. This suggests that for some, being reminded of their peer's retirement savings (e.g., Beshears et al., 2015) may not only fail to change behavior but may act as a discouraging negative social comparison.

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Alternatively, some social norm interventions target situations in which individuals are currently influenced by a norm but one that is viewed as suboptimal. These interventions tend to take place in the domain of risky behaviors, whether that is the use of tobacco (Hansen & Graham, 1991) or illegal drugs (Perkins, 2003), the practice of safe sex (Lynch, Mowrey, Nesbitt, & O'Neill, 2004), gender-based aggression (Paluck & Ball, 2010), student bullying (Sandstrom, Makover, & Bartini, 2013), or alcohol abuse (Agostinelli, Brown, & Miller, 1995). The assumption behind interventions in each of these situations is that some number of the population is engaging in the risky behavior only because they feel their peers' social approval is dependent upon doing so. Interventions in this case can only be successful to the degree that these individuals have misperceived the social norm, which is to say to the degree that fewer individuals support the risky behavior in reality than in these individuals' estimation of the social norm.

This situation, known as pluralistic ignorance (Prentice & Miller, 1993), is an excellent example of why the second step outlined above, evaluating the normative climate prior to intervening, is crucial in social norm interventions. Situations of pluralistic ignorance, where individuals falsely believe that only they disagree with the norm, are well-suited for norm interventions. When evaluating the normative climate, those desiring to change the norm must evaluate both the current base rate of the relevant behaviors (e.g., how much individuals drink, how often people recycle versus launder their towels) and then evaluate the current perceptions of these behaviors (e.g., how much do individuals think their peers drink, how often do individuals think others recycle versus launder their towels). If the target's perception of the social norm is accurate, a social norm intervention is unlikely to have a strong impact. Beyond potentially increasing the salience of the social norm as a factor in decision-making, the target does not gain any novel information from a social norm intervention, because they already have an accurate perception. If individuals have an overoptimistic view of the norm (e.g., they believe many of their peers recycle their towels, but fewer actually do) then a norm intervention could adversely affect the target behavior, a variation of the so-called "boomerang effect," where individuals who are performing better than average learn the norm and slack off as a result (Schultz, Nolan, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2007).

However, in cases where individuals misperceive the norm due to pluralistic ignorance, norm interventions have more leverage. In these cases, some portion of the population feel trapped by the norm—they feel pressured by the norm to drink, smoke, have unprotected sex, or enact another risky behavior more than they wish to. Because these individuals misperceive the norm, they are the ideal targets for accurate social norm information, which might correct their misperception and allow them to feel less social pressure. One key task in evaluating the normative climate prior to intervening is determining what portion of the population currently misperceive the norm in a counterproductive direction and as a consequence behave within this misperceived range of acceptable behavior (cf. Scheibehenne, Jamil, & Wagenmakers, 2016). In some cases, evaluating the organization broadly through surveys may make the most sense, but when the suspected pluralistic ig-

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norance is situated in a smaller unit, such as a corporate board (Westphal & Bednar, 2005; Zhu & Westphal, 2011), it may be more viable to perform discrete interviews.

Once a researcher has evaluated and determined that a given situation is appropriate for a norm intervention, there are several possible ways to convey social norms to the target population. Social norms marketing campaigns publicize a single or small set of summary statistics that serve as a representation of the descriptive (“80% of students drink less than two drinks at parties”) or prescriptive (“80% of students are against trash-talking at this school”) norms (Burchell, Rettie, & Patel, 2013). Social norm marketing is particularly useful because it can be disseminated widely without extra cost, but it may require surveying the reference group for prescriptive judgments or when descriptive data are not already recorded. Personalized normative feedback offers the same norm information as social norms marketing but augments it with a personal comparison. For example, individuals might learn that they “consume more water than 60% of. . . [their] neighbors” (Ferraro & Price, 2013) or that they use “15% less electricity than. . . efficient neighbors” (Allcott, 2011). This approach requires more tailoring than social norms marketing, because it presents individual-level data as well as the relative standing compared to the aggregate norm, but it also conveys greater information and therefore can make a greater impact. Some researchers take norm interventions a step further with focus group discussions where the target group meets together to discuss the social norm information and their feelings about the target behavior (LaBrie et al., 2013; Reilly & Wood, 2008; Schroeder & Prentice, 1998). Recent investigations have also targeted small focus group interventions specifically at socially salient students, who then, via their change in attitude and behavior, change the perceived social norm in the broader network (Paluck & Shepherd, 2012; Paluck, Shepherd, & Aronow, 2016).

Several questions remain open in crafting the most effective or efficient social norm interventions. For example, imagine designing a norm intervention to encourage low-income individuals to open a bank account. The researcher has a choice of two frames, both of which use descriptive norms to encourage the behavior. In frame A, the researcher publicizes a basic social norms marketing message: X% of people like you are opening a bank account. In frame B, the researcher adds a further statement: X% of people like you are working to become financially stable by opening a bank account. Which frame should encourage a greater number of people to open the bank account? When structuring a norm intervention, it’s unclear whether linking the micro behavior, opening a bank account, to the broader prototype, being financially stable, should improve the efficacy of the intervention or weaken it, because current research suggests both results are probable. By emphasizing the broader prototype or goal, the intervention might show improved efficacy via identity relevance or norm spillovers. By communicating the broader prototype, a norm intervention can potentially strengthen the identity relevance of the normative message by linking it to a valued goal (e.g., being green, being financially stable). This is perhaps a better strategy than relying on only other social categories, such as gender, race, or socioeconomic status, because it’s often unclear which category forms the most important reference group. Does an employee look only to the same title for a comparison on retirement savings? Only the same age? Perhaps by stressing the relevant goal one can

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sidestep some of these delineations (e.g., X% of employees are being preparing for their future by saving in their 401k).

Furthermore, stressing the broader prototype could encourage spillover effects from one micro behavioral norm to another. To the extent that individuals view multiple behavioral actions as linked to a broader prototype (e.g., good team member), inducing them to enact one of the behaviors should increase their willingness to take other related actions. For example, a norm campaign that successfully convinced targets to begin composting in order to comply with a “green identity” might also increase their willingness to conserve water, in order to achieve the same identity goal. Spillovers of this type can lead to a cycle of reinforcement of each behavior, thereby leading to longer-lasting norm changes.

There is another stream of research, however, that suggests that individuals’ past behaviors, particularly those with moral connotations, can license them to resist taking similar behaviors in the future (Mullen & Monin, 2016; Monin & Miller, 2001). Evidence for such *moral licensing* would suggest that when individuals are confronted with a request for a potentially taxing behavior, such as mentoring a new coworker, they may use previous instances of good citizenship to license them to refuse the request. The risk of moral licensing can be expected to be greater in the case of norm interventions that reference a broader prototype, because it will bring to mind a broader set of potentially licensing behaviors. To recall an earlier example, one might imagine targets who don’t want to open a bank account releasing themselves from the restrictive power of a norm intervention by pointing to other steps they have taken (e.g., cutting extraneous spending, paying down debt) that showed their commitment to financial security.

This last example illustrates just one way in which researchers would benefit from sharpening their understanding of the psychology involved in norm interventions. Given the powerful effects that norm interventions can have on behavior, and the increasing prevalence of behavioral science in public policy spheres, organizational scholars studying social norms can have a considerable impact in shaping behavior in and beyond organizations.

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Notes:

(1.) For an exploration of what defines “sufficiently large” and the parameters effecting when this level of social proof has been reached, see MacCoun’s (2012) Burden of Proof (BOP) framework and model.

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