What implications of social norms theory for promoting health and wellbeing?

Ben Cislaghi
Assistant Professor in Social Norms
Centre for Gender, Health and Violence
ben.cislaghi@lshtm.ac.uk
The pragmatist’s cappuccino metaphor

- The packaging of the tool
- The abstract virtuousness of the theory
- The added value for the brave ones
- The juice that is worth the squeeze

A forgone assumption hidden in many projects

(Material resources aside)

New knowledge --> New behaviour
(New attitudes)
But then failure comes (for the brave one who embrace it)

“Despite an extensive promotion campaign we found only moderate compliance with the intervention”

What are social norms?
What behaviours do social norms influence?
Who is influential?
Who is counter-influential?
Why do people comply with social norms?
WHAT ARE SOCIAL NORMS?
Many schools of social norms as beliefs

- Marketing
- Consumer behaviour
- Organisational Science
- Health Science
- Implementation science
- Communication
- Behavioural economics
- Game theory
- Moral Psychology
- Social Psychology
- Moral Philosophy
- Evolutionary psychology
- Political Science
- Health Psychology
Social norms regulate what behaviour is “normal”
Social Norms

• Unwritten rules about what is acceptable in a given society or group of people ("reference group").

• Exchange Christmas gifts with family members, offer water to a visitor, leave a tip to the waiter.

• Often maintained by positive and negative social sanctions.
Social Norms have important positive roles

1. They help us work together

   We are ultrasocial and culturally evolved (Tomasello et al, 2005)
   (Boehm, 1999)

2. They positively affect people’s health:

   Cultural Consensus is correlated with normal blood pressure
   (Dressler and Bindon 2000)

   Social Integration is correlated with physical and mental health
   (Berkman et al 2000)
One theory: Social Norms as Beliefs

1. What people believe others do
2. What people believe others approve and disapprove of

(Descriptive norms or empirical expectations) (Injunctive norms or normative expectations)

A Social Norm is NOT a personal attitude
Examples of Harmful social norms

I wouldn’t like to smoke (attitude), but I ought to do it (norm) to look cool
I wouldn’t like to drink that much (attitude), but hey: you have got to fit in so I do (norm)!
I can’t wear a helmet when cycling (norm) – that’s just for the geeks!
I would like to defend that person that is bullied at school (attitude), but I don’t want to be seen with him (norm) because everyone think s/he is a nerd (and would disapprove of me);
I would like to report the teacher that hits the child (attitude) but nobody does it (norm) and I think others would stop talking to me and call me a “policeman”
Effect of Interaction of Social Norms and Personal Attitudes on health outcomes

Cislaghi B, Heise L (2018); Theory and Practice of Social Norms Interventions: Eight Common Pitfalls. Globalization and Health
Social Norms influence...

Harmful Alcohol Use (Prestwich et al. 2016)

Substance abuse (Mahalik et al. 2015)

Contraception / Condom use (Protogerou et al. 2015)

Bullying (Berger and Caravita, 2016)

Access to education (Martens, 2013)

Readiness to ask for help (Vogel et al. 2015)

Domestic Violence (Jewkes et al. 2015)

Corporal Punishment of children (Vaughan-Eden, 2018)
Current attention on social norms in LMIC

- Child Marriage (Lee-Rife et al. 2010)
- FGC (Mackie and LeJeune, 2009)
- Open defecation (Zimba et al. 2016)
- Family planning and birth spacing (Bongardt et al. 2016)
- Intimate partner violence (Bass et al. 2016)
Social norms could facilitate cooperation and strategies for exchange of goods among low-frequency partners and strangers (evolutionary)
Social norms could facilitate cooperation and strategies for exchange of goods among low-frequency partners and strangers
Social norms could facilitate cooperation and strategies for exchange of goods among low-frequency partners and strangers

**Small bounded societies (e.g. rural villages):** stronger low or high-trust equilibrium that is more difficult to change
Social Norms and the Market

Social norms could facilitate cooperation and strategies for exchange of goods among low-frequency partners and strangers.

**Small bounded societies (e.g. rural villages):** stronger low or high-trust equilibrium that is more difficult to change.

**Open high density societies (e.g. urban cities):** lots of exit strategies, many reference groups, equilibrium can change rapidly.
INFLUENTIAL AND COUNTER-INFLUENTIAL GROUPS
Who is influential?

Likelihood of accepting IPV if a social contact accepts IPV, across different types of relationships.

- Significant
- Not significant

Increased likelihood of accepting IPV

Type of relationship:
- any
- Same HH
- mother
- father
- spouse
- important
- talk
- friend
- borrow
- leader
Percentage smoking outside area?

Percentage violating?
Sometimes the norm exists in a specific reference group...

...and sometimes they are in the “society”

THREE FINAL POINTS
1. NOT ALL NORMS ARE EQUAL
The prevalence of a norm doesn’t affect its influence

20 gallons of pee in a swimming pool on average

https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.estlett.7b00043
Methods:
- Focus Group Discussions
- Key Informant Interviews
- Social Network Analysis
- Cultural Domain Analysis
- Ethnographic case studies
Norm: Respectable women marry early

Subject: Adolescent girls who reached puberty

Sanctions: Less desirable marriage prospects at age 18

Reference Group: Community members (future in-laws and husbands)

Variations by ethnic group:

Maka. Uncommon, (Mildly) Acceptable
“Is marriage a race? Marriage comes at its time, we don’t force it. She will get married one day”

Mafa. Common, Acceptable and Appropriate
“It is easy for her to find a husband [now that she’s 22], but she will not likely find the type of husband she ever dreamed of when she was 17 or 18 years old”

Mbororo. Common, Acceptable, Appropriate, and Obligatory
“To me, it will be very difficult for a girl to get married [when she’s 20]. At that age, all her sisters would be in their marital homes”

Musgum. Common, Acceptable, Appropriate, and Obligatory
“It will be difficult for her to find a husband, because she is stigmatised by the people in the village”
Cislaghi B, Heise L (2018); *Four avenues of normative influence for health promotion*. Health Psychology.
Norms don’t only determine preference based on what I am expected to do

Norms’ don’t *only* constrict people actions (my individual attitude would be to do X, but I do Y because others expect it from me)

They *also* stretch the field of what is possible.

Not only what is compulsory or forbidden (and even acceptable), but also what is possible
2. NORMS BUNDLE IN UNIVERSES
Norms and IPV

You are not a real man if you don’t hit your wife or lover.

It’s your fault if you can’t manage your relationship well enough and he hits you.

They all pretend their relationships are perfect.

Cislaghi, Battarjee (2017); Honour and Prestige: the influence of social norms on violence against women and girls in Karnataka, Southern India; Strive working papers.
RELATION NORM / BEHAVIOUR: BUNDLES OF NORMS

DIRECT

BEHAVIOUR: FGC

NORM: FGC

INDIRECT

BEHAVIOUR: HITTING WIFE

NORM: FAMILY HONOUR

NORM: FAMILY PRIVACY

NORM: TOLERANCE OF VIOLENCE

Cislaghi and Heise (2018); *Eight Pitfalls of social norms theory*. Globalization and Health.
3. SOCIAL SYSTEMS ARE COMPLEX
Norms and IPV

You are not a real man if you don't hit your wife or lover.

They all hit their wives and lovers, but that's not the reason I hit my wife! I do that because I am angry and she cheated on me.

Cislaghi, Battarjee (2017); Honour and Prestige: The influence of social norms on violence against women and girls in Karnataka, Southern India; Strive working papers.
Partner violence is sustained by:

- **Factual beliefs**: women will not obey unless beaten; women need discipline to be good wives
- **Positive attitudes** toward the practice -- hitting is an acceptable form of discipline
- **Direct norms**: other men will look down upon a man who cannot keep his wife in line (masculinity norms)
- **Indirect norms**: family privacy -- disclosing violence will bring shame upon the family
- **Gender roles/scripts**: ideals of what a “good wife” is/does
Cislaghi B, Heise L (2018); Using social norms for health promotion in low and mid-income countries. Health Promotion International.
Six Key messages

1. Social norms are beliefs about what others do and approve of
2. They are different from personal attitudes...
3. ...but these two can be aligned or misaligned.
4. Not all norms are equal, some are more powerful, others less
5. Norms can have direct or indirect influence
6. Norms affect factors on several domains in the ecological framework