

# Applying Social norms theory to understand the collective action problem of violence against women and children.

Dr Kate McAlpine, 2021

Few development programmes explore beliefs about the social environment, but understanding the presence and effect of social norms is critical if the complex problem of violence is to be successfully addressed (Mackie et al, 2015).

Mackie et al, 2015; Fry et al, 2016; Valente, 2010; Paluck and Shepherd, 2012; and Bicchieri, 2006, 2014, and 2016 have all written extensively & valuably about social norms theory. Their thinking is drawn upon for this introduction to social norms theory, which is part of a larger research endeavour conducted by Dr McAlpine and Citizens 4 Change to understand whether the punitive treatment of women and children in Tanzania is in fact a social norm.

## What makes a social norm?

There are multiple meanings of the term “norm”. It can be a statistical regularity, a typical behaviour within a group, a moral belief that is motivated by conscience, or a legal convention. In contrast, a social norm is socially conditioned.



**‘A social norm is a rule of behaviour such that individuals prefer to conform to it on condition that they believe that (a) most people in their reference network conform to it (empirical expectation), and (b) that most people in their reference network believe they ought to conform to it (normative expectation).’**

**(Bicchieri, 2016)**



Social norms have three key elements related to social motivation:



### **Social expectations**

Social norms are constructed by one’s beliefs about what others do and about one’s beliefs about what others think one should do.



### **Reference groups**

Social norms are informed by one’s beliefs about the social expectation of people whose opinion is valued.



### **Anticipation of social approval or sanction**

Compliance with a social norm is maintained by anticipation of the overt or covert approval or disapproval of people within the reference group.

**Social norms tell us how we think we ought to act.** They are second-order beliefs that include an element of “should” or “ought” and express social approval or disapproval of a behaviour. People prefer to follow them because they expect that people whose approval matters to them will also comply with the behaviours.

## A brief timeline of social norm research

1960,  
1978

**Schelling**

Game Theory hypothesising about regularities in human behaviour.

1990

**Ajzen & Fishbein**

Developed the theory of human action, which accounts for the gap between attitude and behaviour. They also developed the Reasoned Action Approach (2010).

1998

**Cialdini & Tost**

Distinguished between descriptive “do what others do” and injunctive norms “do what others think you should do” and personal norms that are internally motivated and consistent with one’s sense of self worth.

1993

**Prentice & Miller**

Argued that pluralistic ignorance means that many privately reject a group norm but mistakenly believe that many others accept the norm. Thus the norm is persistent and even publicly favoured even though it may be privately opposed.

2006

**Bicchieri**

Distinguished between empirical expectations, a belief that many others follow the norm; and normative expectations, a belief that many others believe the rule should be followed, and/or may be willing to sanction deviations from it.

### Effecting change in interdependent behaviours.

Norms refer to interdependent behaviours where other people’s actions and opinions matter to one’s choice. Not all drivers of violence are social. They may be extra-social and caused by economic, legal, political, religious or technological factors.

**The first challenge is to understand if punitive treatment of women and children in Tanzania is in fact a social norm.**



Fry et al (2016) studied social norms related to children in Zimbabwe and explained that in fact, “There is a belief that most social norm behaviours are more common than they actually are.” Senga (2020) argues that in Tanzania there are emerging protective norms; but he does not systematically use social norms theory to evidence this claim. Thus, there is a real need to fully understand which violence issues are related to social norms; and only then to determine interventions for behavioural change (Mackie et al, 2015).

### How to determine if punitive treatment of children is a social norm?

Demographic Health Surveys may suggest the presence of a social norm;

- if there is a high spatial or ethnic variation in a practice, indicating a reference group, or
- if there is a high discrepancy between behaviour and attitude, indicating a social norm prevailing over personal attitude, or
- if there is comparative persistence of the practice or a comparatively rapid shift in the practice, indicating a highly interdependent action.

In empirical research it is rarely people's behaviours that indicate the presence of a social norm, but rather their beliefs about others. Thus, to understand if a social norm is present three things need to be investigated.

## 1 The nature of the Reference Group

The reference group includes everyone who matters to an individual in a certain situation. Some people can matter more than others, and their approval or sanction determines what behaviours are considered valued. These are the opinion leaders in people's lives; and they may be physically distant or proximate to the individual to whom they matter. Paluck & Shepherd hypothesized that highly connected and "chronically salient individuals provide cues as to the social norms of the collective". It thus makes sense to also ask, who is highly connected and therefore salient?

Social network analysis can be used to indicate the reference group; or to identify who is most influentially located in the group. The simplest and most informal type of network analysis is just asking people who relates to whom with respect to a practice. For example, they could be asked if they have recently interacted, discussed a specific topic, or received some sort of assistance (Valente, 2010).

A possible questions could be: Please think about the people in your life;

**Whose opinion do you value?**

**Who would you discuss your school life with?**

**Who do you go to if you need assistance?**

## 2 Beliefs about others

The starting point in understanding a social norm is to investigate beliefs about others. There are three categories of belief;



those about the non-social environment



those about oneself



and those about the social environment, specifically about what others in the group think or do.

Understanding if a social norm exists starts by exploring the third category of beliefs about the social environment. Thus, we need to measure individuals' beliefs about who the reference group is, beliefs about what others do, and beliefs about what others approve of (normative expectations). A possible question could be: **Is the behaviour that you describe common in your community?**

## 3 Anticipation of social approval or sanction

The key is to understand what people think is socially approved of or disapproved of, in the context of the reference group. One could also ask whether an action is socially appropriate or inappropriate, or leads to social acceptance or rejection in the reference group.

It is important to be aware of social desirability bias when looking for social norms; whereby respondents give the answer they think the questioner wants to hear, rather than providing a true reflection of their belief or behavior. This is particularly so when exploring the potential existence of social norms that are punitive; because there is now sufficient popular awareness of childrens and womens' rights that people tend to 'cover up' behaviours that they know are considered to be rights violations.

Once it is clear that a behaviour is maintained by a social norm the challenge becomes one of effecting change.

## Social norms are often resistant to change



**“Because of the interdependence of expectation and action, social norms can be stiffly resistant to change.”**

**Mackie et al (2015)**



To abandon a harmful old norm or establish a beneficial new norm requires that enough people in the reference group change their social expectations. There are three potential avenues to effecting change in interdependent behaviours that are maintained by people's belief systems about other people.

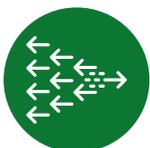
- 1** Change the behaviour of influential people within the reference group. A small number of highly influential people can more easily bring about change than a larger number of less influential people. This is one way that unequal power is relevant to social norms change.
- 2** Change what people think about the behaviour of others who are important to them - their social expectations. This can be done by attracting those most motivated to change and make highly public that many are changing.
- 3** Dismissing myths about the prevalence of a behaviour.

### Measuring if a social norm has changed

Change in beliefs about social approval tends to precede actual change in group behavior. So declining social approval for an old behavior, or increasing social approval for a new behavior can indicate progress towards behavioural change. To understand if a social norm has changed we would need to use repeated surveys over time to find out:



**Have some individuals shifted to another reference group or formed a new one?**



**How have empirical and normative expectations changed with respect to the old behavior and the new behavior?**



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