



Social Norms and Pro-environmental Behavior: A Review of the Evidence



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 July 2015

Received in revised form 18 February 2017

Accepted 23 April 2017

Available online 4 May 2017

JEL:

D03

C91

Keywords:

Social norms

Prosocial behavior

Experimental economics

ABSTRACT

In light of the growing attention that social norm interventions have garnered as policy tools, we review the current body of evidence on their effectiveness with respect to pro-environmental behaviors. We identify the various conceptualizations of social norms currently in use and inventory the experimental economics and social psychology literature that has examined the impacts of social norm interventions on pro-environmental behavior. For each study included in this inventory, we note several contextual features, the data collection and analytical methods used, and any significant main effects attributed to the social norm intervention. We also review several theoretical models of behavior that incorporate social norms. Based on this empirical and theoretical review, we draw a number of policy implications and identify avenues for future research on the role of social norms with respect to pro-environmental behavior.

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1. Introduction

A vast body of evidence demonstrates that social norms impact a wide range of behaviors, including conservation activities, charitable donations, alcohol consumption, and diet and exercise habits. According to this research, it appears that what other people do and think matters a great deal to individuals, and moreover, that social norm dynamics can have important implications for societal outcomes (Nyborg et al., 2016). Social information can affect individuals for a variety of reasons:

people may wish to fit in (or on the contrary, stand out), avoid social disapproval, or seek social esteem. People may also take the behavior of others as an indication of what is most effective, or they may expect reciprocity in exchange for their own conformity. Paradoxically, despite the many reasons why people may follow social norms, it has also been shown that people tend to underestimate the influence of norms on their own behavior (Cialdini, 2007). Findings such as these indicate that social norms tend to operate through fast, intuitive, and emotional mental heuristics. What's more, emerging evidence also points to the possibility that the importance of social norms with respect to behavior has been underestimated by the research community in the past, as well. Indeed, social norms have been found to be responsible for some of the explanatory power previously attributed to elements in the Theory

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of Planned Behavior (Thøgersen, 2014) and have also been found to explain some of the effectiveness of the default option framing bias (Everett et al., 2015).

While the study of norms originated in sociology, over time it has also come to be emphasized in a variety of domains ranging from neuroscience and business ethics to public health. Along with the recent import of many psychological insights into the field of economics, social norms have increasingly become of interest to economists, as well. In this review, we draw from work in social psychology and economics, and as such, we treat conformity to social norms from the individualistic perspective of these disciplines. Opp (1979) provides an early comparison of how economics and psychology approach the study of social norms, suggesting that hypotheses from both disciplines can complement each other in advancing the body of knowledge on the subject. This complementarity is apparent given that economic theories tend to excel in generalizability, while psychological theories tend to excel in explanatory power. He notes that although the “structural-individualistic” approach employed in economics (i.e. expected utility theory) requires some assumptions, it permits researchers to state very specific hypotheses regarding the conditions for conformity to social norms, and thus constitutes a powerful method by which hypotheses from social psychology can also be tested. Additionally, he notes that whereas social norm theories in social psychology address both the information-norm relationship (that is, the psychological process of the formation of norms) as well as the norm-behavior relationship, economic theories are limited to addressing the latter, as expected utility theory explains actions, not motives (Opp, 1979). We note, however, that the methodological developments that have been made in experimental economics in recent years have improved the capacity of economics to address the motivational elements that underlie behavior.

Because social norms are implicated in such a wide range of behaviors, it is hardly surprising that they have become the subject of attention by scholars in such diverse domains. In this paper we synthesize common definitions, inventory empirical findings on the effect of social norms on pro-environmental behaviors, and review several theories that incorporate social norms as determinants of individual behavior. In light of this empirical and theoretical review, we derive practical implications for policy-making and offer some useful directions for future research. The aim of this paper is to bring together disparate elements of previous literature in order to reach a more holistic picture of the importance of social norms in pro-environmental behaviors. As a whole, research in the area demonstrates that social norms have significant impacts on behavior and that the degree of these impacts may be affected by a variety of factors including characteristics pertaining to the individual, the norm evoked, the implied reference group, and the social and environmental context in which the decision takes place.

2. Definitions

Social norms have been used to refer both to common behaviors themselves, as well as to the beliefs that support conformity to these behaviors. In most of the recent literature, however, social norms are generally understood to be shared rules of conduct that are partly sustained by approval and disapproval (Elster, 1989). They have been described as the widespread convergence of the “unplanned, unexpected result of individuals’ interactions...that specify what is acceptable and what is not in a society or group” (Bicchieri and Muldoon, 2014), as well as “the unwritten codes and informal understandings that define what we expect of others and what others expect of us” (Young, 2015). While some authors identify laws and codes as explicit norms, and unwritten social rules as implicit norms, most consider social norms to be inherently implicit, which places legal and other explicitly codified social frameworks outside of the category of social norms. Purely social norms can also be distinguished from moral and personal norms by the fact that social norms are not followed unconditionally. Instead, people conform to social norms only if certain conditions, such as observability and normative

expectations, are met. Social norms have also been distinguished from habits, conventions, and legal rules because they pertain to public (vs. private) action, are rarely in the interest of the individuals who conform, and are not the product of deliberate planning, respectively (Bicchieri and Muldoon, 2014). According to this definition, social norms are therefore considered to be implicit, conditionally followed, and motivated by external (vs. internal) enforcement.

Proceeding from this general understanding of what constitutes a social norm, the difference between descriptive and injunctive norms is the most prominent and widely utilized distinction. Whereas descriptive norms refer to what most people do, injunctive norms describe what most people approve of doing. A further distinction can be made between personal injunctive norms and non-personal injunctive norms as what one approves of doing and what one believes others approve of doing, respectively. The former is usually referred to simply as a personal norm, whereas the latter is usually referred to as an injunctive norm. As the study of norms has expanded, further classifications have been proposed. Another distinction that has emerged is the difference between perceived and actual norms, where a perceived norm refers to an individual's subjective belief about the actual descriptive or injunctive social norm. Perceived descriptive and injunctive norms have also been referred to as empirical and normative expectations (Bicchieri and Muldoon, 2014). In psychological game theory, these expectations constitute one of the mechanisms through which norms impact behavior.

Another distinction that has been made concerns the prescriptive vs. proscriptive characteristic of a social norm. Whereas prescriptive social norms consist of descriptions of what others do or approve of doing, proscriptive norms are prohibitive in nature, focusing attention on what others do not do (descriptive), or do not approve of doing (injunctive). While both of these norms may encourage the same behavior (e.g. the injunctions “keep the park clean” vs. “do not litter”), some evidence suggests that proscriptive injunctive norms attract more cognitive attention than prescriptive injunctive norms, and that this may account for the greater effectiveness of proscriptive norms (Cialdini et al., 2006). Another possible explanation for this finding could be that the proscriptive statement above implies a specific action (in this case, avoiding littering), whereas the prescriptive statement is less clear about the specific action to be taken (“keeping the park clean,” for example, could comprise a variety of specific activities). Further tests of this hypothesis will be needed in order to support the robustness of this result and explore whether such findings apply beyond the context of the study above.

Although descriptive and injunctive norms are distinct concepts, empirical evidence suggests that they are closely psychologically related. Injunctive norms are generally thought to be effective because they signal the likelihood of obtaining social approval or disapproval, and therefore enable individuals to update their expectations regarding the accompanying material and emotional payoffs associated with possible actions. Descriptive norms are thought to be effective by serving as an indicator of both injunctive norms (when there is uncertainty surrounding these) as well as payoff-maximizing behavior. In the latter case, conformity is motivated by adaptive concerns and can be considered an automated cognitive strategy that reduces the calculation costs involved in the decision-making process. Morris et al. (2015) indeed note that people frequently infer what ought to be (injunctive norms) from what is (descriptive norms), and that people may also induce perceived injunctive norms from their own personal norms. We note the additional possibility that people may infer perceived descriptive norms from perceived injunctive norms. Smith et al. (2012) show that the power of each type of norm on behavior depends on the degree to which they are in alignment, and Bicchieri and Xiao (2009) find that when these two norms are in conflict, descriptive norms are predictive of behavior, whereas injunctive norms are only predictive of behavior when they coincide with descriptive norms. Other research indicates that when individuals are under a cognitive load, the influence of descriptive norms on behavior increases while the influence of injunctive norms decreases (Melnyk et al., 2011), which provides support for the

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