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# The outer influence inside us: Exploring the relation between social and personal norms

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## ABSTRACT

International efforts for a more sustainable society have often resorted to formal agreements. But these commitments are more effective if people, communities and institutions integrate them as relevant behavioural standards, or social norms. In this paper we propose to analyse how social norms are internalized as personal norms and environmental identity, and then how able they are to predict recycling and organic foods purchase behaviour in two countries—Portugal and Brazil. The role of group identification is also analysed. Results show that behaviours are better predicted by personal norms and environmental identity than by more external social norms. Moreover, the influence of social norms on personal norms and environmental identity is in part moderated by group identification: Injunctive norms predict personal norms and environmental identity better when participants are more identified with the group, while descriptive norms predict them more directly.

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## 1. Introduction

In the last decades several international treaties, conventions and other legal commitments have been implemented with the goal of protecting the environment (Giddens, 2009; Vlek, 2000). Numerous national laws have also been issued to locally assure, for example, resource conservation, biodiversity protection or climate change adaptation, a trend especially strong in European Union member states (Castro, 2012; Poumadère et al., 2011). However, these new commitments and laws can only be fully effective if people, communities and institutions change the way they behave. For this to happen, the new formal laws need over time to become also informal social and personal norms (Castro, 2012). It is therefore crucial to study the various aspects of this transformation, identifying how new environmental laws become accepted as social norms, how people internalize these as personal norms, and what type of norms better help predict behaviour.

An analysis of how social norms are internalized as personal norms – i.e. feelings of *personal* obligation associated with one's self-expectations (Schwartz 1977) – would be able to further clarify some aspects of the social processes involved in the social change stimulated by laws (Castro, 2012). Considering that part of this law-

driven social change will not happen without the internalization and generalization of these initially external social influences to different contexts, this paper is interested in analysing how practices that are *socially* (externally) motivated become, in time, *personally* (internally) relevant and thus motivated by personal norms (Schwartz, 1977; Staats et al., 2004) and, eventually, part of one's environmental identity (Van der Werff et al., 2013). Some practices succeed in becoming social norms after they have been formally regulated through laws, normally at the end of a complex process (Castro, 2012). This process involves the activity of multiple national mediating institutions that adapt and translate the formal changes for citizens in terms of concrete everyday practices (Castro and Mouro, 2011). In order to be contextually active laws and formal regulations must be contextually integrated in local logics, where social identities, habits and previous social norms can either facilitate or hamper this process (Castro, 2012). These elements contextualize the local social change process through which laws and formal regulations, or in other words new *injunctive norms*, become in time locally active, and therefore observable through practices, or *descriptive norms* (Castro, 2012).

The existence of this type of contextualized national translation of legal requirements also means that the real implementation of commitments made at an international level may vary widely across countries and is done at different paces in different countries (Recchia, 2001). The result is that at a certain point in time different countries are in different moments of the legal enforcement

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of the globally agreed regulations, and have differently demanding legislations. Portugal and Brazil provide an interesting case for a cross-cultural comparison. These two countries are united by a colonial past and have shared the same political structures until the XIX century. Other than sharing important cultural and linguistic references, these two countries have faced similar events during the second half of the XX century (dictatorships, economic crisis) that obstructed the development of sustained environmental policies (Bertoldo, 2016). But since Portugal joined the UE in the 80s', many pro-environmental, law-regulated practices – including recycling behaviours – have become highly and systematically regulated by implementing UE legislation and institutions (Castro, 2012). In Brazil, institutions and regulations promoting sustainability-related services as recycling are more recent and their implementation is hampered by structural issues (Ferreira and Tavolaro, 2008). Other pro-environmental behaviours such as organic purchase are not regulated in either country, and are therefore entirely dependent upon informal norms. The joint analysis of the social norms, personal norms and environmental identity motivating pro-environmental behaviours such as recycling (regulated) and organic purchase (non-regulated) therefore constitutes an opportunity to analyse how the differences in formal norms (laws) between Portugal (stronger legal enforcement) and in Brazil (weaker legal enforcement) influences the internalization of these formal norms as personal norms in each country.

In this paper we propose to analyse how the different societal contexts that are created by the different levels of implementation of environmental laws in Portugal and Brazil affect the internalization of social norms (injunctive and descriptive) as personal norms and environmental identity, and how these normative motivations are predictive of behaviour. Environmental identity corresponds to the most internalized and meaningful source of motivation to fulfil pro-environmental goals (Kashima et al., 2014; Whitmarsh and O'Neill, 2010).

We must also consider that social norms (descriptive and injunctive) are ordinarily associated with specific social groups whose importance can be more or less important for the individual (Terry et al., 1999). This is why we will also analyse how group identification conditions, or moderates, the predictive power of social norms over personal norms and environmental identity (Nigbur et al., 2010; Terry et al., 1999).

All these different sources of behaviour motivation – social, personal and identity – will be considered in this paper as motivations for compliance that are differently internalized as part of the individual's self-regulation. According to the Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan and Deci, 2000), since childhood and across our lifespan we are exposed to behavioural requests which may or may not become internalized. "Internalization refers to people's 'taking in' a value or regulation" so that, eventually, these will naturally emanate from the individual (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p. 71).

Below we present first an external, social type of motivation: descriptive and injunctive social norms. Then we present a more internalized type of motivation: personal norms and environmental identity. Finally, we present a potential moderating factor of the normative influence: identification with the reference group.

### 1.1. External regulations: social norms

Behaviours are externally motivated when they "are performed to satisfy an external demand or reward contingency" (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p. 72). Social norms can be considered to be an external type of motivation that is especially observable when social demands are still independent from – or not internalized by – the individual. Social norms imply not only public types of demand, but also public sanctions when they are not observed (Schwartz and Howard, 1984).

Thøgersen (2006) proposed a model organizing the different types of norms that are involved in the motivations discussed by SDT along a continuum of increasing integration with the self. In this model, descriptive social norms correspond to the most external type of motivator, followed by injunctive social norms. Descriptive social norms refer to the common or usual behaviour presented in a given context, providing information for the intrapersonal goal of behaving accurately in a specific context (Jacobson et al., 2011). Thøgersen (2006) considers these norms to be more external than injunctive ones because they are readily available in the 'outside world'. Still part of the external types of motivations, but already closer to the personally relevant social reality, are the injunctive social norms. The injunctive norms involve the perception of approval or disapproval of a certain behaviour, by a certain social group. This is why the injunctive norms are so important for the interpersonal goal of establishing and maintaining social relationships (Cialdini and Trost, 1998; Jacobson et al., 2011).

But once these social norms, descriptive or injunctive, start to be personally relevant, the motivation to comply with behaviours also becomes internalized as personal norms and finally, as part of one's own identity.

### 1.2. Internal regulations: personal norms and environmental identity

Internal regulations are autonomous in relation to external types of regulation since the individual already controls and manages them as his/her own (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

#### 1.2.1. Personal norms

Personal norms can be considered part of a more internal and autonomous type of motivation to comply with pro-environmental behavioural requirements. Personal norms correspond to feelings of personal obligations that are also related with self-expectations (Schwartz, 1977). Schwartz and Howard (1984) describe the specificity of personal norms in relation to social norms in the following terms: "whereas other attitudinal concepts refer to evaluations based on material, social, and/or psychological payoffs, personal norms focus exclusively on the evaluation of acts in terms of their moral worth to the self" (p. 245, italics added). The Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory has proposed and demonstrated how personal norms are the best predictors of pro-environmental behaviours (Steg et al., 2005).

#### 1.2.2. Environmental identity

Identity-relevant actions are maintained over time because they become an important part of what an individual recognizes as him or herself—they influence a person's self-identity (Clayton and Opatow, 2003; Van der Werff et al., 2013). The importance of the environmental identity in predicting pro-environmental behaviours has already been demonstrated by studies showing that this concept predicts recycling behaviour (Castro et al., 2009; Nigbur et al., 2010; Terry et al., 1999) and willingness to buy carbon offsets (Whitmarsh and O'Neill, 2010) over and above Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) variables, even after the inclusion of social norms (Nigbur et al., 2010).

However, it is not yet clear whether in order to predict specific pro-environmental behaviour we must always take into account specific identity predictors (Nigbur et al., 2010), or if instead, a more generic environmental identity measure can provide a robust and realistic predictor for a wide range of pro-environmental behaviours. For example, Whitmarsh and O'Neill (2010) have shown that a general measure of environmental identity was able to significantly contribute to explaining a large number of different pro-environmental behaviours.

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