



Commentary

Understanding the sources of normative influence on behavior: The example of tobacco

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 October 2013

Received in revised form

4 March 2014

Accepted 19 May 2014

Available online 21 May 2014

Keywords:

Social exposure

Norms

Tobacco use

Environment

Smoking

ABSTRACT

Despite extensive research on social norms, the sources of norm formation are not well understood. Social exposure to a behavior (defined as the composite of ways through which people see that behavior in their social, physical, and symbolic environments) can serve as a source of normative influence. Using tobacco as a case study, we propose that research should move beyond categories of individuals as sources of norms and focus on a broader range of sources of normative influences. An understanding of social exposure as a source for norms may be important to better understand and intervene in environments to promote public health. We make policy recommendations arising from the explication of social exposure and propose directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

Unhealthy behaviors tend to cluster within social networks, which are systems of personal relationships and social interactions (Christakis and Fowler, 2008; Smith and Christakis, 2008). This suggests influences in the social environment may play an important role in the development and maintenance of these behaviors. One important process through which the environment affects behaviors is social norms. Social norms comprise “the rules and standards that are understood by members of a group, and that guide and/or constrain social behavior without the force of laws” (Cialdini and Trost, 1998, p.152). A substantial body of literature and several social and behavioral theories explore the impact of social norms on thoughts and behaviors. These theories include focus theory of normative conduct (Cialdini et al., 1990; Lapinski and Rimal, 2005; Perkins and Berkowitz, 1986), theory of planned behavior/reasoned action (Ajzen, 1991; Montaña and Kasprzyk,

2002), theory of normative social behavior (Rimal and Real, 2005), and problem-behavior theory (Jessor, 1987). However, the sources of social norms are less well studied.

Previous discussions of social norm formation have focused more broadly on how norms evolved, for example, whether they formed because they had cultural value or fulfilled a rational function connected with survival (Cialdini and Trost, 1998; Etzioni, 2000). What is not well documented, however, are the roles of specific sources of information about social norms within cultural or social groups. Much of this literature has focused on interpersonal influences and interactions as the sources for social norms in an individual's environment (Abrams et al., 1990; Cialdini and Trost, 1998). Other significant sources for the development of norms – including the physical environment (Abrams et al., 1990) and mass media (Yanovitzky and Stryker, 2001) – have been acknowledged but not well characterized. The link between an individual's environment and the formation of social norms about health behaviors has not been adequately studied. Moreover, it is not unusual for individuals to receive mixed normative messages from different sources concerning a particular behavior. Current theories do not account for the interactive effects of information sources for norms in people's environments.

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To address this gap and expand on the literature on social norm formation, we propose the concept of “social exposure”, defined as the composite of ways in which people come in contact with or experience a particular product or behavior in their environment. Social exposure provides information for the development of social norms. Using tobacco as an example, if a person recorded all instances of exposure to tobacco products, including efforts to market them, their use, and indicators of their presence in the environment, the aggregation would constitute social exposure. The aim of this paper is to explicate social exposure, using tobacco use as an example, in order to understand the various sources for norms and suggest directions for future research.

2. Types of norms

The literature provides strong evidence for the impact of social norms on a variety of attitudes and behaviors. Examples include littering behavior (Cialdini et al., 1990), cancer screening intentions (Smith-McLallen and Fishbein, 2008), alcohol consumption (Perkins and Berkowitz, 1986), fruit and vegetable consumption (Sorensen et al., 2007), and spousal violence against women (Linos et al., 2013). In recent years, much progress has been made in defining and delineating the effects of closely related concepts, including descriptive (prevalence of a behavior) and injunctive (social acceptability of a behavior) norms (Lapinski and Rimal, 2005).

Social exposure is a critical concept for understanding the influence of the environment on the formation of descriptive and injunctive norms. The term “social exposure” was first introduced to a larger audience as part of the 2010 report of the Smoke-Free Ontario Scientific Advisory Committee, which concluded that individuals must be protected against social exposure to tobacco use in order to decrease tobacco use behaviors (Smoke-Free Ontario – Scientific Advisory Committee, 2010). Social exposure refers to actual, as well as cues about, the prevalence of a behavior (descriptive norms) and the permissiveness towards that behavior (injunctive norms) in an individual's environment. Witnessing an ashtray full of cigarette butts, for example, conveys the acceptability of tobacco use in that venue. Similarly, witnessing a group of people smoking in front of a building conveys information about both appropriate and inappropriate venues for smoking. Social exposure influences attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors by serving as the source of information about norms.

3. Social exposure as information sources for norms

Many studies point to the importance of investigating how a source of information affects information processing and subsequent action (Bink et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 1993). Previous research has shown that the reference group (from which the normative information emanates) plays a critical role in how normative information is perceived and acted upon (Campo et al., 2003; Engler et al., 2008; Neighbors et al., 2008; Thombs et al., 2004), likely because acceptability of a particular behavior varies by source. In the case of adolescent drinking, for example, parents and communities tend to support a norm that disapproves of drinking, whereas peers tend to support a norm that approves of drinking (Lipperman-Kreda et al., 2010; Rimal, 2008; Song et al., 2012). Perceptions that friends approve and engage in the behavior and low compatibility between friends and parents' expectations about the behavior lead adolescents to be more likely to engage in problem behaviors like drinking, particularly if their beliefs and attitudes make them more vulnerable (Jessor, 1987). Moreover, individuals' motivation to comply with a perceived norm changes the impact of that norm on their attitudes and behaviors,

as proposed in the theory of reasoned action/planned behavior (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980; Ajzen, 1991).

In our conceptualization, social exposure, i.e., cues an individual receives from his or her social, physical, and symbolic environments, is a specific type of information source that conveys norms and indirectly shapes individuals' attitudes and behaviors.

3.1. Social environment

Significant sources of information about social norms are found in an individual's social environment through exposure to interpersonal and social cues, including those from proximal members (family, close friends), distal members (such as neighbors or classmates), and non-members (strangers) of the social network. Modeling and reinforcement of smoking by family, friends, and classmates are significant predictors of smoking in youth, and part of this influence is through the formation of social norms (Akers and Lee, 1996; Alexander et al., 2001; Ali and Dwyer, 2009; Costa et al., 2007; Ennett et al., 2010; Hall and Valente, 2007; National Cancer Institute, 2008; Van Minh et al., 2011; Vries et al., 1995). Observing family, friends, and others engaging in behaviors, such as smoking, may lead individuals to believe they are highly prevalent, acceptable, and, therefore, normative behaviors. This may lead them to take up smoking, whereas smoking cessation among family, friends, and others decreases individuals' risk of smoking (Christakis and Fowler, 2008). By witnessing coworkers, family, and friends quitting, individuals perceive that smoking is becoming less popular and less acceptable in their community, which makes them less likely to smoke. Moreover, smoking may form part of a cultural identity that individuals use to confirm their belonging to a cultural or socioeconomic group that is distinct from other groups (Pampel, 2006). Thus, an individual's social environment conveys cultural values that make smoking either normative or not normative, so that smoking can be a way to fit in with a particular group.

Descriptive and injunctive norms formed from the social environment have been shown to predict smoking (Akers and Lee, 1996; Alexander et al., 2001; Ali and Dwyer, 2009; Costa et al., 2007; Ennett et al., 2010; Etcheverry and Agnew, 2008; Hall and Valente, 2007; Van Minh et al., 2011; Vries et al., 1995) and intentions to quit (Dohnke et al., 2011). Moreover, smoking relapse after cessation often occurs in social settings and with other smokers, and this can in part be attributed to indirect normative pressure from observing other smokers or because of a desire to “fit in” (Borland, 1990; Carter-Pokras et al., 2011; Shiffman, 1982). These examples point to the influence of the social environment on tobacco through norms.

3.2. Physical environment

Other sources of information about social norms are found in the physical environment. Social exposure to tobacco use or tobacco products occurs in many physical venues: point-of-purchase (retail); bars, restaurants, and other social venues; schools and workplaces; homes; and communities. The attributes of the physical environment can convey descriptive and injunctive norms about tobacco use, which may explain why proximity and density of tobacco retail outlets in communities are associated with tobacco use in adolescents (Novak et al., 2006; West et al., 2010). The physical availability of tobacco products may influence the formation of descriptive and injunctive norms, as the ready availability can convey that many others are using the product and that it is an acceptable behavior. Cialdini et al. (1991) showed that physical cues in the environment – i.e., the presence of litter – were sufficient to convey descriptive norms about the prevalence of littering behavior. These descriptive norms in turn can make salient the

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