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Identifying and Describing Approaches and Attributes of Normative Change Interventions

BACKGROUND PAPER

Learning Collaborative to Advance Research and Practice on
Normative Change for Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health

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INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen an upsurge in interest in social norms and their application in solving complex public health problems. While the number of theories, papers, and programs related to social norms is burgeoning, there is not yet a consensus or common standard about what actually constitutes a social norm change approach and how this differs from other related forms of community-based programming. **This background paper reviews available literature on social norm change theory and programming, with a focus on public health, in an effort to answer critical questions about what constitutes a “social norm change approach.”** This review supports the work of the Scale-Up Learning Community within the Learning Collaborative (LC) to Advance Research and Practice on Normative Change for Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health and Well-being.¹

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based upon a desk review of articles collected primarily from members of the Scale-Up Learning Community as well as additional sources. Over thirty documents were considered for review. They were not subject to specific criteria for inclusion, however, those that were determined to be irrelevant to the review were discarded. A total of 29 documents were included in the final review. 28 of those documents were input into a matrix (see Appendix) tracking references to attributes of social norm change programming. The 29th document was published after the findings were tallied but did contribute significantly to the writing of the paper.

TALLYING AND WEIGHTING

Upon review, articles were divided into two groups: those that were considered to be most directly relevant (13) and those that were considered less directly relevant (16). Articles were input into the matrix accordingly, with the most relevant in the top half of the table, in grey highlight, and the less directly relevant in the bottom half of the table. After completing the matrix for all articles, categories of attributes were aggregated and refined and results tallied, weighted and compared. Each attribute was tallied according to the total number of articles in which the attribute was mentioned and for how many of those mentions were from the group of most directly relevant articles (Table 1). Those that had the highest number of total tallies were input into a second table (found in the Appendix), and clustered according to which of those had the highest totals. The Appendix table compared the two tallies for each attribute, as an initial indication of the weight of the findings.

ANALYSIS

The results from the matrix were used to objectively determine the base findings. Final analysis further drew upon conversations with professionals in the field, prior experience, and critical reflection. For the purposes of this paper, the terms “social norm change approach” and “social norm change intervention” are used interchangeably.

¹ The Learning Collaborative to Advance Research and Practice on Normative Change for Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health and Well-being is a two-year initiative funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF).

FINDINGS

DEFINITION OF SOCIAL NORMS

There are many variations of definitions of social norms being used by different sectors and fields. However, in the broadest terms, there is agreement that social norms are “beliefs about which behaviors are appropriate within a given group.” There is also agreement that norms play an important role in shaping behavior, that they are meaningful in the context of groups/group identity, and that whether a person complies with a norm depends on multiple internal and external factors. Social norms refer to the rules governing a behavior, not the behavior itself.²

In international development programming, the recent emphasis on social norm change interventions has largely centered on two theories: that our decisions are influenced by “empirical” and “normative” expectations (Bicchieri, 2016), or relatedly, from “descriptive” and “injunctive” norms” (Cialdini et al 1990).³ These two theories have subtle differences, but essentially share the same idea- that social norms derive from: 1) Expectations about what people *do* (empirical expectations/ descriptive norms) and 2) Expectations about what one *should do* (normative expectations/injunctive norms). This distinction is critical. These expectations are defined in relation to a “reference group” of others who are relevant to us.

These theories have been fundamental to the field’s understanding of social norms, and how social norms analysis can be used to shape distinctly different approaches to behavior change. However, recently, there appears to be a shift towards simplifying the way that we understand social norms in order to more effectively translate theory into practice. It is easy to get lost in the web of definitions, and in some cases, trying to stay within the frame of complex language can overcomplicate the process of program design and/or evaluation.⁴ At the same time, it is important to understand the nuanced distinctions of social norms and what makes people adhere to them, in order to truly innovate the way we approach behavior change.

PARAMETERS/ATTRIBUTES OF SOCIAL NORMS CHANGE INTERVENTIONS

Much of the earlier work on public health and social norms used a narrow definition of a social norms approach - one that assumes that people have mistaken perceptions about the attitudes and behaviors of others. These perceptions influence individuals’ behaviors, even when they are inaccurate and/or contradict the individual’s own personal attitudes/beliefs (a situation known as “pluralistic ignorance”).⁵ One of the most famous examples of this type of social norm change approach, was the work to reduce binge drinking at US universities (Perkins 1997).⁶ In these cases, the defining attribute of a social norms change approach was to make visible the actual behavior norm, i.e. to correct the misperception. However, not all social norm change is connected to misperceptions or pluralistic ignorance. Therefore, there are other attributes that are needed to define a social norms change approach.

² Vaitla, Bapu, Alice Taylor, Julia Van Horn, and Ben Cislighi. 2017. *Social Norms and Girls’ Well-Being: Linking Theory and Practice*. Washington, D.C.: Data2X, p. 28.

³ Ben Cislighi and Lori Heise. 2016. *Measuring Gender-related Social Norms: Report of a Meeting*, Baltimore Maryland, June 14-15, 2016. Learning Group on Social Norms and Gender-based Violence of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

⁴ A recent UN program tried to adhere strictly to the definition of social norms in a program to prevent intimate partner violence. When they conducted a baseline survey, they used separate questions to ask about respondents’ own behaviors, as well as their empirical and normative expectations of others. Respondents were so confused by the questioning, that their baseline did not reveal accurate information.

⁵ “Pluralistic ignorance” refers to inconsistency between the actual behavior norm and what one perceives others to do or believe.

⁶ Multiple sources. Original study: Perkins HW. *The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention*. U.S. Department of Education; 1997. *College student misperceptions of alcohol and other drug norms among peers: Explaining causes, consequences and implications for prevention programs*; pp. 177–206.

Table 1. Tally and Weighting of Attributes Identified in Review of 29 Articles

NB: Of the articles reviewed, some were more directly relevant than others and had greater salience in relation to the issue. Therefore, there was not a 1:1 correlation between the number of articles and number of mentions of attributes.

Attribute	Total Article Mentions	# of mentions in most-directly relevant articles
Seeks Community-level Change (<i>Clearly articulates social change outcomes beyond just individual</i>)	17	7
Presents the Actual Behavior Norm (<i>When there is a discrepancy between the actual norm and what people think others expect of them</i>)	14	4
Emphasizes Creation of Positive New Norms	12	7
Engages Wide Range of People at Multiple Levels (Ecological Model)	10	7
Creates Safe Space for Critical Community Reflection	8	4
Community-led	8	5
Roots the Issue within Community's Own Values	5	2
Based Upon Accurate Assessment of Social Norms	5	4
Addresses Power Imbalance/ Inequality	6	5
Organized Diffusion (<i>Begins with a core group, who then engage others</i>)	5	4

No one consensus on the attributes of a social norm change intervention emerged from this review. However, convergence was observed around several key attributes, listed in Table 1, above, and discussed below. (The table in the Appendix shows the tally and weight for each of these results, listed in order of the most frequent mention, unless it was necessary to re-order for conceptual clarity. When weighted, results are more evenly distributed, but still closely reflect the initial tally.) According to the review, the 10 key attributes of a social norm change approach include:

Seeks Community-Level Change

The attribute that emerged most strongly as a defining characteristic of a social norm change intervention is that it seeks to achieve change at a community, rather than individual level. While this may seem obvious, in practice, programs sometimes conflate individual outcomes with community level outcomes, fail to articulate or measure the community-level outcomes they seek, or use individual-level approaches to seek community-level change. In many cases, purported social norm change interventions may be deemed “successful” because they get positive results in changing individual attitudes and perceptions, but it is not clear whether the related community-level norms and behaviors change as a result. A recent review of 625 articles related to health-related social and behavior change programs found that “Generally speaking, interventions focused on changing social norms or reducing stigma produced positive effects on attitudes and perceptions, but these changes were not always linked to changes in health outcomes.”⁷

Presents the Actual Behavior Norm (In the Case of Pluralistic Ignorance)

Much of the earlier work and literature on social norms involves situations where there is a difference between the perceived norm (what we think others believe/do), and the actual norm (what others actually believe/do), and the actual norm is more positive than perceived. In these cases, the defining characteristic of a social norm change approach,

⁷ Social & Behavior Change Interventions Landscaping Study: A Global Review; Douglas Storey, Katherine Lee, Caitlin Blake, Peggy Lee, Hsin-Yi Lee, Nicole Depasquale; Department of Health, Behavior & Society Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health; October 2011

therefore, is to increase the visibility of the actual behavior norm. The most popular examples of this are programs to address college drinking, bullying in schools, energy consumption, and other situations where pluralistic ignorance (a situation in which a majority of group members privately reject a norm, but incorrectly assume that most others accept it, and therefore go along with it) is evident.⁸ This attribute has had strong practical relevance because of the way in which it fundamentally changed approaches to behavior change. Programs have often been designed to change individuals' own attitudes or beliefs, based on the assumption that this is what drives their behavior. However, the **understanding that social norms can powerfully influence our behavior, even when they do not align with our own attitudes, has led to a shift in approaching certain problems. In cases where pluralistic ignorance is clear, programs that focus on correcting the misperception of others' behaviors and highlighting the actual behavior norm, rather than focusing on changing individual attitudes about drinking, have seen more effective results.**

Emphasizes Creation of Positive New Norms

This attribute is critical to understanding social norm change programming. For a long time, programs have been designed based on the simple assumption that in order to change a problem, you have to highlight what the problem is and try to work through it. While it is certainly important to explore the consequences of negative behaviors, social norms theory shows us that focusing on the negative behavior can actually *reinforce* that behavior by increasing its visibility and making it appear to community members that the negative behavior is widely practiced by others. This, in fact, can strengthen the very norm you want to change. Therefore, in order **to change social norms, it is necessary for communities to discuss and explore the new norms that they would like to work towards and highlight the positive practices that are already taking place in the community.**⁹ This is in line with the principle of effective behavior change communication that calls for focus on positive change. It also links directly to two other attributes, which are essential to creating and maintaining new norms (discussed below): creating safe space for critical reflection; and rooting the issue within communities' own value systems.

Evidence also shows that **new ideas need to be presented or encouraged from a trusted, credible source in order to effectively create change.** When programming, it is important to recognize that who is considered a trusted, credible source might vary according to the reference group (e.g. might be different for adolescent girls than religious leaders).¹⁰ This does not mean that the trusted source simply tells people what to do or tries to "educate" them, but helps to promote critical reflection, as discussed below. This may not be an inherent characteristic of all social norm change interventions (e.g. energy consumption programs in California), however, appears to be important to effective community-based social norm change interventions within the field of sexual and reproductive health, and international development more broadly.

Engages Wide Range of People at Multiple Levels (Ecological Model)

The most effective social norm change approaches work with multiple types of people at different levels of the ecological system. They use multiple strategies for engaging different groups in critical reflection. Conversely, programs that work at only one level — particularly policy or legal reform — without engaging others, have been shown to be ineffective in creating social norm change. In fact, there is mounting evidence that harmful behaviors such as violence against women, persist even when legal and political action has been taken to address the issue.¹¹

It is interesting to note here that working at multiple levels of the ecological model relates in some ways to reference groups and the need to engage beyond the individual. **While reference groups came out strongly as part of the definition of social norms in the review, they were not referenced frequently as an attribute of a social norm change**

⁸ Conclusion based upon review of articles.

⁹ Alexander-Scott, M. Bell, E. and Holden, J. (2016) DFID Guidance Note: Shifting Social Norms to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). London: VAWG Helpdesk

¹⁰ Dynamics of Social Change: Towards Abandonment of FGC in 5 African Countries, Innocenti (2010)

¹¹ Multiple sources, including: Alexander-Scott, M. Bell, E. and Holden, J. (2016) DFID Guidance Note: Shifting Social Norms to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). London: VAWG Helpdesk; How communications can change social norms around adolescent girls, ODI, 2016; What works to prevent violence against women and girls? Evidence Review of interventions to prevent violence against women and girls; Fulu, Kerr-Wilson, and Lang (June 2014)

intervention. However, when they were mentioned, it was in highly relevant articles that flagged proper identification of reference groups as critical. Working with different types of people at different levels of the ecological system was mentioned frequently as an attribute of social norm change interventions. Further exploration of the connection between these concepts would be beneficial to understanding the parameters of a social norm change intervention and how explicitly the definition of a social norm correlates to the intervention design (e.g. is it possible to account for reference groups, empirical and normative expectations without expressly naming them). *See more about reference groups under the attribute “based upon accurate assessment of social norms.”*

Creates Safe Space for Critical Community Reflection

It is essential that community/ group members have space to think critically about their own ideas and behaviors, and to reflect upon both old and new norms. This goes beyond trainings, one-off campaigns, or ad hoc outreach work. **Community spaces, even when informal, that deliberately and skillfully promote reflection in creative, dynamic, and engaging ways, are important to dismantling old norms and creating new ones.¹² Doing so ensures that change comes from within the community/group, as a means of creating more meaningful, lasting change.**

Community Led

This is a general term that speaks to a community’s active participation in norms-shifting activities, versus community as a static recipient of project-led activities such as building health knowledge about disease transmission and prevention. Depending on the specific norms change program, it may underpin activities to create positive new norms and safe spaces for critical community reflection; it may be an overarching attribute of community-level change.

Roots the Issue within Community/Groups’ Own Value Systems

There is sometimes a misconception that dismantling norms and creating new ones means transferring someone else’s beliefs onto a community, labeling a community/group’s practices as “bad” or dishonoring their culture. In fact, initial discussion of new ideas may prompt some resistance at first. However, **it is possible, and in fact, essential for communities to root new norms within their own value systems, particularly if critical reflection is led by those who are trusted, credible sources. Reflection helps people to identify which values their norms and behaviors are serving and which they are not, as well as how they might better live their values if things changed.** For example, a community where intimate partner violence is prevalent may believe that they are supporting their value of strong families. Critical reflection can help to dismantle norms around intimate partner violence, by rooting the exploration of new norms within the community values of healthy, strong families.

Based upon Accurate Assessment of Social Norms Propping the Specific Behavior

We often make assumptions about the norms that drive certain behaviors, or that the behaviors themselves are the norms. In fact, not all behaviors that programs seek to change are social norms. **As social norms refer to the behavioral rule, not the behavior itself, it is important to diagnose which norms are propping up a given behavior. Multiple norms might be causing a behavior pattern.** Therefore, it is important for programs to understand clearly the norms they are trying to address in order to determine the most effective way to create change. Social norms assessment also involves identifying whose behaviors a program intends to change, and who represents the relevant reference groups.

Social norms may be upheld by different groups- it could be a geographical community, groups with a common interest, age or other characteristic.¹³

¹² Multiple sources, including: Communication for Social Change: An Integrated Model for Measuring the Process and Its Outcomes/Maria Elena Figueroa, D. Lawrence Kincaid, Manju Rani, Gary Lewis (2002); Dynamics of Social Change: Towards Abandonment of FGC in 5 African Countries, Innocenti (2010)

¹³ Dale T. Miller and Deborah A. Prentice, Changing Norms to Change Behavior, 2015

Two attributes emerged from the review less frequently than the others. However, when weighted, their results were high according to directly relevant mentions, and closely on par with the other results. When considered alongside program experience, consultation, and widely accepted foundations of practice, the results emerge as significant.

Addresses Power Imbalance/Inequality

Addressing power imbalance/inequality, particularly related to gender and marginalized groups, has been found to be fundamental to creating long-term social change, particularly for women and girls.¹⁴ Therefore, in the case of sexual and reproductive health, this is an important attribute of social norm change programming. By strict definition, it may not be inherent to all social norm change approaches (e.g. you may be able to reduce drinking without addressing power imbalances), however, should not be overlooked when working towards improved and equitable health access and outcomes.

Organized Diffusion

Organized diffusion is a popular technique for sparking social norm change. It means that change begins with a core group, who then engage others. This approach features strongly in successful social norm change interventions such as Tostan's Community Empowerment Program and related FGM work and the SASA! approach to preventing violence against women and HIV (Raising Voices). **However, it is not clear whether this is fundamental to social norm change, or simply a technique that has helped to bring success (a distinction that may not be important in trying to reach behavior change goals). In addition, it is not yet clear what is the most effective means of organized diffusion, such as formalized groups or broad community-based activism.** This also appears to be the aspect of programming that drops off most easily in terms of program design, funding and structure. It is worth exploring this further.

The attributes listed above are all interconnected; a social norms approach weaves them together, rather than relying on one or the other. For example, an intervention may seek community-level change, or work at multiple levels and not be a social norm change approach. There is room for further discussion about whether some of the attributes listed may be more accurately described as parameters of an *effective* social norm change approach, rather than qualities that are inherent to it. For the purposes of this paper, both have been included.

NORM CHANGE APPROACHES VERSUS COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMMING

With these attributes in mind, it becomes easier to see that not all community-based programming or programs that involve community participation are social norms change interventions.

- Programs may work with a large number of community members and have high degrees of participation, but still be working at the *individual level*. Individual-level programs focus on changing individual knowledge, attitudes and behaviors, but don't necessarily generate critical mass, reflection on community values and norms, and collective action to create new norms. These programs are often training or workshop-based and work with the same specific individuals over time.
- Community-based health programs that involve community participation may achieve individual level change, structural change, or even behavior change, but not necessarily social norm change. For example, a program may increase couples' testing for HIV, but not change the norm that men have the power to decide about HIV testing.
- At the same time, interventions that shift social norms, might not necessarily change health-related behaviors or outcomes. For example, Voices for Change in Nigeria found an increase in gender equitable attitudes and actions amongst men in their intervention areas, but not a decrease in intimate partner violence.¹⁵

¹⁴ DFID Guidance Note: Shifting Social Norms to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). London: VAWG Helpdesk; and Ben Cislighi and Lori Heise. 2016. Measuring Gender-related Social Norms: Report of a Meeting, Baltimore Maryland, June 14-15, 2016. Learning Group on Social Norms and Gender-based Violence of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

¹⁵ Voices for Change presentation; London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine; Windsor, UK. October 2017.

- Social norm change can also be part of a larger social change process that includes other components such as behavior and structural change, as described in the model presented by Johns Hopkins University's Center for Communication Programs (Figueroa, Kincaid, Rani, Lewis, 2002).¹⁶

DISTINGUISHING COMMUNITY-BASED INTERVENTIONS AND SOCIAL NORM CHANGE INTERVENTIONS: PREVENTING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

In the 2014 comprehensive review of the evidence base for what works to prevent violence against women and girls, there is a specific section on programs aimed at changing social norms in order to prevent violence. The section highlights evaluation results that help to clarify distinctions between social norm change and other community health-related results (Fulu, Kerr-Wilson, and Lang, 2014).

- An evaluation of Soul City in South Africa found positive changes in support-seeking and support-giving behavior. However, there was mixed evidence of the impact on norms and attitudes related to domestic violence and there was no influence found on norms regarding the appropriateness of sexual harassment or the cultural acceptability of violence (Usdin et al., 2005).
- There is evidence that community mobilization campaigns can positively change attitudes and beliefs that condone violence. However, there is not a clear linear relationship between attitudes and behavior. Accordingly, an evaluation of the “One Man Can” campaign (Hughes, 2012) found that whilst changes in attitudes were limited, changes in perpetration of VAWG were actually quite substantial.
- SASA! reduced the social acceptance of intimate partner violence (IPV) more significantly for women than men, as well as perpetration of IPV.

PROGRAM DESIGN FOR SOCIAL NORM CHANGE

Many of the programs included in the review seek to shift social norms, but were not designed using an explicit social norms analysis. According to DFID, in a recent review of social norm change programs (Alexander-Scott, M. Bell, E. and Holden, J. (2016), “Most programmes were not explicitly designed with social norms theory in mind, and have not measured changes in social norms as distinct from changes in individual attitudes and behaviours. Further, interventions tend to be small scale, have not compared and measured value for money and we know very little about whether they brought about sustained change over time.” For example, SASA! utilized a thorough baseline assessment that offered understanding of social norms, but did not base its intervention strategy on a specific method of social norms analysis. It fused many different levels of understanding of the issue of violence against women and HIV, to create change, including social norm change. DFID and others have created guidance on how best to develop a social norm change approach, however, this is an area worth further review.

¹⁶ Communication for Social Change: An Integrated Model for Measuring the Process and Its Outcomes/Maria Elena Figueroa, D. Lawrence Kincaid, Manju Rani, Gary Lewis (2002).

Other Factors for Change

It has been noted that social norm change is often just one component of broader social change. Several documents in this review highlighted that lasting social change involves a combination of individual, material, structural, and social norm change. The early interventions that garnered great attention — those that emphasized pluralistic ignorance and focused on specific behaviors — offer the temptation to see social norms change as a magic bullet. In reality, when addressing complex social problems, it is necessary to consider social norms within the context of other change.¹⁷

CONCLUSIONS

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF A SOCIAL NORM CHANGE INTERVENTION

Based on this review, it can be suggested that a **community-based social norm change intervention to improve sexual and reproductive health outcomes (SRH) is an intervention that seeks to improve the sexual and reproductive health of women and girls at least in part by transforming the social norms that prop up harmful health-related behaviors. Such interventions utilize an analysis of social norms, including whether there are any that are salient in driving that behavior, and are led by communities through a process of critical reflection, resulting in positive new norms rooted within the values of that group.**

This definition recognizes that social norm change is just one part of an intervention to create behavior change, which may require additional efforts to transform individual attitudes and/or material and structural conditions. The definition of a social norm change intervention warrants further review and discussion, including whether a program needs to be designed based on an explicit analysis of social norms.

CALL TO ACTION

Social norms have gained increasing attention in international development and, specifically, the field of health behavior change. Social norm change has shown potential for positive impact on health-related behaviors, though there is less clarity on the direct impact on health outcomes. In order to advance understanding and practice in implementing norms-change interventions, we may consider the following:

- Review select interventions with clear evidence of success in changing social norms, e.g., have explicitly measured normative change. Identify key questions about program design and implementation to create social norm change, and compare and contrast the programs according to specific domains.
- Hold workshops on designing effective social norm change interventions, and a pool of technical advisors who can support organizations through this process.
- Review the steps for designing social norm change interventions with practitioners involved in successful programming and come to agreement on guidelines.
- Advocate with donors to fund longer inception periods for designing new program interventions. Inception periods should bring together practitioners and specialists in social norm change (including academics) to review evidence, theory and experience to inform new programming.
- Improve measurement of social norm change to establish what really works in changing social norms and sexual and reproductive health behaviors and outcomes.
- Invest in measuring whether changing social norms actually translates into improved SRH outcomes.

¹⁷ Multiple sources, including Ben Cislighi and Lori Heise. 2016. Measuring Gender-related Social Norms: Report of a Meeting, Baltimore Maryland, June 14-15, 2016. Learning Group on Social Norms and Gender-based Violence of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine; and Alexander-Scott, M. Bell, E. and Holden, J. (2016) DFID Guidance Note: Shifting Social Norms to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). London: VAWG Helpdesk