

Social norms: More details, please

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The words we use matter. The concept of a social norm exists in many social and behavioral science disciplines and research traditions (1). Because the general term “social norm” is a hypernym, an explicit definition is crucial to discussions of its place and usefulness in solving complex social–environmental issues (cf. ref. 2).

In their discussion of incentives, Lubchenco et al. (3) suggest that social norms are a type of behavioral incentive reflected in “both reputation and self-image of individual actors.” However, no formal definition of social norm is provided. The authors state that a social norm includes, “reputation-driven and personally motivated norms” and reference changes to social norms without specifying which—or which type—of norms; for example, the statement that “social norms around marine reserves have changed significantly...” (3). This inexact use of the term social norm belies its superordinate nature, making it difficult to understand what has changed and why it is important (4, 5). We briefly comment on how the concept of a social norm might be better used and defined, and underscore the complexity and nuances associated with changes to a social norm (4).

The term social norm is used, conventionally, to refer to a normative social belief, which is an individual’s beliefs about the behaviors and evaluations of others in a social setting: that is, a cognitive construct and mental representation of the actual social norm (5). This use distinguishes it from a more appropriate use of the term social norm, which refers to the actual reality of behaviors that are common or approved within a social group (6). Further distinction comes in

the form of “descriptive” (common or typical behavior) and “injunctive” (approved or accepted behavior) dimensions of a social norm (7).

Distinguishing between normative social beliefs and social norms is important because the reality of a situation (social norm) may be unrelated or inconsequential to an individual’s perception of common or approved behavior (normative social beliefs) (8). Furthermore, when considering the incentives social norms afford and their subsequent influence on behavior, it is crucial to differentiate between types [i.e., descriptive (is) or injunctive (ought)], as each pertain to different sources of motivation (7, 9). Specifying what aspects of a social norm (or normative social belief) were measured, targeted, or changed by behavioral incentives is necessary.

Changes to the social norm can refer to changes in behavior or changes in beliefs, and changes to one do not necessarily equate to changes in the other (5). These distinctions have real-world implications for designing management strategies. Without specificity and differentiation, it is difficult to know what social norm refers to and accurately identify shifts and changes (10). Whereas the case studies discussed by Lubchenco et al. (3) provide significant details on advances in ocean sustainability, the framing of behavioral incentives with the term “social norm” is ambiguous. A clearer and more explicit definition is needed to better use and articulate the dynamics of social norms and normative social beliefs, and clarify how the right incentives might be created when targeting them.

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