

Measuring social norms

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Authors: Ben Cislaghi and Lori Heise

This brief offers guidance to researchers who are not experts on social norms but want to capture information on norms as they relate to HIV and other health and development outcomes. Here, members of the STRIVE consortium provide some techniques for collecting information on social norms in the context of studies designed to explore the structural drivers of HIV.

What are social norms?

Social norms are unspoken behavioural rules shared by people in a given society or group; they define what is considered ‘normal’ and appropriate behaviour for that group. They can influence, for instance, how people dress for a wedding, whether women must cover their hair in public, how people greet each other, and whether men generally eat before women.

Norms interact with other individual, social, material and structural factors to influence human behaviour. While they can constrain human action, they can also motivate action in a positive way. Norms are seldom monolithic; there are often pockets of contestation and individuals who choose to act against the norm, despite the consequences that may ensue. As a result, norms can bend, shift and change over time.

A plethora of disciplines – including anthropology, sociology, behavioural economics and evolutionary psychology, to cite just a few – have theorised the ways in which social norms emerge, persist, and influence behaviour. Some theories emphasise the role that norms play in helping to establish group identity, whereas others emphasise the value that norms play in helping individuals to collaborate in ways that are maximally beneficial to the group. Norms can be inculcated through socialisation and reinforced through text books, media and daily modelling of behaviours, or they can be imposed from above by more powerful ‘others’, such as people with authority. Even though each theory of norms offers important insights and contributions, there is no universally shared consensus on why and how norms evolve and persist.

STRIVE members are currently working to merge different schools of thought into an approach to understanding and measuring norms that can help guide the design and evaluation of interventions, especially those aimed at dislodging harmful gender-related practices. But the endeavour to harmonise different disciplines and theories is complex and part of a longer-term enterprise that STRIVE is undertaking. For the practical purposes of this brief, we thus adopt the terminology of one popular school of thought that describes social norms as people’s beliefs about 1) what others do, and 2) what they approve and disapprove of.

This conceptualisation is especially useful for individuals attempting to measure norms quantitatively.

Across disciplines, practitioners refer to these two distinct but interrelated concepts in several ways. Social psychologists call the first type of belief (what others do) a ‘descriptive norm’ and the second type (what others approve and disapprove of) an ‘injunctive norm’, as first coined by Robert Cialdiniⁱ. Other naming conventions include those of Cristina Bicchieriⁱⁱ, who uses ‘empirical expectations’ to describe what people believe others do, and ‘normative expectations’ to describe what people believe is expected of them.

There is substantial evidence that social norms can influence a variety of health-related behaviours, including those related to HIV. Research on HIV and social norms has mostly focussed on four aspects of the norms/HIV nexus. These are (from the most to the least studied):

1. Condom use and sexual risk behaviour;
2. Drug injection and needle sharing;
3. Willingness to seek HIV testing; and
4. Access to and response of health services.

But norms can also influence upstream factors that affect individuals’ vulnerability to HIV, including factors such as women’s ability and willingness to leave abusive relationships; the ability of young people to resist alcohol advertising and promotion; the degree to which girls receive parental support to complete secondary school; and the impact of stigma on individual’s willingness to disclose their status.

Clearly, more research is needed to understand the complex ways that norms interact with other factors that contribute to HIV prevalence in low and middle-income countries. We encourage researchers to consider contributing to this effort to capture and measure normative change when they evaluate interventions, and we hope this brief will help towards that end.

Measuring social norms vs measuring individual attitudes

In measurement terms, it is important to recognise that people can hold a given individual attitude and yet behave in a way that is contrary to that attitude to conform with a social norm. This can happen on a large scale, with most people in a group holding an attitude in opposition to a specific behaviour, and yet engaging in that behaviour under the belief that others expect them to, a phenomenon known as ‘pluralistic ignorance’.

ⁱ Because this approach is based on beliefs, it can be measured based on individual’s self-reports. By contrast, definitions of norms that evolve from sociology or gender theory, conceptualise norms as embedded in institutions and structuring relations of power (Marcus and Harper 2014). This conceptualisation is more difficult to measure quantitatively.

Acknowledging the difference between social norms and individual attitudes has practical implications for survey creation. Asking study participants whether they individually think an action is good or bad might not be enough to anticipate their actions, especially if their actions are motivated less by their personal attitude or preference than by their sense of what others expect of them. Indeed, what they see others do and what they think others approve and disapprove of, may be more defining of what they end up doing than their own personal preference.

The 'reference group': when does it matter?

Early on, several norm theorists introduced the concept of 'reference groups' to refer to those 'others' whose opinion motivates people to comply with specific social expectations. The group whose opinion matters to someone may vary depending on the setting and the behaviour. Loosely speaking, important 'others' can be of two kinds: specific and general. Sometimes people anticipate the reaction of a 'specific' group of people. Take, for instance, an adolescent who wants to fit in her group of friends, and engages in potentially harmful behaviour (like smoking) to do so. Other times, people comply with the rules of their 'general' larger society. Many unspoken rules are inculcated at an early age through socialisation and reinforced through media and encounters of daily life. Take, for instance, the idea that adolescent boys are expected to be sexually active, while adolescent girls are expected to refrain from sexual activity. In this second case, people do not want to impress a particular group or obtain their esteem; they are just complying with what they have learnt as being the rules of their society.

The direct and indirect role of social norms

The relationship between social norms and the behaviour or practice under examination can be either direct or indirect.

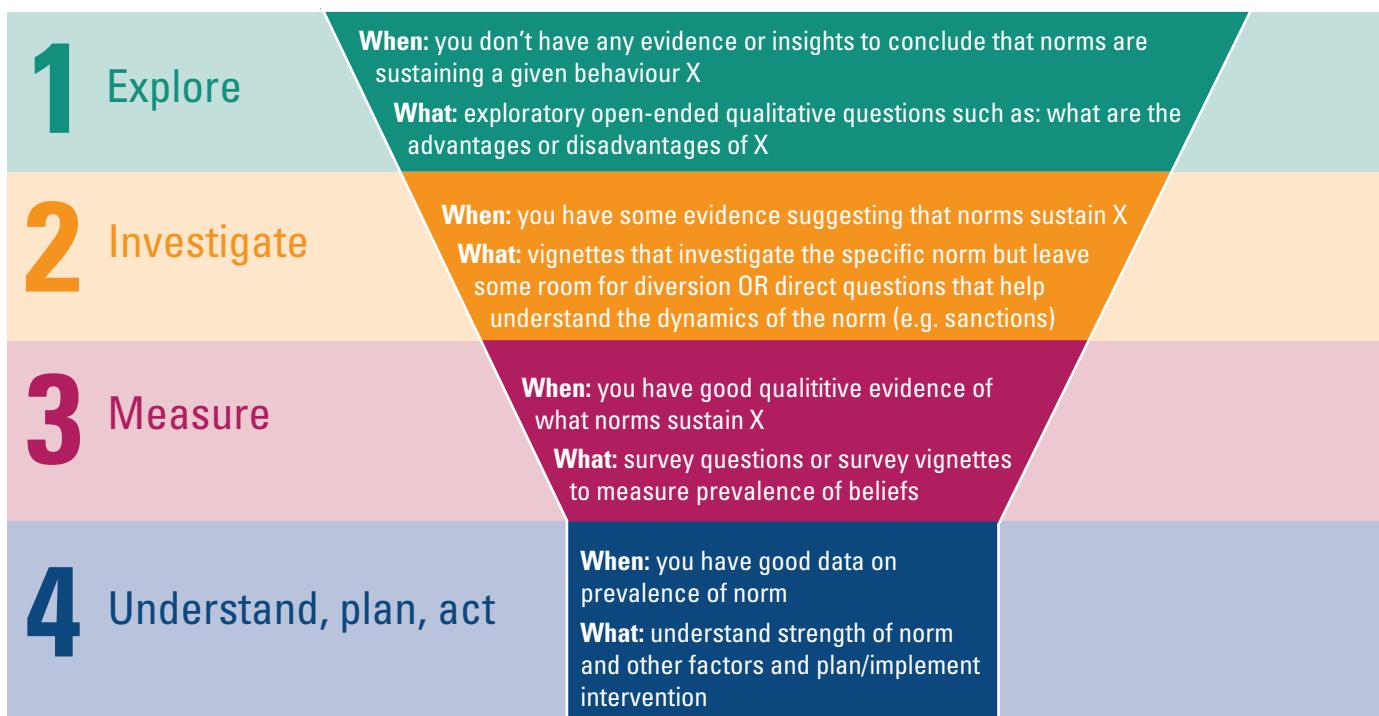
Direct practices are those where the norm and the behaviour conceptually overlap. For instance, in the case of female genital mutilation/cutting, the practice is the direct outcome of the norm itself. In certain areas of Senegal, for example, there is a well-established social rule that only girls who are cut are considered clean, worthy and suitable for marriage. Families that violate this norm (by keeping their girls intact) risk having their daughter considered unacceptable as a potential marriage partner for young men in their setting.

With other health-related behaviours, however, there may or may not be a direct link between the practice and an accompanying norm. In the case of sexual risk behaviour, for example, people do not necessarily believe that they are expected to engage in sex with multiple partners, without a condom. Yet, there might be norms that are indirectly contributing to this practice. Researchers would then need to understand the system of norms that are sustaining the risk behaviour. A person might be ashamed to confess to their doctor that they routinely have episodes of anonymous sex without protection, preventing them from seeking pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). In this case, the norm might be that sex should take place within committed relationships and casual sex is shameful. Assessing the range of normative beliefs that inform behaviour is an important element of applying a social norms lens to any harmful practice.

Collecting data on social norms

Measuring social norms is extremely context-dependent. Good measurement must be preceded by evidence that can help interpret the quantitative data on norms. The 'funnel' of norms exploration and measurement (Figure 1) is a tool to help practitioners consider what evidence they possess on norms.ⁱⁱⁱ Practitioners should position their understanding of social norms on the funnel: the more evidence they possess, the further down the funnel their exploration can focus.

Figure 1: The 'funnel' of norms exploration and measurement



1. Explore potential normative influence: asking open-ended questions

Practitioners who do not possess clear evidence that a given behaviour is under normative influence should start at phase 1 of the funnel. Their exploration should include very open-ended qualitative questions about the behaviour in question. In the case of engaging in pre-marital sex, for example, these might include questions of the following sort:

- Do most young people you know have sex before they get married?
- What would people think about someone who decided to wait?
- What might be the advantages of postponing sex until marriage? What would be the down sides?
- Does having many sexual partners increase boys standing among their male friends? What about their female friends?
- Are things the same or different for girls who have several sexual partners? How so?
- If a young girl knew that her parents strongly disapproved of her having sex, do you think this would affect her actions? Why or why not?

The above approach can be easily adapted to different practices. The strategy is to adopt a conversational, open ended style that gives room for the respondent(s) to share truths about their lived experience. The goal of this phase is to uncover whether a behaviour is sustained by norms, and if so, what norms may be at play.

Box 1 gives an example of how early exploratory work yielded insights on norms affecting two STRIVE sponsored projects in Northern Karnataka, India.^{iv}

2. Investigate dynamics of normative influence: using social norms vignettes

When local knowledge already suggests that norms are at play, it is advisable to gain further insight into norm dynamics by using vignettes or other projective techniques. Vignettes are short stories that depict a situation of interest and invite participants to comment on it. Particularly useful are vignettes that are paired with structured questions that probe different aspects of norm theory (see the 'SNAP' tool developed by CARE USA on page 4).

In creating vignettes, the following points should be taken into consideration:

- The vignette must include credible characters from the local reality, with local names. It's helpful to clarify that you are not referring to any real person who might have the same name.
- The main character is presented with a situation that requires norm compliance. You might want to add specific observers, to put the character under the pressure of having to conform with what he or she thinks these observers expect from him or her.
- Ask participants what they think a person like the character would do in their setting if facing a similar scenario. Probe for detailed descriptions of the reasons the character would act that way.

Box 1: Exploring normative influence sustaining intimate partner violence and child marriage in South India

From the STRIVE working paper on honour and prestige

To understand the role of social norms on child marriage, Cislagli and Bhattacharjee asked South Indian parents to discuss advantages and disadvantages, risks and opportunities, as well as fears and worries, that influenced their decisions to send their girls to school or marry them off instead. Their findings included the following:

"The honour of a family whose girl has received a boy's attention would be seriously compromised, and parents would be ashamed of what others in their village thought and said of them. Parent informants had serious doubts about sending their girls to school for this reason and community outreach workers confirmed the difficulties of convincing them and other parents with anxieties about the impact on family honour of sending their girls to school." (p.5)

Through this and other similar semi-structured discussions, the authors uncovered the system of norms that influenced child marriage in the region. These included the beliefs that 1) respectable unmarried girls do not receive boys' attention; and 2) people disapprove of girls who receive such attention.

In a similar fashion, for another project discussed in the same paper, the authors looked at the norms surrounding intimate partner violence against female sex workers. They asked participants about the main positive and negative outcomes of hitting a woman when she does something to deserve it. They found that participants believed that their friends would disapprove of them if they told them that they did not beat their lover if she did something to deserve it (such as cheating on him):

One said that his friends would say, "Are you not a man? If you are not brave enough, go to the bar, drink a couple of beers and go back home and beat her." Generally, all wholeheartedly agreed that their friends would think they were not real men if they told them they did not beat their lovers when "necessary." (p. 6)

Participants' narrative unveiled a system of norms that contributed to (though were not the main driver of) intimate partner violence in their setting. These norms included the beliefs that 1) all men hit their lovers or wives; and 2) a man's friends would make fun of him if they knew that he did not beat his lover or wife when she deserved it.

- Then continue the story, questioning the sequence of events if the main character does not comply with the norm. What happens next? Will someone intervene? Could anything make her change her mind?

CARE USA has recently produced a tool, called the ‘Social Norms Analysis Plot’ (SNAP), that integrates the four steps detailed in Table 1.^v It provides a useful framework for developing vignettes to use in interview or focus group guides for exploring local norms.

One of the many advantages of the SNAP tool, is that it can help practitioners and researchers design social norms vignettes that yield insights into how norms operate in the project setting, including the strength of the norm and people’s willingness to violate it. This information is vital both for helping to design interventions and for constructing questions to monitor shifts in normative beliefs over time.

CARE’s Social Norms Analysis Plot (SNAP)		Example of a vignette used to explore child marriage
Narration	Setting the background	Participants are introduced to the scenario: The main character is faced with a situation when a social norm under diagnosis would come into play, and he/she needs to decide whether or not to comply.
Question	Descriptive norms (What I think others do)	Participants are asked what they think others in their setting would do if they were the main character (or another character engaging in the behaviour of interest).
Question	Injunctive norms (What I think others expect me to do)	Participants are asked what they think others in their settings expect the main character (or another character engaging in the behaviour of interest) to do.
Narration	Non-compliance of the main character	Participants are presented a twist in the narration: The main character (or a new character) does not comply with the (potential) norm.
Question	Sanctions (Anticipated positive or negative reactions to non-compliance)	Participants are asked about the opinion or reaction of others (to the non-compliance) – specifically others whose opinions matter to participants.
Question	Sensitivity to sanctions (Strength of sanctions over decision to comply or non-comply)	Participants are asked: If the character incurs negative sanctions for non-compliance, would he/she comply in the future.
Question	Exceptions	Participants are asked: Under what circumstances would it be okay for the non-complying character to break the norm.

3. Measure social norms: using appropriate social norms survey questions

Different options exist for practitioners wanting to measure social norms quantitatively. Despite previous work done around norms measurement, particularly in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights, norms measurement is still very much in its infancy. New approaches and strategies are being piloted every day and investigators are encouraged to remain open to innovation.

When measuring norms, there are two important aspects to consider:

- *Through whose influence is the norm operating?* Recall that some norms operate through specific reference groups which may vary for different behaviours: an adolescent wanting to impress her friends won't necessarily behave in the same way at a party as she does at home with her family. In this case, it is important to identify whose opinion is most important in shaping the behaviour in question. Often the reference group can be discerned

during formative research using projective techniques like vignettes. [Whose opinions would Rehima consider when deciding whether to get married?]. Quantitative questions can then be framed in terms of the most appropriate reference group.

- *What questions should one use?* The jury is still out on the best way to capture norms in quantitative surveys. Most researchers attempt to measure both descriptive norms (what proportion of people in your setting do X?) and injunctive norms (would people important to you [your reference group], approve of you doing X?).

There are a variety of ways to structure such questions. If possible, it is best to pilot various approaches in your setting before deciding which approach will work best. Box 2 includes a set of question wordings, using examples from different gender-related behaviours to illustrate options.

The various techniques all offer valuable options for learning more about the best strategies and techniques to capture and measure the influence of social norms on health-related behaviours.



Box 2: Options for wording questions

I. A common approach to structuring norms questions is to use Likert scales to assess the degree to which individuals agree with key summary statements about their setting or reference group. For example:

1. **To what extent do you agree with the following statements:**
 - a. Most people in my community would not talk about being beaten by their husband to people outside of the family (Agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, disagree.)
 - b. Most people in my community would think poorly of a woman who discussed being beaten by her husband with people outside of her family. (Agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, disagree.)

II. Other researchers instead ask people about the frequency with which people engage in the behaviour of interest, or the number of people who do so. For instance:

1. Number:

- a. In your village, how many young girls get married before the age of 18? (all, most, some, few, nobody)
- b. Among people in your family, how many would approve of you getting married before the age of 18 (all, most, some, few, nobody)

2. Frequency:

- a. How often do your friends drink alcohol when socialising? (very often, often, sometimes, never)
- b. How often do others [your friends] disapprove if they see you drinking alcohol at a party? (very often, often, sometimes, never?)

III. A third strategy is to simply ask people to report on what they observe about behaviour and attitudes of others in a specific situation:

1. **In your experience, when congregating on the street, do most boys around here**
 - a. Tease young girls when they pass by
 - b. Let girls pass by without comment
 - c. Neither
2. **In your opinion, when young boys tease girls as they pass by, do "most people around here"**
 - a. Approve of the teasing
 - b. Disapprove but tolerate the teasing
 - c. Disapprove of the teasing
 - d. Have no strong opinion

IV. Finally, some researchers focus explicitly on the possibility of positive or negative sanctions arising from conforming to or violating a norm. For example:

1. If a young girl was not married by the time she was 18, this would reflect badly on her family [Agree, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, disagree]
2. If a married woman left her husband and returned to her family after being beaten, neighbours would gossip about her [Agree, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, disagree]
3. In your experience, if a married woman is beaten by her husband, what percentage of families in your village would accept her back home [All, most, some, few, none]

4. Understand the impact of social norms: effective monitoring of interventions

Considering the proper level for aggregating and reporting norm data is key to ensuring the utility of such data for designing and targeting interventions. Normally, it is most useful to aggregate individual level responses to normative questions at the level of the reference group; these are the individuals whose collective opinion may influence the respondent's behaviour. In settings where the norm operates at a community level, it is generally sufficient to report the area-level average of the norm. In surveys conducted using cluster sampling, it is usually possible to report and compare

average endorsement of various norms questions by cluster as well as across the entire community, district, or region. Generally one needs at least 7-10 respondents per grouping to create valid and reliable estimates of local endorsement of key norms.

Understanding how norms operate across groups will help practitioners as they plan their interventions, for instance, by directing resources to the groups where the norms are the most entrenched. Alternatively, knowledge of normative variation might help practitioners work with groups where the norms are weaker, helping to catalyse pockets of contestation or new norms that can help drive larger normative change.

Further reading

* represents especially useful resources

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