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Construction of Meaning during a Pandemic: The Forgotten Role of Social Norms

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ABSTRACT

How social norms are formed likely has a bearing on the mechanisms underlying their effects on behavioral outcomes. We propose three mechanisms of norms formation – through direct experience, symbolically through media, or imaginatively – and introduce ideas about normative durability, normative subscription, normative volume, personal agency, and polarization of norms – that likely have a bearing on how norms affect behaviors. The COVID-19 pandemic has important implications for how norms are formed, which in turn invoke different underlying mechanisms in the relationship between social norms and behaviors. We propose a number of hypotheses for future studies to test.

Much of our learning about social norms (Cialdini et al., 1991) is relevant for COVID-19-related behaviors, some of which are well-established for general good health (e.g., washing hands regularly), while others are rarer but made salient by the pandemic (e.g., physical distancing, wearing face masks). Because COVID-19 is a new pandemic and the science behind it is evolving, many behavioral decisions are made with uncertainty, which elevates the prominence of normative influence.

How people understand norms in their environment is a social process (Bicchieri, 2006), and their development in the COVID-19 context could occur *directly* through interactions with others, *vicariously* through exposure to media, or *imaginatively* through extrapolations. Considerable overlap likely exists among these pathways, so they are not mutually exclusive. However, it is instructive to expand on these distinctions, especially in the current COVID-19 context when aspects of social life are disrupted, limiting direct interactions with others.

Much of what we know about others' expectations and behaviors is based on direct observation or interaction. When we interact with friends, for example, we discern, shape, and adapt to the emerging rules of interaction, internalizing others' behaviors and expectations. In the absence of direct interactions (for example, to reduce COVID-19 exposure), people are socially isolating themselves for an extended period of time, and social norms are derived more likely from others symbolically through mediated mechanisms.

Television coverage, for example, may depict people not wearing a mask, leading some viewers to make value judgments about others defying local directives, thereby internalizing competing social norms – that the norms support wearing a mask and that most people, but not the aberrant ones depicted on television, are compliant.

Another basis for norms formation is imaginative. By this we mean that the internalization of norms is based not on direct experience with the underlying behavior, but rather through people's imagination; people perceive the prevalence and acceptability of a behavior on the basis of internal

projections. The idea here is that individuals have no way to check the veracity of the normative information they have internalized. These types of normative information are particularly relevant for behaviors that are private and less visible *in vivo* or in the media. In the context of COVID-19, this may include, for example, handwashing (or soon, perhaps, vaccination), which tends to be practiced in private more than in public and which may be less visible in the media compared to physical distancing and masking. Imagined norms may also be considered less trustworthy than those derived by direct or symbolic means and, therefore, carry less force.

Whereas the internalization of normative information through direct social interaction provides opportunities for the actors themselves to shape norms through either negotiation or their own actions, such opportunities are absent in the formation of norms through symbolic or imagined experiences. Watching others on television not wearing masks, for example, provides people with information about the underlying norms, but without having the ability to process and interpret that information through direct interaction.

This distinction between norms internalized through personal agency and those observed vicariously or imaginatively is important for at least two reasons. First, personal agency likely leads to greater ownership because it accords more familiarity and understanding about the norm, and the expended effort in formulating the norm makes it likely to remain more egoistically embedded (or durable when faced with opposing norms). Second, the higher level of ownership of the norm likely means it aligns more closely with one's underlying values and thus external supervision is not required for the norm to influence behaviors. In this case, the ability of the norms to influence behaviors will remain true whether the behavior is enacted in public (where external supervision would be present) or in private (where it would not).

The idea of *normative subscription* is key here: the extent to which one endorses the particular norm and internalizes it as a behavioral guide. When one is personally invested in a norm,

that is, when subscription is high, the presence or absence of others is inconsequential in determining whether one's actions are consistent with the norm. Overall, then, we hypothesize that normative subscription predicts behaviors: high-subscription norms, those internalized through a personal agency, will be more predictive of behaviors than low-subscription norms, those formed without the benefit of direct interaction.

Normative volume constitutes the second distinction between norms internalized through direct versus symbolic experiences. It refers to information about the size of both the prevalence and acceptability of the underlying behavior. Direct experiences are fewer in number, more personalized, and episodic. They communicate information about a smaller number of actors defining the norm, typically those with whom one has regular contact. In contrast, symbolic experiences often convey information about large groups of people and sometimes even entire societies. Furthermore, especially during a shutdown, direct personal experience with others shrinks and the flow of symbolic experience expands as people consume news and social media content to stay up to date with current events. We distinguish collective (Sedlander & Rimal, 2019) or community norms (Kaggwa et al., 2008), which refer to the proportion of people engaging in a given behavior (e.g., the idea that 90% of people in one's community having been vaccinated represents the collective norm in that setting) from normative volume, which refers to the absolute number of individuals contributing to the normative perceptions.

This distinction is important because the social aspect of social norms may be amplified when a greater volume of normative information is derived symbolically from the media than when it is surmised through individual participation and engagement. Future scholarship could examine how the greater volume of COVID-19 information through the media over time compares with that through interpersonal means for differential impact. On the one hand, norms derived through personal investment could be stronger determinants of behavior because of the underlying ego-involvement in formulating those norms. On the other hand, norms derived symbolically may convey greater endorsement among members of the broader society because of greater perceived normative volume and thus exert greater pressures on behavior. Consistent with the "influence of presumed influence" model (Gunther & Storey, 2003), we might predict that when normative volume from the media is high, people will imagine a larger effect of normative endorsement by others on others. This would lead people to adjust their own normative endorsement accordingly and act on it in their dealings with others. These competing hypotheses remain to be tested.

A key feature of norms formed through the imaginative mechanism is that they are not socially observable and thus their veracity remains unknown and difficult to ascertain. Their influence on behavior, then, is subject to the vagaries of other factors, such as salient environmental cues (Fazio et al., 1983), trust in information sources (e.g., Fridman et al., 2020), or ego-involvement (Park et al., 2011). For example, when ego-involvement is high, behaviors are likely to be driven by underlying values (and less by social norms; Park & Yang, 2012). We hypothesize that both the imaginative and mediated mechanisms of meaning-making will be more active when the direct interaction mechanism is constrained, and thus might gain normative force.

Relevance to the current pandemic

These reflections lead to four observations particularly relevant in the COVID-19 era. Though speculative, in that they are based more on derivations from what is known than directly from empirical evidence, our hope is these pathways are heuristic enough to stimulate future research on social norms, particularly in situations characterized by uncertainty.

First and most important is that restrictions on social movement and physical distancing guidelines widely imposed around the world beginning in early 2020, together with increased time spent in the digital world, drive people to rely more on symbolic and imagined sources of information to understand what others are doing and what is acceptable to do. Norms formed in this way have larger perceived normative volume but fewer opportunities to be shaped by actors themselves through direct interaction.

Second, the online content that people have access to is increasingly personalized, tailored to individual preferences, and selected according to prior behaviors by automated content generators and machine learning algorithms. This amplifies in-group norms, creating the infamous "bubble" effect that hinders learning about what "the other side" is saying or thinking, thereby distorting the perceived volume of certain types of normative information.

Third, construction of meaning around private and less visible behaviors may be more influenced by personal imagination, compared to behaviors that are publicly observable. Masking and physical distancing, in contrast, are inherently social behaviors; they are practiced in public and enacted for the protection of not just oneself but also of others.

Fourth, we suspect that normative beliefs and trust in information sources may be related. The degree to which people trust COVID information sources may affect the normative force of information or images in those media; when trust is low, normative force may be undermined. Data from an ongoing global survey of COVID knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors among Facebook users in 67 countries (<https://ccp.jhu.edu/kap-covid/>) indicate that online sources of information are the most common but also the least trusted. As information about potential COVID vaccines increases and is widely disseminated through social media, what effect will this have on imagined norms around vaccine acceptance? Conversely, might appealing to and strengthening normative beliefs through symbolic means increase trust in certain information sources (and in other public institutions)?

Figure 1 summarizes our primary thesis, which consists of three components – that we need to pay attention to how norms are themselves formed (whether through direct experience, vicariously, or imaginatively), that this process of formation imbues them with certain characteristics, and that those characteristics, in turn, determine their ability to influence behaviors.

How norms are formed during a pandemic – through direct observation, symbolically, or imaginatively – likely matters in terms of their durability, their influence on behaviors, and how they are subsequently negotiated in a post-lockdown reality. But we do not know how prior construction of meaning from high

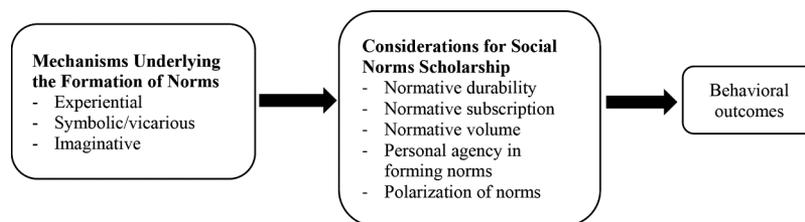


Figure 1. Pathway depicting how the formation of norms may affect behavioral outcomes.

volume vicarious information affects one's subsequent response. We also wonder whether direct experience undermines vicarious meaning or whether the normative volume of symbolic information increases the durability and force of vicarious experience. We hope subsequent research will take up these important questions.

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