

# Emerging Challenges and Issues for The Social Norms Approach

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As the social norms approach has met with success a number of challenges have emerged. In particular, it is important to learn from unsuccessful interventions. These failures can be very instructive and serve to articulate, refine, clarify and expand the model. Because these failures may be due to lack of fidelity to the model, it is important to consider the following challenges:

## ***Readiness* Developing the infrastructure to support a social norms campaign**

The theory of social norms makes intuitive sense to many prevention specialists in contrast to other approaches that may have failed to produce results. Yet while the theory is elegant, implementation is difficult and requires a significant amount of “readiness” or preparation to ensure that an infrastructure is available that can deliver a quality intervention. Readiness includes 1) training key stakeholders and staff in the model, 2) creating support and discussion in the larger community, 3) revising policies that may foster misperceptions, 4) collecting and analyzing data, and 5) training and supporting project staff to implement the model properly.

## ***Salience* Decide which messages are appropriate and relevant for which audience**

In homogeneous communities all members may feel a part of the community and react positively to a community norms-based message. Many social norms campaigns adopt this format with slogans such as “most of us” or “students at our university...” However, in a very heterogeneous community students may not identify with these messages unless they are carefully constructed to have broad appeal. Some students may identify more with particular identities such as participation in an affinity group and be better reached through these channels. Thus, which messages are “salient” to which groups is an important consideration in social norms campaigns.

## ***Believability* Create credible messages in terms of source and explanation of data**

Social norms messages contradict widely held beliefs and introduce cognitive dissonance by suggesting that the truth is different from what is popularly thought. Ideally, these messages will stimulate a process of self-reflection and re-examination of what is normative. However, when a message is not believed and easily rejected, a campaign is compromised. This can be due to a variety of factors, including when the source of the message is not trusted, the presentation of the message is not appealing, or data that is questioned is not explained thoughtfully.

## ***Evaluation* Program evaluations must be thorough to reveal any successes**

Inadequate evaluation of social norms campaigns may lead to the incorrect conclusion that they have not been successful when in fact positive changes have been overlooked. Thus, while the overall percentage of students who drink less than a certain amount may remain unchanged, beneficial changes can occur within this group. Similarly, some groups may be positively affected while others are not. Finally, methodological difficulties in evaluation design may obscure positive changes.

## ***Responding to Critics***

The social norms approach has met with criticism from some individuals. In some cases social norms is being held to a higher standard of evidence and implementation than other approaches. Other concerns are based on misunderstandings, or lack of familiarity with the research. Finally, interventions may fail for the reasons noted above and should not be used to suggest that social norms in itself is a failed strategy.

## ***Issues of Replicability***

Social norms campaigns are context specific. Thus, a particular message or style of media presentation may be appealing in one community and not in another. In addition, the best means of disseminating information may differ among groups or communities. Because of this context issue, attempts to replicate social norms interventions independent of a specific context may fail. Similarly, when a social norms intervention is adapted to a different health issue, the intervention must be tailored to the culture of the new problem.

## ***Combining Social Norms with Other Approaches to Drug Prevention.***

There is currently no consensus regarding whether social norms is effective when combined with other drug prevention strategies – particularly environmental management. At a minimum, other strategies and methodologies that foster fear and call undue attention to extreme behavior should be minimized because they will undermine social norms efforts and have not been found to be effective. Some experts argue that social norms and other environmental management strategies can be effectively combined, while others argue that the desired changes can be created through social norms alone.

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