

# SOCIAL NORMS THEORY: DEFINITIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

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## Definitions\*

*Pluralistic Ignorance* is the incorrect belief that one's private attitudes, judgments or behavior are different from others. *False Consensus* is the incorrect belief that one represents the majority when one is actually a minority. *False Uniqueness* is the incorrect belief that one's behavior is more unique than it really is.

## Assumptions\*\*

1. Our actions are often based on misinformation about, or misperceptions of our environment.
2. When we define or perceive situations as real they are real in their consequences.
3. Individuals often adopt a bystander role in which we passively accept our (mis)perceptions of the status quo rather than actively intervene to change it, i.e., we stay in the "closet" about what we really feel.
4. Pluralistic Ignorance is self-perpetuating, because it discourages the expression of opinions and actions that one falsely believes are non-conforming.
5. Appropriate information, carefully targeted, can help shift people from a bystander or closeted position to an interventionist one.
6. The culture or community of an individual and the meaning of information within that culture must be considered when designing an intervention.
7. Even when leaders do not personally engage in the problematic behavior, we contribute to the climate of pluralistic ignorance by the way we talk about the behavior, i.e. we are the "carriers" of the misperception. Pluralistic Ignorance thus serves to strengthen beliefs and values that the carriers do not themselves hold (i.e., our non-action makes us a part of the problem rather than a part of the solution)
8. For a norm to be perpetuated, it is not necessary for the majority to believe it, but only for the majority to believe that the majority believes it.

## Corollaries

1. Different norms may be "salient" for different groups.
2. Norms are contextual and vary based on the culture and context of each campus and setting.
3. Misperceptions exist at the individual, group, and community levels
4. Pluralistic Ignorance accompanies periods of social change, when attitudes change faster than social

norms.

5. Pluralistic Ignorance is intensified during times of personal change (psychological and/or biological).
6. Pluralistic Ignorance exists in relation to health behaviors (alcohol and other drug use, smoking, sexual activity, eating disorders, etc.) and attitudes about others (racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, etc.)

## **Stages of Bystander Behavior**

In order to move from being a bystander to taking action the bystander must:

1. Notice the event
2. Interpret it as a problem
3. Feel responsible for dealing with it
4. Possess the necessary skills to act
5. Be free of fears of retaliation

### RELEVANT ARTICLES

Berkowitz, AD (1997). From Reactive to Proactive Prevention: Promoting an Ecology of Health on Campus. Ch 6 in PC Rivers & ER Shore (Eds), Substance Abuse on Campus: A Handbook for College and University Personnel, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT.

\*\*Berkowitz, AD (2003) Applications of Social Norms Theory to Other Health and Social Justice Issues. Chapter 16 in HW Perkins (Ed), The Social Norms Approach to Preventing School and College Age Substance Abuse., San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

\*Berkowitz, AD (2003) The Social Norms Approach: Theory, Research and Annotated Bibliography. (Available from: [www.edc.org/hec/socialnorms/](http://www.edc.org/hec/socialnorms/) )

Perkins, HW (1997). College Student Misperceptions of Alcohol and Other Drug Use Norms Among Peers: Exploring Causes, Consequences, and Implications for Prevention Programs. In Designing Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention Programs in Higher Education: Bringing Theory into Practice. Newton Mass: Higher Education Center and U.S. Department of Education.

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