

## Conceptual structure and practical application: Bicchieri's approach to Social Norms\*

Bicchieri, C. (2017). *Norms in the Wild. How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social Norms*. Oxford University Press.

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**ABSTRACT:** For a deep understanding of collective action problems, it is essential to clarify the various types of behaviour we observe. One category is represented by social norms, informal rules of behaviour that must satisfy certain conditions in order to be recognized. In this context, professor Bicchieri not only presents a theoretical model that defines what a social norm is and why people are willing to conform, but she also provides, in her latest book *Norms in the Wild*, an overview of how her model may actually be applied in the field, through interventions capable of changing stable but harmful social norms.

**KEY WORDS:** social norm, experiments, collective action

The behavioral turn in Economics brought a new focus on cognitive and psychological factors influencing decision-making. The cardinal principle of profit maximization has been strongly challenged by empirical evidence, which has shown how other relevant factors determine the deliberation's output. What emerged is that in situations of potential conflict between private and common interest, observed behaviors are not purely selfish but 'pro-social', that is, they show a tendency towards cooperation, attitudes of benevolence and reciprocity. Several theories have been proposed to explain this apparent pro-social component in decision-making: inequity aversion (Fehr and Fischbacher 2004) and reciprocity theory (Rabin 1993) are among the most cited. They purport to explain why people do not consider maximization of their material payoff as the sole criterion for splitting resources —commonly between themselves and a second person or group. One issue that these theories deal with is why people conform to a certain collective behavioral pattern given certain circumstances. For instance, if we perceive the division of a material good as unequal, we are ready to punish the person responsible even if it is costly for ourselves. In other words, under certain circumstances one is ready to punish those who do not conform to a recognized social norm. Conversely, people are ready to reward those who follow the current norm, by cooperating with other members of the reference group.

Thus, even the most purportedly scientific approach to rational choice have seen the introduction of fundamental concepts such as social norms, social preferences and ref-

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erence group. Cristina Bicchieri's<sup>1</sup> recent work, *Norms in the Wild* (2017), is built around these concepts. Her book constitutes both a point of arrival and one of departure for the study of social norms' change. Point of arrival because it implements the theoretical model on social norms reached in *The Grammar of Society. The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms* (2006), in which the author asks the question of how to identify, among different collective behavioral patterns, social norms, defining the conditions under which they exist and are followed by the majority of the reference group. It is a departure point because Bicchieri does not circumscribe her research to lab experiments—in the attempt to determine the conditions under which a social norm exists and why people conform to it—but she would like to investigate whether or not a social norm can change and how it would occur in the field.

presents only preliminary results and projects to change social norms. Their examples are intriguing and shocking; and they are shown to be plagued with bewildering problems and unexpected twists and turns. Definitely it the story of the dawn of a new science: the science of changing social norms.

Let's go first to the antecedents of *Norms in the Wild*. As it was said, this work adopts the theoretical framework laid out in *The Grammar of Society*. Bicchieri's questions there were: Why do people do what they do? What are behaviors determined by? What are the behavioural constraints in the social dimension? *The Grammar of Society* provides the conceptual answer; then an attempt for real application is presented in *Norms in the Wild*.

The theoretical contribution of the model developed in 2006 is so central that the first two chapters of *Norms in the Wild* are dedicated to a clear and summary exposition of the pivotal notions to distinguish a social norm from other types of collective behaviour, closely following that earlier publication. It is fundamental to underline how a social norm is defined; what is meant by social preferences; the role of empirical and normative expectations. The great novelty of the book is that this conceptual structure is supported not only by laboratory experiments—benchmark already in *The Grammar*—but by a series of field experiments, conducted mainly in collaboration with UNICEF<sup>2</sup>: urgent topics such as female genital cutting, limited breastfeeding, open defecation, are examples that are developed within the book to highlight the dynamics of mutual expectations, the definition of collective behaviour as a social norm instead of custom, descriptive norm, or moral norm; the role of beliefs and how to identify and make these variables measurable is central to being able to change a social norm that damages people following it.

Social norms are defined as informal rules of behavior that must satisfy three conditions: the condition of contingency, the condition of descriptive expectations and the condition of normative expectations. This means: to define a collective behavior as conforming to a social norm this social norm (i) must be common knowledge for all or, at least, for most of the members of the reference group; that is, people must generally take that regularity *as a norm* rather than as a mere coincidence. Second there must be conditions for compliance, that is, agents' conformity to the norm must be deliberate—people prefer to conform rather than deviate. And that preference must be based on two types of expectations (the remaining two conditions in the definition): (ii) everyone (or almost everyone) expects others to behave in the same way (empirical expectations about what others do) and (iii) she expects that others expect she should behave according to the norm (normative expectations about what I think others think I should do). These three elements are the conditions under which

a social norm differs from other types of collective behaviour. As highlighted, this becomes of primary importance for intervention: understanding whether or not breastfeeding is a practice dictated by a stable social norm or by a moral one constitutes an essential requirement. To outline the type of collective behaviour that we are faced with tells us what kind of intervention to implement and which variables trying to modify—not by chance *Norms in the wild* leads as subtitle *How to diagnose, measure and change social norms*—and for that reason, the difference between social and moral norms is emphasized through the chapters, since it depends on the type of motivation leading the action.

It is worthwhile to start with a consideration that needs to be kept in mind when the ultimate goal is trying to change harmful collective behaviours: people need reasons to take a course of action, no matter how well-established a behaviour is. In order to make some collective behaviour different, as Bicchieri underlines, we must begin by changing group's individual beliefs, providing reasons why one's behaviour is preferable to an alternative one. In the social sphere, this would happen if changing behaviour is perceived as interdependent. Here it is introduced a first macro distinction: a social norm is the result of interdependent behaviour, in which each one considers, as reasons for acting, what the others do and deem appropriate. On the other hand, if behaviour is independent, what most of others do or consider proper has no impact on individual choice. This is the case of moral norms, according to Bicchieri, in which the agent prefers to act following a moral principle that for her is inalienable, regardless of what others do or believe.

Turning to the real life, this means that if we take limited breastfeeding as an example, a changing behaviour on the part of young mothers towards newborn could take place by modifying empirical and normative expectations. As evidenced by an experiment by UNICEF-WCARO, mothers-in-law occupy a central position in nourishment. For instance, even if a young mother thinks that giving colostrum to her child is a good practice, she will still lack strong motivations to change her behaviour since in her reference group elder women and her mother-in-law have different beliefs about how to feed infants. If a change of attitude starts from elder women, considered the reference point for raising children, then there may be a greater chance that healthy practices in child feeding are adopted and followed by young mothers—thus, this behaviour is interdependent, because it changes in relation to what others do and think others should do. If giving colostrum was perceived as a moral principle—as opposed to simply be seen as a good practice—by a young mother, expectations and disapproval from others of the network would have no effect. It is not easy, as the author points out, to catalogue these collective behaviours as social rather than moral, but it is a necessary operation to diagnose behaviours, bearing in mind that compliance with a social norm “is conditional on having the right kind of expectations” (Bicchieri2017, 66). Therefore, a series of fundamental concepts are frequently recalled, since without a clear distinction of the various types of expectations, beliefs and collective behaviour, it is not possible, according to Bicchieri, to intervene effectively in the field.

This consideration deserves a further brief clarification: the transition from experiments in the laboratory to experiments in the field makes the key concepts even more important. As long as we are in the laboratory, the recruited subjects are in a context recreated *ad hoc* to manipulate one or more variables. On the one hand, this seems to be a strong point because it allows specific aspects to be circumscribed, seeing how they influence decision-making. On

the other hand, there are plenty of potential problems inherent in the laboratory itself—for example, subjects may want to maintain a high self-image with respect to how they would behave in real life, even in games of total anonymity, because they still want to preserve a certain type of self-concept towards themselves; there is also the well-known ‘demand-bias’, the effect that subjects tend to behave as they think the experimenter expect them to behave. In the field things change drastically. While, as *Norms in the Wild* shows, previous research in the laboratory is essential to be able to work on the *mare magnum* of collective social practices, theories developed to explain experimental data need further elaboration. Under the influence of social norms many actions are the result of automatic processes activated by stimuli and situations—or ‘cues’—that activate a certain behavioural response. This is not to say that people lack responsibility and the capacity to discern, but it is a fact that demands that the researcher focuses on how context and environment affect human decision-making. Bicchieri introduces the notions of schemata and scripts. The formers are defined as “generic know-how structures that lie at the base of our understanding of the natural and social world (Fiske and Taylor 1991; McClelland, Rumelhart, and PDP Research Group 1986; Rumelhart 1998)” (Bicchieri 2017, 131). When the schemata are related to events, then we talk about scripts, in which norms would be embedded precisely because the same scripts prescribe action sequences that are automatically implemented by individuals—depending on the reference points that the event at stake makes focal. Acting on a cognitive level, schemata are very difficult to disrupt, especially because they are supported by a series of beliefs that each one creates—and many times our beliefs can be misleading, because biased.

The last chapter is dedicated to those who, endogenously, within the reference group, are responsible for a change of a recognized norm. They are those who are called ‘trendsetters’ and who, according to Bicchieri, should have a norm’s low sensitivity and a low perception of risk. Many people, aware of the probable sanctions—not necessarily economic, but also emotional such as shame and exclusion from the group—do not feel in the right position to start a counter behaviour, against what is established. In addition, a declared connected problem is the phenomenon labelled ‘pluralistic ignorance’: a cognitive state in which people belonging to a certain group/community disapprove an existing social norm at a personal normative belief level, but each one still believes that others in their group keep on following it, because that norm is what they publicly see. An example that the author proposes of this belief trap is taken from a UNICEF case study in which children were punished by their tutors. These caregivers, albeit disapproving of violence against children, did neither speak openly about the practice’s wrongness nor modify their behaviour because, seeing beatings’ effects on children, they believed that other caregivers were still following the norm. For fear of being judged as weak or of losing parents’ appreciation, they did not question the norm (Bicchieri 2017, 42).

This example, like others in the book, allows the reader to reach an overall picture from a theoretical, methodological and practical point of view about what dynamics are subject to the presence of social norms and how to intervene. An analysis that aims at showing which concepts should remain clear when it comes to identifying collective behaviours, the importance played by beliefs, preferences and expectations, how to intervene in the field, which tools to use for change and which are the problems met along this path.

*Norms in the wild* proves to be a successful attempt of how theoretical reflection and practical application can work together, helping each other. It is a brilliant example of how the

academic world opens up to real life, learning from it and giving a real contribution to improve it. The collaboration between the author and UNICEF accompanies the reader within a reconstruction of existing practices, showing both failures and successes.

Nevertheless, especially for those who deal with normative ethics, Bicchieri's theory might cause some concern: moral norms, rooted in people's moral intuitions, are excluded from the dynamic of changing a norm. As Bicchieri clearly stressed, moral beliefs and preferences are unconditional with respect to what others think and prefer, so providing a predictive model that can be used to infer causal connection between social norms and observed behaviour is an extremely difficult task. However, the figure of the trendsetter seems to be very close to the one who wants to change a well-founded norm because s/he considers it wrong. Since adhering to a moral principle —and acting accordingly— is an act of individual willingness, not dependent on others' beliefs and behaviours, the trendsetter would make the moral content focal, no matter what others do. What remains unspoken, but that seems to be crucial for understanding human behaviour in collective actions, is how morality could intervene and what impulse it gives to try to change harmful but established practices. On the one hand, it is clear that a methodology that aims to change social norms requires the tools provided by Bicchieri. However, within the motivational force that would induce a potential trendsetter to rebel against some norm she perceives as not right, the reference to a substantial ethical level should not be left aside.

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## Notes

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2. "Many of the examples I present have been inspired by the interactions with participants at the Penn-UNICEF program on Social Norms and Social Change, which started in 2010 and is ongoing" (Bicchieri, 2017, Acknowledgments).









