**Under the Influence: How the Group Changes What We Think**

**Researchers Study What Gives Social Norms Their Power**

By Shirley S. Wang

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How is it that so many people started saying "Awesome!", or started wearing Uggs?

These are examples of how individuals' behavior is shaped by what people around them consider appropriate, correct or desirable. Researchers are investigating how human behavioral norms are established in groups and how they evolve over time, in hopes of learning how to exert more influence when it comes to promoting health, marketing products or reducing prejudice.

Psychologists are studying how social norms, the often-unspoken rules of a group, shape not just our behavior but also our attitudes. Social norms influence even those preferences considered private, such as what music we like or what policies we support. Interventions that take advantage of already-existing group pressures, the thinking goes, should be able to shift attitudes and change behaviors at less cost in effort and resources.

Norms serve a basic human social function, helping us distinguish who is in the group and who is an outsider. Behaving in ways the group considers appropriate is a way of demonstrating to others, and to oneself, that one belongs to the group.

But surprisingly little is known about how attitudinal norms are established in groups. Why do some people in a group become trendsetters when it comes to ideas and objects?

"The questions are among the most challenging" in the field, said H. Peyton Young, a professor at the University of Oxford in the U.K. and at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Dr. Young studies how norms influence economic behavior. "It's definitely a big open research area where there's a certain amount of dispute."

One question is whether there is always a leader that sets or changes the norm, or whether norm change occurs organically over time, even in the absence of a strong leader.

Researchers have studied how new ideas and innovations—whether the latest fashion, electronic gadget or slang word—are introduced and spread within a group. Individuals who innovate tend to be somewhat isolated from the rest of the group, researchers say. Being too much a part of a group may constrain one's ability to think outside of convention, says Christian Crandall, a professor of social psychology at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, who studies social norms. "There's a freedom to innovate" that comes with isolation, Dr. Crandall says.

Though innovators may be isolated, the group often adopts their innovations because these new ideas or objects are an accessible way for members of the group to bond or signal solidarity. It could be a baseball cap worn backwards, or a pocket square. Each conveys a different identity.

But before others will take up the new idea, someone central to the group, with more connections than the innovator, has to recognize it.

Another major factor is whether the new idea evokes emotion. Jonah Berger, marketing professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, studied what makes ideas "go viral." His team analyzed 7,000 newspaper articles in the New York Times and found the articles considered most popular on the newspaper's website were those that aroused more emotions, particularly happy emotions but also anger or anxiety.

Scientists know group pressure is a powerful influence over health behaviors, including alcohol use, smoking and exercise. By developing a deeper understanding of the dynamics of trend-setters and trend-followers, researchers may discover more behavioral options for promoting health and preventing disease.

The more public an object or behavior is, the more likely it is to spread, Dr. Berger says. The bright-colored bracelets worn to show support for cancer survivors are seen by others, making a private value visible. "Your thoughts are not public, but your behaviors are," Dr. Berger says.

Rarely does any one individual set an entirely new norm for the group. Group leaders, however, help perpetuate or shift the norm. Unlike innovators, leaders tend to be high-status "superconformists," embodying the group's most-typical characteristics or aspirations, says Deborah Prentice, a social psychologist at Princeton University. People inside and outside the group tend to infer the group's norms by examining these leaders' behaviors.

Societal attitudes toward gay Americans largely changed after high-status individuals like Elton John and Elizabeth Taylor spoke out and explicitly established a new norm of acceptance, the University of Kansas' Dr. Crandall says.

But observation of others' behavior can also result in misperceptions of the norm, which in turn can cause the actual norm to shift. Misperceptions are dangerous when it comes to risky behavior. In a series of studies, Dr. Prentice and her team asked student participants, who filled out questionnaires, how much alcohol they drank, and how much they thought a typical student at their college drank. The researchers found students often overestimated how much others drank. The amount students reported drinking was closely related to their beliefs about how much others drank: Students who thought others drank more tended to report drinking more.

Many colleges have tried, with varying success, to correct misperceived drinking norms, for example by using posters to publicize real drinking rates. Similar norms-based approaches have been tried for influencing smoking and eating disorders within groups.

Occasionally, a misperception of societal norms can have a positive effect. Individuals who hold negative opinions about other ethnic groups, for example, may suppress these views if they think the attitudes won't be accepted within their own group. "Suppression becomes reality over time," Dr. Crandall says.

And recent evidence suggests happenstance plays a role in popularizing concepts. Matt Salganik, a Princeton sociologist, wondered why the Harry Potter novels became so popular, considering the original manuscript had been widely rejected before being published. His team created an artificial online market to examine the influences on individual preferences.

In a study published in Science in 2006, participants went to a website and listened to songs, rating and downloading the ones they liked. The 14,000 participants were randomly assigned to different "worlds." Individuals in the "independent" world simply rated and downloaded songs without any input about what others were doing. In the other seven dependent worlds, raters saw which songs other participants downloaded and how they rated them.

The researchers figured if ratings were based solely on each participant's taste, then the best songs would rise to the top and all the worlds would mirror the independent world. But if, as they suspected, participants were influenced by others' ratings, then different songs would be rated highest in each world.

The researchers found vast variation in rankings between different worlds. Often, which song was rated highly simply depended on who the first raters happened to be. In some circumstances, "if you rewound the world and played it again, you could see a potentially different outcome," says Dr. Salganik.

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