

Module 2 Unit 3

This is a **REQUIRED READING**.

National Social Norms Institute (2002). What is social norms theory?
Retrieved from <http://www.socialnorm.org/pdf/themainframe.pdf>. [2 p.]

What is Social Norms Theory?

Social norms theory states that much of people's behavior is influenced by their perception of how other members of their social group behave. According to social norms theory, people tend to misperceive, i.e., exaggerate, the negative health behavior of their peers. If people think harmful behavior is typical, they are more likely to engage in that type of behavior.

All too often, perceptions are incorrect. If unhealthy behavior is perceived to be the standard in a social group, the social urge to conform will negatively affect overall behavior of group members. Alternatively, by educating a group about healthy behavior that is in fact the usual practice among their peers, behavior can be affected in a positive manner.

Social norms is an environmental approach that seeks to impact social and cultural environments as the way to then influence individuals. It has been widely applied using social marketing techniques. Normative messages are designed for delivery using various media and promotion strategies in order to effectively reach a target population and promote its accurate norms of health and safety.

Social norms theory has also been successfully applied through other strategies such as curriculum infusion, creating press coverage, policy development, and small group interventions.

Relevant references: 6, 7, 10, 11, 16, 18, 29, 32,42, 67, 68, 70, 72

How Can Social Norms Practitioners Use the Press?

The press often construct a “frame” of significant social health problems and their solutions and therefore influence public conversations and perceptions. Typically, the focus is on problems and extreme behaviors and misperceptions of true norms are then reinforced.

The strategy of this guide places the emphasis on reshaping the frame of the debate, i.e., changing the very context in which the issue is discussed. For example, social norms practitioners of college drinking projects would strive to replace traditional themes found in news coverage with more accurate ones. The “everybody’s doing it” and “students are out of control” themes would shift to the more positive and accurate themes highlighting the majority norms of healthy behavior.

The goal, in this example, is to change the way college drinking is framed by the press. To be successful, this change requires that social norms practitioners be able to make their points cogently and directly. This guide seeks to translate the theoretical precepts into easy-to-use examples and advice. In doing so, it allows practitioners to more efficiently educate the press and the public about social norms projects.

The **Main Frame** guide builds on the existing techniques used to create news. It incorporates the principles of social norms into the practical realities of generating coverage and working with the press.

Relevant references: 19, 28, 51, 72