



MERCY FOR
ANIMALS

***Social norms: What they are and
how they help and hinder farmed
animal advocacy***

Nicolas Delon, Zoe Griffiths, Courtney Dillard

1. Social norms 101

Definition and functions

While many people believe their thoughts and desires rule their behavior, in reality, people often act according to what they believe society approves of and expects of them. That is, they act as social creatures who follow the “rules” of society in order to avoid punishment and reap rewards.

Given this, it is no surprise that people often prefer to behave like others in their reference network: their peers, neighbors, and fellow community members. Learning how much energy or fast food members of one’s network consume or how often they exercise can lead to adjustments in one’s own behavior.

In social psychology, these unspoken “ways of doing things” are called **social norms**.

A social norm is a rule of behavior that individuals in a particular group prefer to conform to. Their preference depends on two kinds of social expectations: (a) that most people in their reference network conform to it (**empirical expectation**) and (b) that most of them believe they ought to conform to it (**normative expectation**).¹ The self-maintaining structure of norms explains their persistence but also their potential for change. Norms can become obsolete when preferences to follow them weaken.

Not all norms operate through explicit communication. Choice architecture or “organizing the context in which people make decisions”² can also influence behavior. Behavioral economics has emphasized the pervasive biases and subconscious processes influencing us. Subtle changes or nudges as simple as manipulating the “default” choice in cafeterias, personal savings and retirement plans, or organ donation shape behavior like norms.³

Types

The first distinction to draw is between **descriptive** and **injunctive** norms. Descriptive norms tell us what’s commonly the case—what most people do. Injunctive norms tell us what to do—what most people think we should do. Opinions and practices regarding these norms can vary. Perhaps most of our neighbors think we should recycle but fall short, or perhaps people think the ideal weekly alcohol intake should be lower than it is.

The next distinction is between **static** and **dynamic** norms. Static norms tell us which social norms are

currently in place, like a snapshot of current preferences and behavior. Dynamic norms tell us how norms are changing, how, say, meat consumption has recently decreased in a certain place or how normative expectations regarding meat consumption are shifting.

These types intersect. Both descriptive and injunctive norms can be expressed as static or dynamic. For animal advocates, dynamic injunctive norms are essential, as they signal ongoing change, whereas static descriptive norms could make change seem impossible. A [report](#) from Faunalytics provides a helpful fact sheet for using dynamic norms effectively.⁴

Power

Social norms shape behavior, encouraging people to act as others do. Our urge to comply with social norms leads us to adopt behaviors ranging from toxic to admirable. By using the preference for conformity and need for social proof, we can redirect behavior by signaling or adjusting norms.⁵ Recognizing the power of norms, social change advocates have successfully used informational campaigns⁶ to communicate acceptable behavior. Below, we highlight how advocates can leverage the power of social norms for farmed animal protection.

2. Norms—linking the individual to the collective

It is crucial to understand that social change does not involve simply a collection of disparate changes in individual attitudes and behavior. Rather, it requires change at the collective level. To understand how change happens, we can look at the mechanisms that trigger norm activation and how they are influenced.

We can begin with a general understanding of the shared cognitive processes that support social norms: **schemata** and **scripts**. Schemata are cognitive templates that we use to make sense of the world around us. They help us extract the most information from a social situation as easily as possible, and they set our expectations for future social contexts. Scripts are like narratives. In a given situation, such as being at a restaurant, we expect things to unfold according to a certain script—being seated, reading the menu, ordering, using the silverware, and so on. Schemata and scripts are “activated” in many typical situations.⁷

3. Why norms matter for animal advocacy

Social norms are a promising but neglected lever in animal advocacy. Many studies in recent years describe the effect of appeals to different kinds of norms on consumer behavior, including eating meat. Social norms are both problems and solutions for animal advocates: They act as a drag on social change but provide leverage for effective interventions.

Existing social norms that make change difficult for animal advocates

Farmed animal advocates may see current social norms as extremely daunting obstacles. These norms appear to reinforce the consumption of animal products everywhere we look. Indeed, eating meat is not only common but widely accepted as “normal.” Studies on the “four Ns” of eating meat (natural, normal, necessary, and nice) explore this idea.⁸

Many people use the four Ns to justify eating meat—an instance of “motivated reasoning.” Omnivores endorse the four Ns more than restricted omnivores (flexitarians) and vegetarians. The four Ns also correlate with demoralization (i.e., denying that animals can think or feel), meat consumption, and lower consumer guilt. While “normal” is, strictly speaking, only one of the four Ns, the other three can be seen as its evaluative counterpart, providing rationale for the statistical element of normalization.

Existing social norms that may help animal advocates

While cruel farming practices themselves are normalized economically and legally,⁹ most people’s attitudes and behaviors are in line with Western cultural norms that people should not be cruel to animals.¹⁰ This can be seen starting very early in life, with children overwhelmingly exhibiting high levels of compassion for animals—some even placing more value on animals’ lives than on humans’.¹¹ And while this high level of compassion for and empathy with animals may not be as readily observed in older populations,¹² being kind (as opposed to cruel) to animals is undeniably the prevailing norm in the West. In a recent survey of 1,000 Americans, 78 percent expressed concern over the welfare of animals raised for food.¹³ There are clear opportunities to create cognitive dissonance or psychological discomfort for

people by consistently and creatively juxtaposing the contrasting norms of treating animals compassionately and eating animals or animal products.¹⁴

The perception of animals as food routinely activates widely shared schemata and scripts—some holidays call for barbecues or for certain animals to serve as centerpieces on the table; some practices (e.g., not eating meat) are perceived to be at odds with certain identities (e.g., manliness); strenuous physical activity requires more protein intake, which to many means dairy and meat; and so on. At the same time, schemata can be challenged. Consider the successful 2018 documentary *The Game Changers* on plant-based athletes. Eating meat is central to norm psychology, but since these norms depend on ideas and narratives that are partly up to us, change is possible. We can change social expectations.

4. Social norms around meat eating in relation to other important aspects of social psychology

Social norms are part of the decision-making process for our thoughts and actions, and as such, they operate in connection with other psychological phenomena.

Pluralistic ignorance is when members of a reference network (norm followers) falsely believe that most of their fellow members approve or disapprove of a behavior. Because most of us prefer to follow the norm, we reproduce the norm even if most of us believe it is undesirable. For instance, the phenomenon is well documented with alcohol consumption on American college campuses; students drink more than they would like because they (falsely) think most students prefer drinking more.¹⁵

Pluralistic ignorance can result in the overestimation of undesired problematic behavior or the underestimation of desired behavior. Consumers may also perceive themselves as behaving more desirably than others and perceive others as unlikely to change their behavior.¹⁶ Eating meat from animals living in conditions [most people do not approve of](#) could likely be a strong example of this.

Current meat-eating norms may also partly depend on a misperception of dynamic injunctive norms. Many people may be ready to change but fear being perceived as outliers and underestimate how many people are like them. **Preference falsification** happens when people do not express their true preferences

or values when knowing what people really think is difficult. Social norms can thus publicly persist despite widespread private disapproval. But once people start protesting norms, rapid change becomes possible, as we saw when the #MeToo movement unfolded.¹⁷

A more elusive issue is the so-called **attitude-behavior gap**, which shows that people's self-reported values, opinions, and intentions, such as in surveys, are a poor predictor of actual behavior. Social norms partly explain this. People's preference for "social proof" (i.e., acting in ways that others would approve) overrides their personal attitudes.¹⁸ This also suggests that simply informing people about farming practices to change attitudes is insufficient; we also need to alter their social setting and motivate them by highlighting norms that influence behavior.

At the same time, we must be mindful of the **motivated reasoning** and **cognitive dissonance** affecting consumers: the rationalizations they offer ("it's natural," "it's normal") and compartmentalization they implement ("they're meat," "it's their purpose") to keep eating meat. People are predisposed to seeing eating meat as justified because it has been normalized in our society, which in turn leads to "dementing" farmed animals (seeing them as less intelligent or sentient than they are).¹⁹

Our susceptibility to **peer pressure** is also important to understand. Economist Robert H. Frank reminds us that peer pressure primarily determines one's likelihood of becoming a longtime smoker.²⁰ Social scientists also talk of pressure toward **conformity**, which can explain the persistence of social norms despite changes in individual attitudes. The "Asch paradigm," after Solomon Asch, describes the effect of majority behavior on individuals. This applies to veg*ns. In most of the world, the combination of minority status and the associated stigma explain resistance to change.²¹ Conformity pressures also highlight the role of exemplars (e.g., trendsetters, celebrities, thought leaders) and institutions (e.g., popular media) in modeling the acceptability of deviations from the norm. Vegan influencers can be critical in modeling the possibility of alternative norms.²²

Finally, **identity and culture** play a role because personal norms embedded in moral, cultural, or religious norms can make individuals *less* sensitive to social norms. Evidence suggests that this is true of meat eating.²³ But identity and culture can also provide leverage for change. By acting on the relevant scripts and schemata, moral reflection and cultural change can accompany subtle shifts toward new

norms. Dietary practices have moral, aesthetic, religious, and cultural meaning; they involve emotions, rituals, commitments, and values that are not subject simply to reasoning and can be central to identities.

5. Relevant research on changing social norms—messaging (experiments and case studies)

Animal advocates shouldn't see changing current social norms as a lost cause. Norms can and do change over time. Fifty years ago, many of us would never have conceived of a world where same-sex marriage and nonbinary gender identity were (generally) accepted as normal. Today, this is exactly the world many of us live in. Alternative practices become normalized; older ones are jettisoned. We can escape the "normalization trap."²⁴

Over the past few decades, social norm research has shed light on the influence of social norms on various aspects of our lives. Most of the available evidence concerns energy consumption and saving,²⁵ alcohol,²⁶ smoking,²⁷ and non-meat-related aspects of diet.²⁸ Time and again, researchers have found that how others act has a disproportionate impact on an individual's behavior. In particular, evidence suggests that messaging about descriptive norms can influence energy usage, recycling, alcohol intake, smoking, and healthy or sustainable dietary habits. There is comparatively little but growing data on the consumption of meat and other animal products. Recent research offers fine-grain insights into subtle uses of norms that may help animal advocates.

Messaging social norms explicitly and implicitly to individuals

- Some studies indicate that subjects conform more to information about what other people do not do (i.e., the "don't norm") than information about what they do (i.e., the "do norm"). Moreover, don't norms more strongly influence environmental choices regarding energy efficiency and sustainable food consumption.²⁹
- Dynamic norms (versus static norms) have their own influence on intentions and behavior. People do not just care what they think others think they should do; they also care how behavior is changing over time.³⁰ Dynamic norm messaging could mitigate the risks associated with deviating from prevailing norms and support the role of trendsetters and

norm entrepreneurs.³¹ There is encouraging data along these lines concerning meat.³²

- Personal norms, including moral beliefs, have a strong impact on decision-making. Appeals to dynamic majority norms work best with people whose personal norms are weaker.³³ As noted, identity and culture interact with social norms. Talk of meat and alternatives should be sensitive to cultural dimensions of practices that could be central to people's identities (e.g., meat eater versus animal lover).
- There is power in nudging. Social settings carry default rules for food choices. Interventions in "micro environments"³⁴ where people eat or buy groceries can prompt subtle shifts in norms, such as by making meat an optional extra on a menu³⁵ or increasing availability of alternatives.³⁶ Because default rules establish a reference point for people's decisions, they must be chosen wisely. While more research is needed to understand just how effective these interventions may be,³⁷ even if the efficacy of nudging is relatively low, it is a low-cost intervention that could easily be scaled up.
- Appeals to descriptive norms can backfire³⁸ through the so-called boomerang effect. Reminding people of the high frequency of undesirable behavior, such as smoking or littering, often reduces the likelihood that they will alter their behavior. According to the focus theory of normative conduct,³⁹ effective messaging emphasizes what is actually approved or disapproved rather than the regrettable frequency of a behavior. Overloading people with information may also be counterproductive. Normative messaging can cause information overload and reduce motivation for change.⁴⁰

Communicating social norms via institutional change

- Smoking⁴¹ provides an interesting case study. During the late 20th century, the view of cigarette smoking moved from a matter of personal preference to an object of danger and disgust.⁴² When it became widely known that smoking could harm not just oneself but others through secondhand smoke, including children, regulation became acceptable. Various regulations (taxation, labeling, advertising, prohibitions on sales to

minors, OSHA and Federal Aviation Act restrictions) and major lawsuits also shifted public attitudes. A recent study on the fight over smoking presents useful parallels to animal advocacy.⁴³

- Laws change norms by altering the view or understanding of certain practices irrespective of formal sanctions.⁴⁴ But norm change is also required to support legal change.⁴⁵ The law's ability to successfully regulate risky and harmful activities can depend on their perceived moral characteristics. In the United States, such activities are often framed in terms of personal choice, immune to government regulation (e.g., vaccinations, guns, smoking).
- Public and private institutions can also influence norms by making desirable behaviors like recycling more convenient and undesirable behaviors like smoking less convenient. Accordingly, offering more plant-based options in stores and cafeterias can boost consumption of plant-based food. Changes that are initially solely behavioral accrue new meaning as they become customary—when recycling becomes a habit, it is also viewed positively. Changes in the prevalence of a behavior can contribute to changes in its social meaning; a behavior becomes an act of cooperation expected by others.

6. Specific recommendations for animal advocates

- *Create campaigns that creatively contrast the social norm of compassion toward animals with eating meat.*
 - One of the strongest assets we have is the existing norm in Western culture that people should not be cruel to animals. Campaigns that juxtapose this value and current practices of industrial animal agriculture may be very effective, especially when paired with recommendations for attractive alternatives.
- *Find ways to signal positive norms around veganism in a wide variety of public spaces, and tailor the choice of influencer to the audience.*
 - Expanding efforts on public awareness campaigns while seeking ways to positively feature vegans and veganism in all areas of public life may very well pay dividends down the road. In a similar vein, animal advocacy organizations and others concerned about animal agriculture's impact on the environment and public health should

cultivate relationships with vegan influencers and work to feature specific influencers in messaging for particular audiences (e.g., politicians, celebrities, Fortune 500 companies, public intellectuals, writers, journalists).

- *Adopt strategies similar to those of other effective movements for social change.*
 - As with anti-smoking efforts, forms of social reprobation may be key to reducing meat consumption. Peer pressure and the effects of secondhand smoking help to reframe a strictly private choice as one that affects others. The negative impacts of industrial animal agriculture on the environment, public health, and animal welfare should feature prominently in the revised social meaning of meat, following the playbook of the regulation and moralization of smoking.
- *Focus on younger audiences who have had less exposure to meat-eating norms and display higher levels of compassion toward animals.*
 - Children display less speciesism and more concern for animals and are less likely to approve of eating animal products.⁴⁶ Having been less exposed to norms, children are more malleable than adults. They are also very attuned to elders, teachers, and other role models from whom they pick up on community norms. Children can become influential nodes in networks. By exposing them to a broader set of possibilities, we can gradually shift norms from one generation to the next.

Recommendations for individual animal advocates

- *Know and use your position in your “reference network.”*
 - [Research](#) suggests that people are often more open to the idea of a vegan diet and trying vegan food if someone they know and like suggests it. Take the time to think about who in your social circle may be veg-curious, and share restaurant suggestions, recipes, and other helpful information with them.
- *Let others know about your dietary choices.*
 - It’s important that other people, from wait staff to friends and family, know that you are vegan because the more vegans “appear” in society,

the more normal a vegan diet will seem. Think of ways to share your dietary choices with those around you in a positive way that creates curiosity rather than defensiveness. And be sure to ask for vegan options wherever food is provided to signal demand for these products.

- *Frame your diet as part of an emerging new norm rather than one that breaks with current norms.*
 - Instead of emphasizing originality and norm breaking, make the desired norm seem like a trending or dynamic norm that others can be part of. This approach can provoke interest, especially if people see other signs that confirm it, such as more vegan options on menus. Community support is essential. Find and rely on a community that can reinforce the norm.

Recommendations for researchers

- *Carefully operationalize and distinguish concepts of norms.*
 - As noted, different kinds of norms affect behavior differently. Further research into the effect of norms on consumer behavior would benefit from a comprehensive taxonomy of norms: static versus dynamic norms, descriptive versus injunctive norms, and social versus moral norms.
- *Study the respective effects of different norms.*
 - Norms differ not just in kind but in content. We need to understand how to change meat-related norms. Can we “moralize” meat like smoking? What effect does highlighting disapproval of farming practices have on consumption? We also need to understand the effect of positive norms on views or consumption of plant-based and cultured products. How can we normalize alternatives and increase their social acceptability?
- *Study the strategies and message frames of successful recent social movements and institutional efforts.*
 - Recent movements provide opportunities to study social change from a comparative perspective (e.g., marriage equality, #MeToo). Ongoing institutional efforts (e.g., vegetarian school meals in New York City and outreach) would benefit from academic study of their effectiveness and potential to be emulated by other municipalities or scaled up.

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