



Social Norms

Materials:

- Worksheet

Brainstorm: How do you think we know how we are expected to behave in social situations? How do we learn these “rules”? What are some examples of these kinds of rules?

Discuss: Social norms are really what we’re talking about here. Social norms are defined as “rules and standards that are understood by members of a group, and that guide or constrain social behavior without the force of law (Cialdini and Trost, 1998, p. 152) Social norms let us know what is expected of us - what we should or should not do in social situations. There are significant reasons as to why we try to conform to these norms.

Dive in! Neurobiology can help us understand why we try to conform to social norms and it has to do with relationships. There are two elements of a relationship that are important - how we behave and the expectations that others have of our behavior. Let’s recall some brain information. The brain creates a mental map that helps us navigate our social world and then uses this map to make predictions. The brain makes predictions because that is the most metabolically efficient way. When the brain’s predictions are correct, it is less costly. When there are errors, it is more metabolically costly, but then learning can occur. This learning improves predictions for next time. As we improve our predictions, we are more likely to guess how people will respond when we act in the way that they expect or what might happen if we don’t. For example, when you are young and you break a rule at home, you might be surprised that you get into trouble. However, as a teenager, if you break curfew, you probably won’t be surprised to find yourself grounded and your parents upset. Learning about social norms helps us to predict how we are supposed to behave and what will happen if we do or if we don’t. There are two types of norms that we should consider: injunctive norms and descriptive norms. Injunctive norms are what we’d guess our peers think is cool and descriptive norms are what our peers actually do. Sometimes what we think our peers think is cool, isn’t what they actually do and this misperception might cause us to engage in behaviors to “fit in” when, in fact, if we actually asked what our friends thought, we might be really surprised!



High School

Activity: Hand out the worksheet but do not have students put their names on the worksheet. Have students decide if the statement is true or false for the general population and then for themselves, personally. Once the class has completed the quiz, gather the worksheets and go over the results to see if their perceptions of acceptable behavior is actually true.

Reflect: How have I been fooled by what I thought was a social norm? How has it changed my thinking or behavior for the better or worse? How can I gather more information to make a better decision about what I think is socially acceptable? How would I benefit from that information?

Extend and Enrich

Norms and how they influence us.

<https://youtu.be/uME3JOM3W4k>

Professional Development: How have I been fooled by what I thought was a social norm? How has it changed my thinking or behavior for the better or worse? How can I gather more information to make a better decision about what I think is socially acceptable? How would I benefit from that information?