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The Social-Norm Espousal Scale

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ABSTRACT

Social norms play an important role in a variety of important cognitive and behavioral processes. Although individuals differ in terms of the extent to which they believe in and value social norms, no research to date has identified a measure with which to assess such dispositional variability. The current research assessed the reliability and validity of the Social-Norm Espousal Scale (SNES). A total of six studies utilized 752 participants recruited from a college campus, from an Internet data-collection site, and from an interurban train station. Collectively, results demonstrate that the measure is internally reliable, predicts self-reported behavior, predicts impression formation, and correlates significantly yet modestly with a variety of conceptually related constructs. The SNES thus appears to be a reliable and valid tool with which to assess individual differences in the extent to which people believe in and value social norms.

1. Introduction

> "[People] incorporate in themselves a set of norms or standards from their social surroundings. Whether they wish to or not, whether they are conscious of the fact or not, makes no difference. The norms or standards vary from society to society. Everyone, therefore, is community-centric to some extent." (Sherif, 1936; p. 25).

1.1. Social Norms

In *The Psychology of Social Norms*, Sherif (1936) argued that an understanding of social norms is critical to predict human behavior. In support of this thesis, he presented a series of now-famous studies utilizing the autokinetic effect. In these studies, participants were placed in a darkened room in which a single point of light was presented. Although the point of light was stationary, the absence of any other visual stimuli made the point of light appear to move erratically and unpredictably. When participants were asked to judge the extent to which the point of light moved without knowing others' guesses, they typically provided discrepant responses. However, when participants were able to hear other participants' responses, the groups' guesses tended to converge as trials continued. That is, when a normative response was established by a group, the participants in that group tended to conform to that norm, providing responses that were consistent with that newly created social norm. Although contemporary social psychologists tend to consider this work as demonstrating informational conformity, Sherif conducted the studies in attempts to demonstrate how perceived social norms can impact subsequent judgments.

Of course, a great deal of research on social norms continues in more-contemporary social psychology. Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren (1990), for example, explored the extent to which social norms – and the salience thereof – impact behaviors. One study took place in a parking garage. Participants, unaware that they were being observed, returned to their cars to find an advertising flyer placed under their car windshield wipers; researchers unobtrusively noted whether the participants littered (i.e., threw the flyer on the floor) or not. Cialdini et al. (1990) found that participants were more likely to litter when the parking-garage floor was already littered. That is, when the apparent social norm was to litter (i.e., the garage was covered with trash), participants were more likely to conform to that apparent social norm by throwing their trash on the floor. When the apparent social norm was not to litter (i.e., the garage floor was nearly spotless), participants were more likely to conform to *that* apparent social norm by refraining from littering. This difference was magnified when the norm was made more salient when a confederate littered as the participants first entered the garage floor.

Adherence to perceived social norms can explain behaviors more harmful than littering. Bohner, Siebler, and Schmelcher (2006), for example, investigated how such social norms impacted men's "proclivity" to engage in rape. False information was used to manipulate perceived social norms regarding rape-myth acceptance (e.g., rape can be the victim's fault; rape is not such a terrible offense): whereas some participants were led to believe that their peers held a high degree of rape-myth acceptance, others were led

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to believe that their peers held a low degree of rape-myth acceptance. Rape proclivity was subsequently assessed by asking participants to indicate the likelihood that they would behave in a manner described in a series of vignettes in which a man forces himself upon a woman. Results indicated that participants followed the perceived social norms: participants led to believe that rape-myth acceptance was a well-held belief among their peers showed a higher degree of rape proclivity.

1.2. An individual difference?

Classic and contemporary research make it clear, then, that social norms play an important role in many aspects of our lives. The research also suggests, however, that people differ in the extent to which they follow these social norms. For example, not all of Sherif's (1936) participants followed the apparent social norm by adjusting their light-point estimates to the same degree. Not all of Cialdini et al.'s (1990) participants conformed to the apparent social norm by throwing the advertisements on the floor (or refraining from doing so) as a function of condition. And not all of Bohner et al.'s (2006) participants were equally impacted by the perceived degree of rape-myth acceptance prevalent among their peers.

Many processes may be at work in yielding this apparent variability in the extent to which participants followed the respective social norms. It would seem that an underlying individual difference in the extent to which people value social norms might be one such process. Given that psychologists have devoted much work to understanding social norms, it is somewhat surprising, therefore, that to date no researchers have attempted to create a broad individual-difference measure with which to assess such tendencies.

To be sure, related individual-difference measures do exist. For example, there exist a variety of measures designed to assess extreme tendencies to ignore social norms such as the Psychopathic Personality Inventory (Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005) and the Levensen Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (Levensen, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995). The Psychological Inventory of Criminal Thinking Styles (Walters, 1995) is designed to assess antisocial tendencies among criminals. And the Personality Assessment Inventory (Morey, 2007) contains subscales assessing antisocial features. However, these constructs are designed to assess the extreme negative (antisocial) pole of a continuum upon which a general tendency to value and follow social norms exists. None of these assessment tools can be used to test where individuals fall on a broader continuum on general tendencies to value social norms.

The current research was designed to fill this void. We created the Social-Norm Espousal Scale (SNES) as an individual-difference measure with which to assess the extent to which people perceive that following social norms is important and valuable. Whereas some people feel that following social norms is an important part of their lives and of society in general, others tend to eschew such norms, perceiving that such social rules are unimportant and unnecessary to concern themselves with. Below, we describe the process through which we developed the scale, as well as a series of studies designed to test the reliability and validity of the measure.

2. Pilot research

Over the course of six pilot studies, 594 individuals from the United States participated via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk; see Burhmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011) for payment of between US$0.10 and US$0.25. MTurk is an online service through which volunteers can complete tasks for payment; in recent years, much social-science research has been conducted using this service. We began by composing a series of 50 items that would assess the overall concept of social-norm espousal. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which the items were characteristic of them using a five-point scale anchored with 1 = *extremely uncharacteristic* to 5 = *extremely characteristic*. Using an iterative process, we removed items with low standard deviations, means far from the midpoints, or low correlations with other items. As shown in the Appendix, a series of 14 items emerged, 9 positively coded and 5 reverse coded.

3. Primary research

3.1. Study 1: reliability

Given that the initial pilot studies were collected exclusively via MTurk, an initial goal was to assess whether the scale's internal reliability would replicate using a different sample. To test this, 116 participants (53% female; M_{age} = 43.73, SD = 17.27) waiting at a train station in upstate New York, USA, completed the 14-item measure without compensation. Analysis indicated that the scale reliability in the new sample was indeed strong (α = .84).

3.2. Study 2: validity I

Having demonstrated that the scale manifests sufficient internal reliability, the next goal was to assess whether the scale would predict meaningful cognitive processes. We expected that people who espouse social norms would be more likely to self-report engaging in behaviors consistent with social norms than would people who do not espouse social norms. To test this hypothesis, 102 participants (40% female, M_{age} = 30.46, SD = 11.24) recruited via MTurk first reported the frequency with which they engaged in ten behaviors (α = .69) consistent with social norms (holding the door for others, sending thank-you notes, volunteering, offering a seat to someone else, disposing of litter, expediting a meal when in a busy restaurant, giving up a spot in line at the grocery to someone with few items, bringing food or drink when invited to dinner, ending phone calls before interacting with others, and returning shopping carts). Response options ranged from 1 = *almost never* through 5 = *almost always*. The SNES again manifested acceptable internal reliability (α = .91) and was positively associated with participants' composite behavioral-intention scores (r = .25, p = .01).

3.3. Study 3: validity II

Study 3 was designed to further demonstrate the validity of the SNES by assessing how individuals form impressions about others who violate or follow social norms. We predicted a negative correlation between SNE scores and attitudes toward those who violate social norms: norm violators should be particularly derogated by those who espouse social norms. We hypothesized either a positive association between SNE scores and attitudes toward those who follow social norms (those who follow norms might be especially admired among norm espousers) or no such association (individuals might think positively of those who follow social norms regardless of whether they themselves espouse such norms).

To test these hypotheses, 183 participants recruited from MTurk completed the SNES. After answering several unrelated questions, they were presented with five narratives. These short passages, as presented and pretested by Knutson et al. (2010), are first-person narratives in which an author describes engaging in a behavior inconsistent with social norms (e.g., divulging a secret; making an obscene gesture to a motorist) or consistent with

social norms (e.g., being honest on a job application; befriending a homeless person). Knutson et al. (2010) scored these passages in terms of the extent to which they violated social norms; we selected passages that were rated as moderately high or moderately low in norm violation. For each passage, participants were asked to indicate their opinion of the author from 1 = *very negative* through 5 = *very positive*. We then calculated, for each participant, two scores, one representing mean attitude toward the authors who engaged in behaviors rated as violating social norms ($\alpha = .66$), and one representing mean attitude toward the authors who engaged in behaviors rated as consistent with social norms ($\alpha = .66$). As expected, norm followers were perceived more positively ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.55$) than were norm violators ($M = 1.92$, $SD = .56$; $t(182) = 32.14$, $p < .001$) across the full sample. More importantly, SNE scores were negatively and significantly correlated with attitudes toward the authors who violated social norms ($r = -.18$, $p = .02$); there was no association between SNES and attitudes toward pro-norm authors ($r = .01$, *ns*).

3.4. Study 4: test–retest reliability

If the SNES is assessing the extent to which a person espouses social norms as an individual difference, the scale should manifest strong test–retest reliability. To test this, undergraduate students participated in a two-session study in exchange for a chance to win a US$10 gift card. Participants completed the SNES during the second and tenth weeks of a 10-week academic term. Of the 59 participants who participated during week 2, 17 did not participate at week 10, yielding a final total of 42 participants. Internal reliability of the SNES was acceptable at Time 1 ($\alpha = .71$) and at Time 2 ($\alpha = .73$). In addition, scores at Time 1 and Time 2 were highly correlated, $r = .73$, $p < .001$.

3.5. Study 5: convergent validity I

Although there currently exists no measure of the extent to which individuals espouse norms broadly, there does exist a measure of the extent to which individuals espouse the norm of reciprocity in particular. The Personal Norm of Reciprocity measure (PNR; Perugini, Gallucci, Presaghi, & Ercolani, 2003) consists of 27 items. Although the PNR was designed to assess espousal of the norm of reciprocity generally, Perugini et al. (2003) divided the broad measure into several subscales. The *beliefs* subscale assesses participants' cognitions about the norm of reciprocity broadly (e.g., "When I compliment someone, I expect that he or she will reciprocate"). The *positive behavior* subscale assesses how participants believe they reciprocate prosocial behaviors (e.g., "I go out of my way to help somebody who has been kind to me"), while the *negative behavior* subscale assesses how participants believe they reciprocate antisocial behaviors (e.g., "If somebody is impolite to me, I become impolite"). We hypothesized that the SNES would correlate positively with the full PNR measure, and with the beliefs and positive-behavior subscales. We developed two competing hypotheses regarding the negative-behavior subscale. One might argue that because reciprocity is an important social norm, reciprocity involving any behaviors – prosocial or antisocial – might be positively associated with general social-norm espousal. One might therefore predict a positive correlation between the SNES and this subscale. On the other hand, antisocial behavior goes against social norms generally, so people high in SNE might be less likely to report reciprocating antisocial behavior. One might therefore predict a negative association between SNES and this subscale.

To test these hypotheses, 187 participants (48% female, $M_{age} = 33.05$, $SD = 11.64$) recruited via MTurk first completed the PNR scale (Perugini et al., 2003; $\alpha = .81$) and then the SNES ($\alpha = .77$). SNE scores were correlated with overall PNR scores ($r = .18$, $p = .01$), with the beliefs subscale ($r = .35$, $p < .001$), and with the positive-behavior subscale ($r = .22$, $p = .003$). There was no statistically significant association between SNE scores and the negative-behavior subscale ($r = -.10$, $p = .17$).

3.6. Study 6: convergent validity II

Study 5 demonstrated that the SNES was significantly but modestly associated with dispositional espousal of the norm of reciprocity. Study 6 was designed to further test convergent validity by assessing the extent to which the SNES correlates with four individual-difference measures assessing constructs conceptually related to the espousal of social norms: social responsibility, social desirability, agreeableness, and self monitoring.

Berkowitz and Lutterman (1968) described social responsibility as a person's "readiness to behave in a socially responsible manner" (p. 169). The measure includes 8 items, including "It is the duty of each person to do his job the very best he can" and "Every person should give some of his or her time for the good of his town or country." Crowne and Marlowe (1960) described social desirability as the likelihood that a person will engage in "a population of culturally acceptable and approved behaviors" (p. 354). The measure includes 33 items, including "I never hesitate to go out of my way to help someone in trouble" and "No matter who I'm talking to, I'm always a good listener." Agreeableness, one of the Big Five features of personality (e.g., Digman, 1990), indicates the extent to which a person manifests "altruism, nurturance, caring, and emotional support" (p. 422) toward others. The Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999) assesses agreeableness with nine items, including "I see myself as someone who is helpful and unselfish with others" and "I see myself as someone who has a forgiving nature." We hypothesized positive correlations between social-norm espousal and all three of these constructs.

Finally, self monitoring is described as the extent to which people engage in "self-control guided by situational cues to social appropriateness." (Snyder, 1974; p. 526). Snyder and Gangestad (1986) presented a condensed measure with 18 items including, "In different situations and with different people, I often act like very different persons," and "I may deceive people by being friendly when I really dislike them." We generated competing hypotheses regarding self monitoring. On one hand, to be high in self monitoring presumably requires that a person understands the social norms in any given situation. Consequently, one might hypothesize that people high in self-monitoring might also be high in social-norm espousal. Conversely, consistency and commitment to one's values and morals might be in and of itself a social norm (cf. Cialdini, Trost, & Newsom, 1995). For this reason, one might hypothesize that those high in self-monitoring might be low in social-norm espousal.

To test these hypotheses, 122 participants (41% female, $M_{age} = 34.51$, $SD = 12.90$) recruited via MTurk took part. Participants completed the SNES ($\alpha = .90$) and the five individual-difference measures. As shown in Table 1, social-norm espousal was positively correlated with social desirability ($\alpha = .81$, $r = .19$,

Table 1
Study 6: associations between individual differences.

	SNE	Soc. res.	Soc. des.	Agreeable.	Self mon.
Social-Norm Espousal	–	.20*	.19*	.22*	−.14
Social responsibility		–	.21*	.57**	−.12
Social desirability			–	.40**	−.28**
Agreeableness				–	−.19*

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

$p = .04$), social responsibility ($\alpha = .64$, $r = .20$, $p = .02$), and agreeableness ($\alpha = .87$, $r = .22$, $p = .02$). Social-norm espousal did not correlate with self monitoring ($\alpha = .79$, $r = -.14$, $p = .13$).

3.7. Composite analyses

Studies 1 through 6 individually assessed various aspects of the reliability and validity of the Social-Norm Espousal Scale. To further explore the measure, we combined all 752 observations from the six studies into a single data file (52.92% female; $M_{age} = 34.07$, $SD = 14.14$). As shown in Fig. 1, the distribution ($M = 41.51$, $SD = 9.54$) approached a normal curve (*skew* = −0.10, $SE = 0.89$; *kurtosis* = −0.09, $SE = 0.18$). Scores ranged from 15 to 70 on a possible scale from 14 to 70.

The internal reliability for the 14 SNES items was good ($\alpha = .87$). An exploratory factor analysis provided further evidence for the unidimensionality of the measure. As shown in Fig. 2 and the left column of Table 2, all 14 items positively loaded (all loadings >.40) on the first factor (Eigenvalue = 5.29; 37.81% of the variance). A much weaker second factor emerged (Eigenvalue = 1.91; an additional 13.67% of the variance). As shown in the right column of Table 2, Items 2, 3, 8, 12, and 13 loaded on this factor. Because these five items – and only these five items – are reverse coded, it appears that this second factor represents the coding scheme rather than an additional conceptual factor. A confirmatory factor analysis corroborated this structure, $\chi^2(72) = 244.38$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .06, GFI = .95.

SNE scores did not differ as a function of gender, $t(526.79) = 1.46$, $p = .14$, such that males ($M = 41.41$, $SD = 8.65$) and females ($M = 42.63$, $SD = 10.02$) demonstrated equivalent levels of social-norm espousal. There was, however, a correlation between age and SNE scores, $r = .23$, $p < .001$, such that older participants demonstrated higher SNE scores than did younger participants; further analysis indicated that this association did not differ as a function of study.

4. Discussion

Although social norms play a powerful role in many aspects of daily life, no research to date has developed an individual-difference measure with which to assess dispositional differences in the espousal of such social norms. In the current research, six studies employing a total of 752 participants indicate that the 14-item measure predicts self-reported behavior (Study 2), predicts impression formation (Study 3), is stable over time (Study 4), correlates significantly with a variety of similar individual differences but not so strongly as to suggest redundancy (Studies 5 and 6), and manifests strong internal reliability (Studies 1 through 6). Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses demonstrated that a single underlying factor accounts for all 14 items.

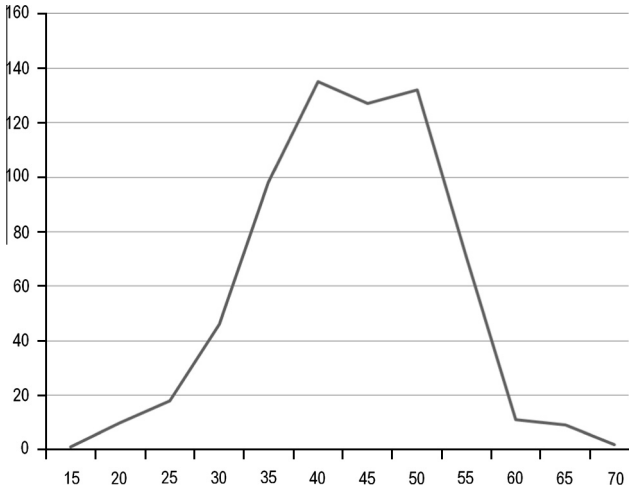

Fig. 1. Composite analysis: histogram.

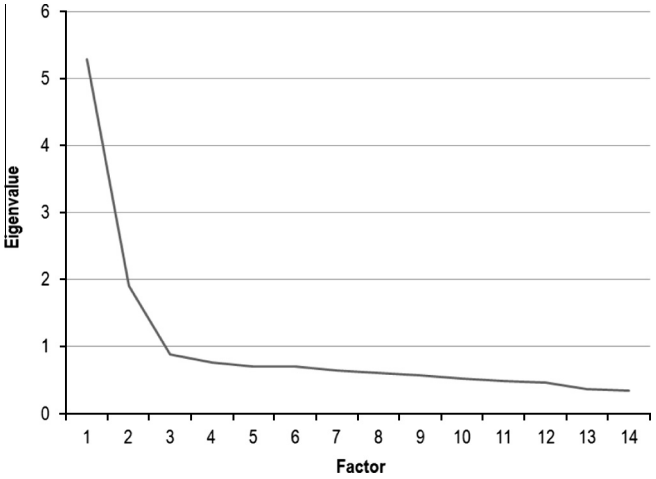

Fig. 2. Composite analysis: exploratory factor analysis scree plot.

Table 2
Composite analysis: factor loadings.

	Factor I	Factor II
Item 1	.61	−.12
Item 2	.41	.51
Item 3	.41	.53
Item 4	.58	−.27
Item 5	.79	−.15
Item 6	.67	−.29
Item 7	.66	−.22
Item 8	.44	.55
Item 9	.70	−.21
Item 10	.72	−.23
Item 11	.67	−.16
Item 12	.55	.53
Item 13	.44	.61
Item 14	.77	−.18

4.1. Applications and directions for future research

Given that social norms are thought to play an important role in a wide range of human behavior, the SNES may prove useful for a variety of scholars. Perhaps most obviously, researchers exploring processes thought to rely on social norms might utilize SNE scores as a moderator or covariate. Consider conformity: might high-SNE participants be especially likely to conform to fellow participants in replications of Sherif's (1936) autokinetic studies? Might high-SNE participants be especially likely to conform to the apparent norm in a replication of Cialdini et al.'s (1990) parking-garage study? More broadly, scholars exploring conformity, morality, and patriotism, for example, might find the SNES useful. That is, appeals to social norms, to morality, or patriotism might impact a full sample of participants weakly or moderately, but such an appeal might be particularly impactful among high-SNE participants.

An important practical application would be to assess whether the SNES can predict actual behavior. Although Study 2 assessed behavioral self-reports, the current set of studies present no research demonstrating the association between SNE scores and any objectively measured behaviors. Although self reports of behavior and objective measures of behavior are often strongly

correlated (e.g., Yeager & Krosnick, 2010), a finding that SNE can predict behavior would underscore the measure's utility.

Another possible practical implication deals with marketing interventions relying on social norms. At many college campuses, for example, campaigns invoke social norms in attempts to reduce maladaptive behaviors such as alcohol abuse and unsafe sexual practices. Research has shown that such campaigns can be effective (e.g., Lewis & Neighbors, 2006; Turner, Perkins, & Bauerle, 2008), though of course not universally so. If practitioners knew which samples of their populations espoused social norms, they might be able to direct scarce resources more effectively. The SNES, then, might be a helpful tool in identifying which people or groups of people might be particularly influenced by social-norm marketing campaigns.

Although the SNES was designed to assess espousal of social norms broadly (and reliability and factor analyses underscore its unidimensionality), Cialdini and colleagues (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1990; Jacobson, Mortensen, & Cialdini, 2011) have argued that people may engage in a manner consistent with social norms for either descriptive or injunctive reasons. Whereas people follow descriptive norms due to their perceived prevalence, people follow injunctive norms in an attempt to gain social approval or avoid social disapproval. Future research may assess the interplay between people's dispositional espousal of social norms broadly as assessed by the SNES and these two differing normative pressures.

A final potential line of future work comes from Sherif himself. In *The Psychology of Social Norms*, Sherif argued that "the profoundest individual differences between [people] of any one age may arise in whole or in part from varying responses to prevailing norms" (Sherif, 1936; p. 65). In fact, Sherif went on to argue that introversion, for example, may be "the product of well-established norms, rather than a biologically inherited incurable introvert type" (p. 65). Today's researchers would likely reject the notion that individual differences in responses to social norms – or espousal of social norms as described herein – are the proximal cause of fundamental dispositional variables such as introversion. However, future research might explore the extent to which social-norm espousal explains variance in other individual-difference constructs.

4.2. Conclusion

Muzafer Sherif argued that all members of society follow social norms to "some extent." (Sherif, 1936; p. 25). It is perhaps somewhat surprising that no research to date has assessed whether the extent to which people follow such social norms constitutes an individual difference. The current research demonstrates that the Social-Norm Espousal Scale serves in this capacity. The measure, therefore, may prove useful to researchers exploring behavioral and cognitive processes thought to be associated with social norms.

Appendix

Please rate the extent to which these items are characteristic of you or what you believe. For each, please use the following scale:

1 = Extremely uncharacteristic
2 = Somewhat uncharacteristic
3 = Uncertain
4 = Somewhat characteristic
5 = Extremely characteristic

1. I go out of my way to follow social norms.
2. We shouldn't always have to follow a set of social rules.
3. People should always be able to behave as they wish rather than trying to fit the norm.
4. There is a correct way to behave in every situation.
5. If more people followed society's rules, the world would be a better place.
6. People need to follow life's unwritten rules every bit as strictly as they follow the written rules.
7. There are lots of vital customs that people should follow as members of society.
8. The standards that society expects us to meet are far too restrictive.
9. People who do what society expects of them lead happier lives.
10. Our society is built on unwritten rules that members need to follow.
11. I am at ease only when everyone around me is adhering to society's norms.
12. We would be happier if we didn't try to follow society's norms.
13. My idea of a perfect world would be one with few social expectations.
14. I always do my best to follow society's rules.

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