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4 Using Social Norms to Promote Positive Relations between Social Groups

Sohad Murrar and Markus Brauer

Social Norms Theory and Intergroup Attitudes

Social norms are customary behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs that are shared by a group (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). According to *Social Norms Theory*, people modify their attitudes and behaviors to align with perceived norms (Berkowitz, 2005). Making certain social norms salient has been used to influence people's attitudes and behaviors to produce pro-social change. Targeting social norms as a form of intervention consists of providing individuals with information about norms among their peers or other relevant references, which can influence their understanding of group norms, their place in the group, and the significance of the information to their own behaviors (Miller & Prentice, 2016).

Communications that make salient certain social norms are often called *social norms messages* and can highlight different aspects of a norm. The most frequently used social norms messages target descriptive and injunctive norms (Cialdini et al., 1990). Descriptive norms describe what is commonly done (e.g., "most people in your peer group engage in this behavior") while injunctive norms describe what is socially accepted (e.g., "your peer group would approve of you engaging in this behavior"). There is a growing body of work focused on the use of "dynamic norms", which describe a shift in others' behaviors over time (e.g., "more and more of your peers are engaging in this behavior") whereas static norms point to behaviors already in practice (e.g., "most of your peers engage in this behavior"; Sparkman & Walton, 2019; Sparkman et al., 2021). Dynamic norms messages are useful in contexts where the desired behavior is not commonly practiced, but where people's behaviors are beginning to change or have the potential to change.

Social norms messaging has been used to produce change that benefits society in numerous contexts. It has been deployed to address behaviors associated with climate change such as reducing residential energy and water use, increasing reuse of towels in hotels, and reducing meat consumption (Allcott & Rogers, 2014; Bernedo et al., 2014; Goldstein et al., 2008; Sparkman & Walton, 2017). Such messaging has also helped reduce the abuse of tobacco and alcohol among high school and college students (Jones et al., 2017;

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Perkins & Craig, 2006; Haines et al., 2003). Given these positive outcomes, researchers have started to examine the utility of social norms messaging for improving relations between social groups.

Social Norms Messaging as an Intergroup Intervention

Prentice and Paluck (2020) suggest that social norms interventions can improve intergroup relations because they target important processes associated with intergroup behaviors and affect perceived norms which may, subsequently, increase the effectiveness of existing interventions. They also propose that social norms interventions innovatively expand the reach of processes that are known to change behavior and link social norms research to various forms of collective action, which is essential for changing intergroup relations. Finally, by merely describing peer attitudes and behaviors, social norms messages emphasize autonomy and personal choice, which is more effective than presenting non-discriminatory attitudes and behaviors as moral or legal obligations to which people must comply (Legault et al., 2011).

Research points to a robust connection between social norms related to diversity and intergroup attitudes and behaviors. Normative beliefs in childhood about interracial friendships predict racial bias such that children who believe their peers and parents do not value interracial friendships show more anti-Black bias over time (Rizzo et al., 2022). Information about fellow ingroup members' positive ratings of African Americans can lead to more favorable attitudes about and helping behaviors toward African Americans (Sechrist & Milford, 2007). Knowledge of peers' endorsement of non-stereotypical views of African Americans leads to less stereotyping of African Americans (Stangor et al., 2001). Hearing a member of a peer group condemn racism can reduce the expression of racist opinions (Blanchard et al., 1994). Having well-connected students publicly speak out against bullying and conflict in school settings has been linked to fewer disciplinary reports of student conflict (Paluck et al., 2016). These findings demonstrate that diversity-related social norms have a strong impact on intergroup attitudes and behaviors.

To develop, implement, and evaluate social norms messages that effectively produce pro-social change, there are several critical steps to consider including: choosing meaningful outcomes, selecting specific audiences for the intervention, determining a reference group whose norms will be highlighted, describing the barriers that prevent change, and identifying the motivators likely to affect the target audience's attitudes and behaviors (Campbell & Brauer, 2020). Social norms interventions to improve intergroup relations might seek to reduce prejudiced feelings (e.g., hostility, fear, anxiety), biased beliefs about outgroups (e.g., stereotypes), or behaviors (e.g., discrimination, violence). They can also attempt to increase openness

to outgroups, desire to interact with outgroup members, warmth towards outgroups, or the belief that a particular outgroup is heterogeneous and has the capacity to change. The intervention's goal may be to promote the occurrence of inclusive behaviors such as getting people to befriend outgroup members and to engage in welcoming and respectful behaviors towards outgroup members.

Social norms interventions must be tailored toward a target audience (e.g., teachers, students, team leaders, team members, etc.) and reference the norms of specific groups or individuals (e.g., general peer group, popular or influential peers, group leaders, etc.). Finally, social norms interventions must identify the barriers and motivators affecting the target audience's attitudes and behaviors, given the context in which the intervention will occur. Some contexts may entail socially dominant and marginalized groups living together in places striving for social equality, while others may entail two or more social groups living separately amidst ongoing armed conflicts striving for peace. Each unique context presents a set of barriers and motivators that will impact how an audience processes the messaging in a social norms intervention.

Engineering Education Equality with Social Norms Interventions

In this section, we describe several social norms interventions used to improve the social climate and reduce the achievement gap in the context of a large public American university, the University of Wisconsin-Madison (Murrar et al., 2020; Brauer et al., 2021). One intervention was a professional-quality poster that conveyed the descriptive social norm that most students at the university value diversity and try to behave in inclusive ways (Figure 4.1). The poster included 24 images of students inside the outline of the state of Wisconsin. The bottom of the poster included a pair of statistics based on previously collected data. The statements read, "93% of students we approached agreed with the message on this poster" and "84% of those students agreed to have their picture put on this poster". In another intervention, we created a 5-minute video that depicted students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (mostly White students to accurately represent the student population at the university) expressing how much they value diversity and try to be inclusive. The video also included diversity specialists and scientists discussing anecdotal and empirical evidence for the idea that most students support the university's commitment to diversity and do not engage in discriminatory behavior, and that bigotry on campus was committed by a numerical minority of people whose values are at odds with the broader campus community. Finally, Brauer et al. (2021) developed a one-page document that was added to course syllabi (Figure 4.2). The document included a descriptive norms message about students' pro-diversity attitudes and inclusive behaviors and an injunctive norms message about university leadership's endorsement of diversity on campus.

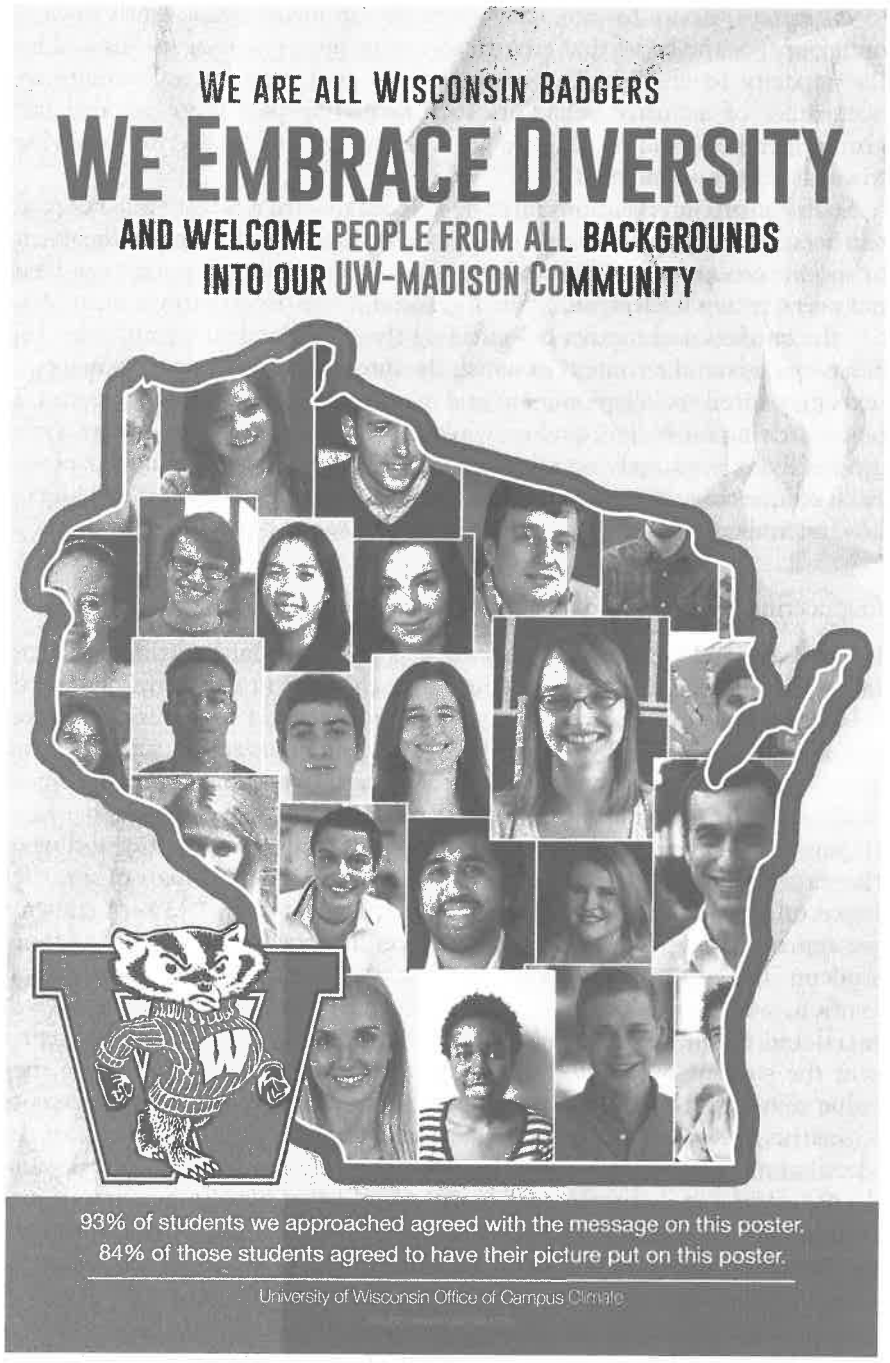

Figure 4.1 Social norms intervention poster and link to the social norms video intervention used in Murrar et al., 2020. www.youtube.com/watch?v=OoEbb9sRKw4

Inclusivity at the University of Wisconsin-Madison

Message from campus leaders:

"At UW-Madison, we value our diversity, in all of its forms, and are trying to create a safe and inclusive community for everyone." – Lori Berquam, Dean of Students,

"UW-Madison is committed to fostering a campus environment where every student can learn, feels safe and valued and is able to thrive." – Chancellor Rebecca Blank

Building good communication skills is critical to your success:

In our diverse society, employers seek candidates who can effectively interact and work in teams with people from many different backgrounds. Like leadership or critical thinking, learning how to communicate well with people from diverse backgrounds is a skill anyone can learn with practice. Badgers who build this skill in college are not only doing the right thing, they are also more successful in the job market and excel more quickly in their careers.

What your peers think:

A recent survey found that 87% UW-Madison students agreed with this statement: "I embrace diversity and make sure that people from all backgrounds feel part of the UW-Madison community." They also said they do their best to behave inclusively, though they sometimes worry about saying the wrong thing. While overt acts of discrimination occur at UW-Madison, recent research suggests these acts are committed by a small minority of individuals who differ radically from other students in terms of their attitudes and personalities.

What you can do:

Building cultural sensitivity and behaving inclusively aren't difficult. Engaging in a few straightforward behaviors can both sharpen your skills and improve our campus climate.

DO...	DON'T...
...have a conversation with a student who has a different background from you. Ask them about their experiences.	...assume you know about an individual's abilities and interests just because they belong to a certain social group.
...attend several activities, talks, or other diversity events per semester. Find an events list at bit.ly/UWdiverse	...use expressions others find offensive (e.g., "that's gay," "gypped," "ghetto," "retarded"). Others see your behaviour, not your intent.
...display the same level of warmth and enthusiasm when interacting with students from all social groups.	...tell someone their name is odd because you find hard to pronounce. Instead, learn how to say their name correctly.
...ask individuals from different social groups what terms or phrases they find offensive.	...tell someone they are different from "typical" members of a social group they belong to.
...choose students from different social groups for class projects.	...remain silent when you see others engage in discrimination. Speak up!

Figure 4.2 Social norms intervention syllabus page used in Brauer et al., 2021.

Given that these interventions were created in a university context, their impact was assessed with thousands of students. Students were identified as being from both privileged (i.e., members of the ethnic and religious majority) and marginalized (i.e., members of ethnic and religious minority) backgrounds.

Various outcomes related to the social climate were evaluated. Surveys were used to assess attitudes towards minorities (e.g., Black people, Arabs, gay men), rejection of racism and discrimination, appreciation of diversity, openness to people from groups to which one does not belong, social belonging, physical health, well-being, peer behaviors and respect, intergroup anxiety, and support for pro-diversity policies. Students' grade data was also collected. It is important to implement and evaluate social norms interventions in multiple contexts and delay the measurement of outcomes as much as possible to determine how long intervention effects last. Thus, the pro-diversity social norms interventions were tested in a curated waiting room, an online setting, and numerous university classrooms. Outcomes were measured up to 14 weeks later.

Across studies, those exposed to the pro-diversity norms interventions had significantly more positive ratings of the social climate, which was due to shifts in their perceptions of their peers' inclusiveness. Furthermore, pro-diversity norms messaging reduced the achievement gap in STEM classes; in classes in which the researchers showed the social norms video at the start of the semester, there was no significant difference in grades between students from marginalized and privileged backgrounds at the end of the semester. Overall, social norms interventions appear to be an effective strategy to improve intergroup attitudes and promote equity and inclusion in the critical context of higher education. Promoting equity and inclusion in higher education can increase college graduation rates and improve career and health outcomes for marginalized groups, which can, consequently, promote social, health, and economic equality on a broader scale.

Growing Evidence for Social Norms Interventions

There is a growing body of research demonstrating the effectiveness of social norms messaging to improve intergroup relations. For example, in a university context, a narrated PowerPoint slideshow conveying an egalitarian social norm led to an increase in how much diversity is valued at the university and stronger intentions to confront sexism and racism compared to a control (Gainsburg & Sekaquaptewa, 2020). Nudging intergroup contact by exposing British people to static and dynamic descriptive norms about their peers having high levels of engagement with immigrants led to lower levels of intergroup anxiety and higher levels of interest and intentional planning to engage in contact with immigrants (Meleady, 2021). In the online context, when a White male (relative to a Black male) who has a large following (relative to a small following) on Twitter condemned racist tweets, people significantly reduced their use of racist slurs (Munger, 2017).

Research points to conditions in which normative messaging may be particularly effective. For example, correcting perceptions about men's concern with gender bias increased intentions to publicly confront sexism only when the perception-correcting message was delivered alongside an example of someone confronting sexism (De Souza & Schmader, 2022). Communicating an inclusive school norm to children led to more positive outgroup ratings, but this effect was eliminated when the students' peers were exclusionary and the students were aware that their outgroup ratings would be shared with their peers (McGuire et al., 2015). The negative effects of the exclusionary peer group held even when students were aware their teachers would see their outgroup ratings. These findings show how influential peer group norms are above and beyond institutional norms. Finally, communicating an anti-discrimination norm to Swiss nationals reduced anti-foreigner sentiments when the ingroup threat of foreigners taking nationals' jobs was low, but not when the threat was high (Falomir-Pichastor et al., 2013). These findings highlight how important it is to consider the context when designing a social norms intervention.

Obstacles to Successful Social Norms Interventions

Social norms interventions are relatively easy to implement, but researchers and practitioners must overcome four minor obstacles. First, one needs to collect data related to social norms that can be communicated later as part of an intervention. For example, when designing a social norms intervention to increase inclusivity, the percentage of peers who value diversity or who support an organization's pro-diversity initiatives must be assessed, usually through a survey. Data collection often must begin several weeks or months prior to the implementation of the intervention.

Second, some individuals may not believe the data presented in the social norms messaging. In the worst-case scenario, they may feel that they are being manipulated with fake data. It is thus crucial that the data collection be done as rigorously as possible and that the sample is sufficiently large and representative of the group that is being talked about in the messaging (e.g., employees of company X). It may be useful to document the data collection process and/or to even have an outside company conduct the survey.

Third, social norms messages may be perceived as offensive by members of marginalized groups who are frequent targets of exclusion and discrimination. For example, this is likely if the message stating that most of their non-marginalized peers enjoy diversity and try to behave inclusively contradicts the lived experiences of members of marginalized groups. These individuals may even argue that the social norms message ignores or minimizes persisting discrimination and systemic injustices. As we will describe below, pilot-testing all messages with members of marginalized groups is important in intervention development.

Fourth, social norms interventions may be difficult to implement in settings where the relations between social groups are filled with strife and tension. For example, during the Ukrainian–Russian war of 2022, most Ukrainians probably would not have believed a message stating that the majority of their fellow Ukrainians have a positive attitude towards Russians.

In such a setting, practitioners may want to communicate dynamic norms or use a different type of intervention (e.g., see Chapter 8 of this volume for malleability interventions).

What Have We Yet to Learn about Social Norms Interventions

Two important questions have not yet been exhaustively addressed in the current scientific literature. First, how can social norms interventions effectively communicate to people that their peers are strongly committed to diversity and intergroup harmony without giving the impression that discrimination and conflict are no longer an issue? Once people get the impression that members of marginalized groups are treated positively, they may decrease their efforts to behave inclusively. Note that this issue applies to all social norms interventions. For example, telling individuals that their peers recycle may cause them to recycle less, just as telling visitors in the Petrified Forest National Park that most individuals do not remove rocks from the park may cause them to think that it is acceptable to pocket a small piece of petrified wood (Cialdini et al., 2006). Additionally, telling people that a certain percentage of their peers engage in inclusive or reconciliatory behaviors, i.e., communicating a descriptive norm, may lead some individuals to realize that fewer people engage in those behaviors than they previously thought. Based on initial studies it appears that such boomerang effects can be avoided by insisting on the fact that the problem being addressed requires continual effort by everyone and by communicating injunctive or dynamic norms messages, but additional research is needed to obtain definite answers.

Second, how can researchers and practitioners craft social norms messages related to diversity or inclusivity that are acceptable for members of marginalized groups? Upon reading the social norms message, members of marginalized groups may feel that the message is either incorrect (after all, they are frequently the target of exclusion and discrimination) or that they are having a worse experience than their fellow ingroup members (that they are discriminated against whereas the other members of the same marginalized groups are not). The issue can likely be solved by acknowledging that prejudice and discrimination continue to be serious problems, but how to protect the feelings of members of marginalized groups most effectively must still be explored.

Tips for Application: Creating and Implementing Social Norms Interventions

In this section, we will present critical components of designing social norms interventions to promote positive intergroup relations and advise on how to handle some practical issues. As already mentioned, it is important to conduct a survey to collect the social norms data that one will communicate about later. We advise including general questions related to the topic (e.g.,

"It is important to me that [Organization/Group Name] has a strong commitment to diversity"; "I enjoy the diversity at [Organization/Group Name]"; "I try to create a welcoming environment for students from other social groups at [Organization/Group Name]"; "I support the allocation of my tuition dollars to programs that help students from underrepresented groups succeed in college"). We suggest using either dichotomous response scales ("Disagree" and "Agree") or 5-point response scales where all five response options are labeled and the labels of the top two response options contain the word "agree" (e.g., "Somewhat Agree" and "Strongly Agree"). This is important to later be able to report the percentage of individuals who agreed with a certain item.

Methodological rigor is critical so that the results can withstand scrutiny. Researchers and practitioners should obtain approval from relevant authorities (e.g., ethics committees or international review boards (IRBs) at educational institutions). We also encourage surveying a representative and large sample so that one can demonstrate, if need be, that the data really say something about the individuals described in the norms intervention. Practitioners can use some or all of the survey results when crafting a social norms message. Sometimes it is most effective to communicate about one key item in the survey. The communication may also take the form of a table where the agreement rate with each of the items in the survey is presented.

People like numbers (especially when they believe the data collection was done rigorously), but they are also swayed by narratives (Murrar & Brauer, 2019). Thus, we advise supplementing the survey results with stories or testimonies from individuals in the organization or group. For example, social norms interventions about diversity could include stories from members of one's organization who talk about their commitment to diversity and their efforts to create an inclusive climate.

The social norms message should validate the experiences of members of marginalized groups by mentioning that lack of inclusion and discrimination continue to be serious problems and there is ample room for improvement. When it is falsely claimed that discrimination or conflict no longer exist, members of marginalized groups are discredited when they speak up against discrimination (Kaiser & Miller, 2003).

It can be helpful to reinforce peer social norms messages by communicating about the norms of the organization or group's leaders. For example, in a diversity intervention, the top leaders should state explicitly that diversity and inclusion are core values that help the organization achieve its mission, be it an educational, administrative, or for-profit mission.

To be maximally effective, the social norms intervention should be pilot-tested with both members of marginalized and non-marginalized groups through focus groups, structured interviews, or even a short survey. The message should not be perceived as offensive or condescending by members of marginalized groups. At the same time, it should communicate ideas that members of the "target audience" are receptive to. Remember that the intervention likely

targets members of non-marginalized groups, and the goal of the intervention is to get these individuals to behave in a more inclusive manner. The intervention will not achieve this goal if the social norms message contains expressions that upset members of the target audience. These individuals will change their behaviors only if their overall reaction to the intervention is positive.

Social norms interventions can take different formats. Information on peers' attitudes and behaviors can be presented on a poster, a brochure, or in the form of a short video. It can be part of an internal newsletter or presented on an organization's web page. It can be shared on social media or during a town hall meeting on climate improvement. Finally, leaders can talk about the widespread support for diversity at various internal events, mention other initiatives to improve the social climate, and reiterate their commitment to fostering an inclusive environment.

When the opportunity presents itself, it can be helpful to explain that widespread support for diversity and inclusion is not contradictory to the fact that members of marginalized groups are frequently the target of discrimination. Just as the trash we see on the sides of our highways is thrown there by a minority of motorists, it is quite likely that members from marginalized groups, given the number of different co-workers they interact with daily, frequently experience discrimination even if this discrimination is perpetrated by a numerical minority of individuals (Campbell & Brauer, 2021).

Finally, it is important to test the efficacy of social norms interventions to ensure they have the desired effect on intergroup attitudes and behaviors. For example, when evaluating pro-diversity social norms interventions, practitioners should examine relevant indicators of inclusion (e.g., the responses of members of marginalized groups on a climate survey, grades/dropouts among students from marginalized groups, turn over/sick days among employees from marginalized groups). These indicators can be compared over time (before and after the intervention). Even better, but more difficult to implement, is to conduct a "randomized controlled trial", where only a randomly selected subset of units (e.g., individuals, classrooms, departments) are exposed to the intervention and outcomes are assessed in all units. If effective, the intervention can then be implemented in the remaining units as well.

Conclusion

Social norms interventions highlight the overwhelming support for diversity, reconciliation, and peaceful coexistence in organizations and groups. They showcase that the organization or group members value diversity and intergroup harmony, try to behave in an inclusive and reconciliatory manner, and endorse the organizational and group commitment to equity and inclusion of people from marginalized groups. Social norms interventions are easy to implement in that they do not require a substantial time commitment from people like completing an in-person or online workshop. They are based on real data ("here is what your peers think and do") that are hard to argue with. They tend to create little reactance because they do not threaten people's social identity, blame them for poor race relations, or infringe on their autonomy. Most importantly, social norms interventions are highly effective in changing people's behaviors toward members of other social groups, thereby contributing to a positive social climate. Thus, social norms interventions are critical to every diversity practitioner's and peacemaker's toolbox.

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