Introduction

Groups create the very basis of our society. We are, as humans, social animals. We are born into groups, learn in groups, live in groups, and work in groups. Groups can range anywhere from three people to a nation. Think of the groups you belong to. How similar are you to other members of your groups? In most cases, we tend to be similar to other members of our groups because standards within the group define behavioral expectations. These standards are called social norms.

Throughout this chapter, we hope to provide basic answers to some of the fundamental questions about social norms and group dynamics: What are social norms? How do social norms influence our behavior? How have social norms been studied? What are the classic experiments on social norms? What is conformity and how does it relate to social norms? When and why do individuals conform? What makes a group? How do social norms and group dynamics overlap?

What Are Social Norms?

Imagine you get on an elevator. There’s no one on it, so you stand in the middle and listen to the soft music while the doors close. Perhaps you start tapping your foot or humming—it is, after all, pretty catchy for elevator music. At the next floor, the door opens and someone else steps in. Where do you expect this person to stand? Do you move? How would you feel if this individual stood right next to you? What if they started talking to you—would that be strange or expected? It’s likely that no one ever sat you down and explained proper elevator protocol, yet somehow, you are likely aware that you’re supposed to face forward and be as far from others as possible. Our behavior in elevators is an example of a social norm.

There are almost as many definitions of social norms as there are articles written about them. Every researcher tends to tweak the definition a little to fit with what they are studying. Some definitions are very broad; others extremely specific. We’ll start our definition of social norms as *unwritten rules that govern our social behavior*.

Think of social norms as grammar to frame the writing of our lives and interactions. Social norms are how we shape our actions into behaviors that are considered proper. You likely have different ways of writing for academic papers than you