# CURRENT RESEARCH IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL INFLUENCE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE BEHAVIORS

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## ABSTRACT

*Understanding why individuals do or do not engage in actions to interrupt inequality can provide insight regarding the maintenance and reduction of social inequality in U.S. society. This study's hypothesis is that societal and peer-group norms are predictive of a range of social justice actions to interrupt inequality. Data on norms and behavior intentions from one hundred seventy-six college students was collected using a self-administered questionnaire. Regression analyses reveal that societal and peer-group norms are likely important determinants of social justice behaviors.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Why do people intervene to prevent social inequality? Why, for example, might someone protest when a book, newspaper article, television show, or other media forum perpetuates or reinforces a bias or prejudice? Understanding why individuals do or do not engage in actions to interrupt inequality can provide insight regarding the maintenance and reduction of social inequality in U.S. society.

I am interested in the effect of interpersonal *acts* (Essed 1991, 2001; Goffman 1959; West and Fenstermaker 1995) on social injustice rather than the effect of individual ideology or attitudes on social injustice. This article extends a small body of literature that uses norms (i.e., social influence) to understand behaviors that maintain or challenge social inequality. I argue that social influence theories should be used to identify factors (e.g., peer influence, group conformity, norms, situational cues) that impede or encourage a range of interpersonal social justice behaviors. This study supports this argument with the finding that norms influence a range of social justice behaviors.

**NORMS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE BEHAVIOR**

A small and recently growing body of literature shows that norms are a strong determinant of social justice behaviors (Crandall, Eshleman, and O'Brien 2002; Fendrich, 1967; LaPiere 1934; Madon, Guyll, and Smith 2005; Masser and Moffat 2006; Monteith, Deneen, and Tooman 1996; Munoz-Rojas, Falomir-Pichastor, and Leuenberger 2000). For example, Fendrich (1967) provides an excellent review of several studies in which group norms influenced raced behaviors of White individuals, such as avoidance, being photographed with a Black person, and participation in race riots against Blacks. Masser and Moffat's (2006) study illustrated that the manipulation of helping norms influenced whether or not individuals discriminated against homosexuals. Another study (Munoz-Rojas 2000) shows that individuals converge towards an in-group norm of discriminatory behavior. Norms were also predictive of how individuals reacted to hostile jokes about oppressed groups (Crandall, Eshelman and O'Brien 2002). These studies show that norms are an important factor in understanding social justice behaviors.

This study contributes to and expands this body of literature by examining the predictive ability of societal norms, peer-group norms, and the combined predictive ability of societal and peer-group norms on a range of social justice behaviors not examined in the previous studies. Specifically, I examine the relationship between norms regarding conflict, helping, promoting social values, the creative arts on college-student behaviors to promote social justice or challenge social injustice. The promotion behaviors include activities such as attending a cultural event or educating others about social injustice and challenging behaviors include activities such as refusing to participate in derogatory jokes or protesting in some form when media is racially biased. The present study confirms that the societal and peer-group norms that students adhere to are predictive of a range of their social justice behaviors.

**METHODS**

**Participants and Procedures**

The participants in the current study are undergraduate students who filled out a survey questionnaire on a variety of social issues and educational experiences. A total of 176 White undergraduate students from a large public Midwestern university were included. This sample was sixty percent female with an average age of twenty.

**Measures**

*Societal norms*

"Societal norms" refers to three independent variables that measure commitment to mainstream U.S. societal values. The variables are scaled measures derived by factor analysis. "Conflict is Negative" assesses whether an individual describes conflict as a negative occurrence (i.e., whether the individual devalues conflict). It is a generally reliable scale (alpha=.623) and includes items such as "I am afraid of conflicts when discussing social issues." "Being Helpful" assesses whether an individual values engaging in helpful activities. It has good reliability (alpha=.762) and includes valuing activities such as "Giving 3% or more of my income to help those in need." "Influence Social Values" assesses whether an individual values activities intended to influence social values in the U.S. It is reliable (alpha=.670) and includes valuing activities such as "influencing social values" and "developing a meaningful philosophy of life." Higher scores reflect increased commitment to the relevant societal value.

*Peer-group norms*

"Peer-group norms" refers to two independent variables that measure the effect of peer-group norms on a range of student activities. I argue that an individual's level of involvement reflects the values of her peer group. Two scaled items derive from a factor analysis of the intensity of sample students' involvement in campus activities. "Creative Social Action" reflects peer-group norms supportive of participation in artistic events and activities that promote social justice for women and LGBT communities. It is a reliable scale (alpha=.666) and includes activities such as those "oriented towards reducing violence against women." "Community Service" reflects peer-group norms supportive of participation in service activities. It is a reliable scale (alpha=.717) and includes valuing activities such as "community service not associated with courses." Higher scores reflect increased commitment to the relevant peer-group norm.

*Actions confronting social injustice*

"Actions confronting social injustice" refers to two dependent measures of an individual's confidence engaging in social justice actions. These two items derive from a factor analysis of actions to confront social injustice (Nagda 2004). "Individual Action" is a reliable scale (alpha=.746) that measures engagement in individual actions such as "challenging others on racial/ethnic/sexually derogatory comments." "Collective Action" is a reliable scale (alpha=.855) that measures engagement in collective actions such as "getting together with

others to challenge an unjust practice."  Higher scores reflect increased confidence engaging in actions to confront social injustice.

*Actions promoting social justice*

"Actions promoting social justice" refers to three dependent measures that reflect an individual's interest in participating in social justice actions. These three measures are scaled items derived from a factor analysis of a range of social justice actions. "Political Action" captures activities reflecting organized political involvement. It is a reliable scale (alpha=.819) and includes actions such as "getting a group of students of color to support student government candidates." "Intergroup Action" reflects interpersonal efforts to increase social justice. It is a reliable scale (alpha=.788) that includes actions such as "facilitating an intergroup dialogue."  "Cultural Action" measures engagement in cultural activities that promote social justice issues. It is a reliable scale (alpha=.779) that includes actions such as attending "a film on women's issues in the US."  Higher scores reflect increased confidence engaging in actions to promote social justice.

**Statistical Analyses**

I use OLS Multiple Regression to examine the ability of Societal Norms, Peer-group Norms, and Societal and Peer-group Norms combined to predict actions confronting social injustice and actions promoting social justice. I entered the Peer-group Norm measures into the regression models as squared transformed measures given their slightly positive skew. Otherwise, I tested and met all required assumptions for multiple regression analyses.

For the first set of analyses, I ran individual regressions for each block of independent variables on each social justice action variable (i.e., separate regressions for Societal Norms and for Peer-group norms on each social justice action variable). In the second set of analyses, I entered both blocks of independent measures sequentially into the same regression model to predict each individual social justice action measure (i.e., one regression for the combined effect of Societal Norms and Peer-group norms on each social justice action variable).

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Societal Norms**

The model representing societal norms significantly predicted all of the social justice actions (see Table 1). Influencing Social Values was the most predictive of the societal norms, with significant positive relationships with all five of the social justice actions (see Table 1). For example, individuals committed to the societal norms of creating "equal opportunity" are more likely to challenge someone who tells a sexist joke. It is not surprising that Influencing Social Values was the most predictive societal norm, as it is more of an overall U.S. norm than those regarding conflict or being helpful. That is, the current culture of the United States overtly focuses on influencing the social values of its citizens (White 2003). A cultural focus on influencing social values holds especially true for the college students in this study. This is due to higher education's discourse and practice regarding citizenship/civic preparation. Much of this

preparation involves developing citizens who will become actively involved in influencing, shaping, and changing their country (Anderson, Avery, Pederson, Smith and Sullivan 1997; Brown and Drake 2006; Hamilton 2006; Hurtado 2007; Parker 2001).

The societal norm of Conflict is Negative had the least predictive power with two significant negative relationships with Individual Action to Challenge Social Injustice and Intergroup Actions to Promote Social Justice (see Table 1). That is, those who have a norm of conflict as negative were *less* likely to engage in actions such as refusing to participate in a derogatory joke or educating students about racism. Conflict is Negative had significant negative relationships with Individual Action to Confront Social Injustice and Intergroup Action to Promote Social Justice, the two most intimate social justice actions. Thus, individuals seeking to avoid conflict are less likely to engage in intimate social justice actions where an individual could most readily experience interpersonal conflict (Blake and Mouton 1964; Goldberg 2007; Rahim 1986; Schoeny, Warfield 2000).

**Table 1.  Societal Norms Predicting Social Justice Actions**

|  | Individual | | Collective | | Political | | Intergroup | | Cultural | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Predictor | B | S.E. | B | S.E. | B | S.E. | B | S.E. | B | S.E. |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Conflict is Negative | -.303* | .085 | -.239 | .122 | -.122 | .092 | -.307* | .099 | -.096 | .107 |
| Being Helpful | .197* | .072 | .203 | .104 | .271** | .079 | .263* | .085 | .373** | .091 |
| Influencing Social Values | .168~ | .078 | .304* | .113 | .222* | .086 | .403** | .093 | .265* | .100 |
| R squared | .214 | | .159 | | .212 | | .326 | | .247 | |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

**p<.001, *p<.01, ~p<.05

**Peer-group Norms**

The model representing peer-group norms significantly predicted all of the social justice behaviors (see Table 2). Creative Social Action was the most predictive peer-group norm, with significant relationships with all of the social justice actions (See Table 2). That is, those individuals who are highly involved with the performing arts and media are more likely to participate in all five types of social justice actions. Intense involvement with the media and systematically oppressed groups might produce a higher awareness of oppression and a behavior norm to act in opposition to it (Larson 2006; McClelland and Linnander 2006).

It was initially surprising that a peer-group norm of Community Service actions was not significantly related to more social justice actions. Upon second thought, however, it seemed possible that those who have community service norms may be unaware of structural inequality. That is, the norm might inform engaging in individual acts such as volunteering while not connecting issues of social injustice to the broader structural level (Adams, O'Brien, and Nelson

2006; Larson and Allen 2006; Lopez, Gurin, Nagda 1998). In contrast to the peer-group norm of Community Service, Creative Social Action was predictive of all of the social justice actions.

**Table 2.  Peer-group Norms Predicting Social Justice Actions**

|  | Individual | | Collective | | Political | | Intergroup | | Cultural | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Predictor | B | S.E. | B | S.E. | B | S.E. | B | S.E. | B | S.E. |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Creative Social Action | .072** | .021 | .087* | .030 | .098** | .022 | .126** | .025 | .103** | .026 |
| Community Service | .202 | .173 | .378 | .242 | .304 | .184 | .455~ | .208 | .624* | .212 |
| R squared | .105 | | .096 | | .165 | | .212 | | .196 | |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

**p<.001, *p<.01, ~p<.05

**CONCLUSION**

Societal norms explain sixteen to thirty-three percent of the variance in social justice actions while peer-group norms account for ten to twenty-one percent. The model that included both types of norms accounted for twenty-five to sixty-seven percent of the variance in social justice actions.  Given the high amount of variance explained by norms, they are likely important determinants of behaviors used to challenge social inequality.

Thus, my findings support my assertion that acts used to interrupt social inequality can be understood using social influence concepts and theories. My findings suggest that norms are a useful lens with which to understand such behaviors. Many of the interpersonal interventions intended to reduce inequality focus on changing individual attitudes despite a lack of attitude-behavior correspondence (Ajzen and Fishbein 1977; Bobo and Kluegel 1993; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Kraus 1995; Horvath and Ryan 2003; Konrad and Hartmann 2001; La Piere 1934; Liska 1985; Merton 1949; Schuman and Johnson, 1976; Williams, Jackson, Brown, Torres, Forman, and Brown 1999). My findings suggest that interventions that change norms might prove more effective at provoking interpersonal acts that challenge and reduce social inequality.

A limitation of this study is that the research design measured behavior intentions instead of reports of behavior or observations of behavior. That is, the predictions of intended behaviors might be less reliable than reports or observations of what respondents have already done.  It is also possible that targeted questioning about reported behaviors could reveal the directionality of the relationship between social justice actions and perceptions of norms. Future studies could improve upon the current design by measuring reports and observations rather than intentions.

The theoretical and social implications of my findings suggest two directions for future research. First, future research and theory should focus explicitly upon the processes by which social influence (e.g., norms, situational cues) results in social justice behaviors. Second, social scientists should use these theories and research findings to design effective practices to reduce social injustice. These practices should look to incorporate strategies that rely upon social

influence concepts such as norms. My findings further and add support to the growing body of research that focuses on the power of social influences to explain social justice behaviors.

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## APPENDIX

## INDEPENDENT MEASURES

### Societal Norms

*Conflict is Negative (*alpha=.623 standardized alpha=.632)
• I am afraid of conflicts when discussing social issues.
• Since coming to college I have learned that the best thing is to avoid conflict.
• Since coming to college I have learned that conflict rarely has constructive consequences

*Being Helpful (*alpha=.762 standardized alpha=.769)
• Becoming involved in activities to improve my community
• Volunteering my time to people in need
• Giving 3% or more of my income to help those in need
• Finding a career that is helpful to others

*Influencing Social Value* (alpha=.670 standardized alpha=.672)
- Working toward equal opportunity for all US citizens
- Developing a meaningful philosophy of life
- Influencing the political structure
- Influencing social values

**Peer-group norms**

*Creative Social Action* (alpha=.666 standardized alpha=.682)
- Arts performances and activities
- Media activities (e.g., film, newspapers)
- Activities oriented toward reducing violence against women
- Activities to improve conditions for gay/lesbian or bisexual students

*Community Service* (alpha=.717 standardized alpha=.721)
- Community service organization
- Alternative spring breaks community service projects
- Community service not associated with courses

**DEPENDENT MEASURES**

**Actions to Challenge Social Injustice**

*Individual action* scale (alpha=.746 standardized alpha=.746):
- Challenge others on racial/ethnic/sexually derogatory comments
- Refuse to participate in jokes that are derogatory to any group
- Reinforce others for behaviors that support cultural diversity
- Make efforts to educate myself about other groups (e.g., other ethnic groups, gender, or sexual orientations)
- Make efforts to get to know individuals from diverse backgrounds

*Collective action* scale (alpha=.855 standardized alpha=.858):
- Call, write or in some way protest when a book, newspaper, television show or some branch of media perpetuates or reinforces a bias or prejudice
- Get together with others to challenge an unjust practice
- Join an organization that takes action toward justice
- Organize an educational forum to inform others about social injustice

**Actions to Promote Social Justice**

*Political actions* scale (alpha=.819 standardized alpha=.825):
- Picketing to support Affirmative Action
- Recruiting students of color to apply to your university
- Meeting to organize events for multicultural programming
- Getting a group of students of color to support student government candidates
- Voting in student elections
- Supporting ethnic studies and help groups working to expand it

*Intergroup actions* scale (alpha=.788 standardized alpha=.785):
- Tutoring high school students in a diverse inner city community
- Facilitating an intergroup dialogue
- Educating students about racism
- Working for anti-racist organizations

*Cultural actions* scale (alpha=.779 standardized alpha=.782):
- A film on women's issues in the US
- A talk about Asian American culture
- A Native American Pow Wow

**AUTHOR'S NOTE**

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