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Understanding social norms and violence in childhood: theoretical underpinnings and strategies for intervention

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Abstract

Violence in childhood is a widespread human rights violation that crosses cultural, social and economic lines. Social norms, the shared perceptions about others that exist within social groups, are a critical driver that can either prevent or perpetuate violence in childhood. This review defines injunctive and descriptive social norms and lays out a conceptual framework for the relationship between social norms and violence in childhood, including the forces shaping social norms, the mechanisms through which these norms influence violence in childhood (e.g. fear of social sanctions, internalization of normative behavior), and the drivers and maintainers of norms related to violence in childhood. It further provides a review of theory and evidence-based practices for shifting these social norms including strategic approaches (targeting social norms directly, changing attitudes to shift social norms, and changing behavior to shift social norms), core principles (e.g. using public health frameworks), and intervention strategies (e.g. engaging bystanders, involving stakeholders, using combination prevention). As a key driver of violence in childhood, social norms should be an integral component of any comprehensive effort to mitigate this threat to human rights. Understanding how people's perceptions are shaped, propagated, and, ultimately, altered is crucial to preventing violence in childhood.

Introduction

Violence in childhood is a widespread human rights violation that crosses cultural, social and economic lines (UNICEF, 2014). Worldwide, at least 23% of adults report experiencing physical abuse as a child, 36% report experiencing emotional abuse, and 16.3% report experiencing physical neglect (Hillis, Mercy, Amobi, & Kress, 2016). Violence in childhood occurs in a variety of contexts – from the home and family to schools and communities – and manifests in various ways within different types of relationships. Both boys and girls experience violence in childhood but differ in the nature of the violence experienced (Landers, 2013; UNICEF, 2014). Violence experienced in childhood can be direct – when a child experiences aggression – or indirect, when she or he witnesses the aggression (Fleckman,
Direct violence includes both interpersonal violence and self-directed violence (Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, & Zwi, 2002).

The repercussions of violence in childhood are powerful and enduring. Early abuse can hinder brain development, leading to long term problems with learning and cognitive ability (Landers, 2013). Childhood violence additionally increases survivors’ likelihood of depression, anxiety, aggression, criminal behavior, and self-abuse (Landers, 2013). The effects may be particularly pronounced among female survivors, who experience more severe economic repercussions, complete fewer years of education, and have lower IQ levels as a result of childhood violence than their male counterparts (Currie & Widom, 2010). Children who live in homes and neighborhoods with high levels of intimate partner violence (IPV) or other forms of physical and emotional violence are more likely to experience clinical disorders, aggression, irritability, and interpersonal difficulties, and may be more likely to perpetrate IPV as adults (Edleson, 1999; Klugman et al., 2014; Schwab-Stone et al., 1995; Wolfe, Crooks, Lee, McIntyre-Smith, & Jaffe, 2003). Additionally, the economic costs of childhood violence are high; it increases health, welfare, and criminal justice expenditures while decreasing rates of productivity and property values (WHO, 2016; Zielinski, 2009).

Regardless of its type or context, violence in childhood is a social problem embedded within a broader social ecology, with risk factors existing at the individual, interpersonal, household, community, and societal levels (Craig et al., 2009; Dunne & Salvi, 2014; Feldman-Jacobs & Clifton, 2014; UNICEF, 2014; Young & Hassan, 2016). Social norms are a key aspect of this social ecology that can either prevent or perpetuate violence in childhood (Bhatla, Achyut, Khan, & Walia, 2015; Boyce, Zeledón, Tellez, & Barrington, 2016; Carlson et al., 2015). This paper describes the relationship between social norms and violence in childhood. It defines social norms, conceptualizes them with respect to their influence on violence in childhood, and provides key mechanisms and strategies for effective social norms change processes.

**Methods**

From June through August, 2016, the authors conducted a review and synthesis of the peer-reviewed and grey literature based on experts’ knowledge of the literature and a search of scholarly databases. To capture the multidisciplinary swath of research on the subject, the investigators used PubMed, Google Scholar, and Web of Science. The references in priority citations were also reviewed for additional relevant sources. Only articles published in English were considered for this review. While not systematic, this review was intended to provide an overview of the literature as well as practical and theoretical linkages between social norms and violence in childhood.

**Defining social norms**

Social norms are shared perceptions about others that exist within social groups and are maintained through group approval and disapproval (Mackie, Moneti, Denny, & Shakya, 2012). There are two broad types of social norms: 1. descriptive norms: perceptions about what members of social groups do and, 2. injunctive norms: perceptions about what members of a social group think others ought and ought not to do (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990; Rimal & Real, 2005).
While descriptive norms characterize perceptions about the prevalence of a certain behavior, injunctive norms describe the extent to which individuals feel pressured—through either perceived social benefits or sanctions—to engage in a certain behavior. What is commonly referred to as social norms can reflect behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, and moral judgements about what behaviors are “right”. In order for a social norm to be perpetuated, the majority of people do not need to believe it is right or true, but rather perceive that others in their social group believe it to be right or true (Berkowitz, 2003). And, social norms do not necessarily reflect reality; members of a social group may think that a belief or behavior is prevalent within their social group when, in actuality, it is not (Borsari & Carey, 2003).

Social norms are linked to, but distinct from, both personal attitudes and individual behavior. Individual behavior is what one does, whereas norms reflect what one think or believes others do. Personal attitudes are the extent to which a person evaluates something with favor or disfavor (Eagly & Chaiken, 2007). Social norms, personal attitudes, and individual behavior all influence each other. However, research suggests that in cases when social norms and personal attitudes are incongruous, social norms may, in fact, exert a more powerful influence on individuals’ behavior (Asch, 1951; Mackie et al., 2012; Nolan, Schultz, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2008). This can mean that an individual behaves in a way that adheres to what she or he believes others deem acceptable, even if this behavior is inconsistent with her or his own beliefs.

**Conceptual framework: social norms and violence in childhood**

**Forces shaping social norms**

Social norms are not formed within a vacuum. Rather, they are shaped by larger environmental forces including culture, religion, policy and regulation, and economics. In Peru, for example, daughters have less economic potential compared to sons, which drives social norms permissive of parental neglect (Larme, 1997). In countries such as Sierra Leone and Guinea, with high prevalence of female genital mutilation, social norms related to the practice are strongly rooted in cultural and religious beliefs suggesting it enhances fertility and promotes female purity (Gruenbaum, 2005; Sipsma et al., 2012). Additionally, in South Asia, social norms related to child marriage are perpetuated by an entrenched system of patriarchy which denies women and girls rights to their own body and sexuality (Malhotra et al., 2011).

**Mechanisms through which social norms influence violence in childhood**

Social norms are one way that violence “transmits” within groups (Ransford & Slutkin, 2016). Through the fear of social sanctions, desire to win approval, and internalization of normative behavior, perceived social norms can influence people to perpetrate, condone, or challenge violence (Bandura, 2004; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1977; Marcus & Harper, 2014). The motivation to avoid sanctions and win approval from one’s social group is a powerful force grounded in human physiology. The brain experiences social and physical pain in similar ways, sometimes driving people to conform with social norms, even if they personally disagree with the dominant attitude or behavior (Bandura, 1986; Marcus & Harper, 2014). Additionally, people are socialized into specific norms starting at a young age, allowing
certain ideas and behaviors to be taken for granted as the only way to think or act. Fear of stigma, guilt, and shame all contribute to the maintenance of common practices by discouraging individuals from challenging prevailing norms (Marcus & Harper, 2014; Posner & Rasmusen, 1999).

Drivers and maintainers of social norms related to violence in childhood

Figure 1, adapted from Marcus and Harper’s (2014) framework, highlights many of the forces that can be harnessed or targeted in order to shift the social norms that influence violence in childhood. The framework illustrates the broad factors that shape social norms (e.g. economics, culture, law), the bidirectional relationships between social norms, individual attitudes, and perpetration of violence, as well as the influence of social norms on childhood violence in different contexts. It further identifies points for intervention, including those factors that serve to maintain or change social norms related to violence in childhood. Forces that maintain violence in childhood include existing power dynamics (e.g. gender inequality, perceived lack of agency in children) (Blanchet-Cohen & UNICEF, 2009; Paluck, Ball, Poynton, & Sieloff, 2010), prevalent violent behaviors (e.g. domestic violence, community violence), social and psychological processes (e.g. the rewards of complying with social norms) (Ransford & Slutkin, 2016; Rimal & Real, 2005), and insufficient structural intervention (e.g. lack of legal protections for children) (Landers, 2013). Forces that drive change around violence in childhood, on the other hand, include shifting power structures (e.g. giving children a voice) (Blanchet-Cohen & UNICEF, 2009), social movements that condemn violent practices (e.g. coalition-led efforts by children’s rights NGOs, media campaigns) (Grugel & Peruzzotti, 2010; Paluck et al., 2010), and policy change (e.g. implementation of laws that punish violent behavior) (UNICEF, 2014).

The framework also provides some insight into why some social norms are more resistant to change than others. For example, a Conditional Cash Transfer program in India provided...
a financial incentive for families to keep their daughters from marrying in childhood with the additional aims of improving girls’ education and increasing their perceived value. While the program changed norms and practices surrounding education for girls and reduced child marriage, it had very little impact on the deeply and culturally entrenched gender norms that drive early marriage in India (e.g. undervaluing girls compared to boys) and may have even reinforced these norms by providing additional income to offset the costs of getting girls married (Nanda, Datta, Pradhan, Das, & Lamba, 2016).

Intervening to shift social norms

Both theory and practice provide useful insight into how interventions can shift the social norms that promote violence in childhood. Human actions are interdependent; the choices of one individual inevitably affect the choices of others (Mackie, 1996, 2000; Schelling, 1980). Therefore, interventions aimed at shifting social norms address the interconnected nature of social groups, while focusing on changing individuals’ perceptions. Effective social norm change interventions tend to accomplish this in one of three ways: (1) by targeting social norms directly; (2) by changing attitudes and beliefs to shift social norms or; (3) by changing behaviors to shift social norms.

Target social norms directly

Some interventions directly target descriptive norms by informing their audience of what their peers do or do not do (e.g. 88% of men in your neighborhood do not spank their children) and/or injunctive norms by informing their audience of what their peers do or do not think (e.g. 90% of men in your neighborhood think it is wrong to spank a child) (Burchell, Rettie, & Patel, 2013). These interventions tend to be informed by a schema change approach in which countering evidence is provided in order to alter socially shared beliefs about a given issue (Rousseau, 2001).

One way that interventions provide countering evidence is through the use of opinion leaders within social groups to openly demonstrate desired behaviors and opinions, thus shifting people's perceptions of what others in their social group do and think through the presentation of alternative social norms (Carter, 2000). These interventions tend to be informed by “Diffusion of Innovations” theory which posits that ideas are propagated by influential and open-minded protagonists who facilitate the introduction of new ideas into a social group. A late majority then adopts the ideas after a tipping point is reached and social norm change quickly proliferates (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971).

Some research suggests that interventions targeting both descriptive and injunctive social norms may be most effective in ultimately changing behaviors as opposed to interventions that target descriptive norms alone (Schultz, Nolan, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2007). Table 1 provides examples of programmatic approaches that directly target social norms in order to reduce violence in childhood.

Change attitudes and beliefs to shift social norms

Other interventions target social norms indirectly by changing people’s attitudes and beliefs. These interventions are often informed by health behavior change theories and models,
Table 1. Programmatic approaches that directly target social norms related to violence in childhood.

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<th>Community Mobilization</th>
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<td><strong>The Green Dot Campaign</strong>, first implemented in high schools in Kentucky, USA, utilizes a diffusion of innovations approach by training “popular opinion leaders” to motivate others in their social groups to be active bystanders in the prevention of dating violence. Such interventions posit that if enough people within a social group shift their attitudes towards a given behavior, eventually, the injunctive norms related to that behavior will also change. The Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS), for example, worked with young men and adolescent boys aged 15–24 to reduce dating violence perpetrated against adolescent girls. The program directly targeted injunctive and descriptive norms with messages, often conveyed by male celebrities, that indicated men in the community support gender-equitable behaviors. An evaluation of the program showed that, following 6 months of program exposure, males in the intervention sites showed significant increases in gender equitable attitudes compared to males in the comparison sites (Pulerwitz, Barker, Segundo, &amp; Nascimento, 2006). An anti-bullying intervention targeting adolescents, aged 11 to 14, in New Jersey, USA used posters hung in middle schools to disseminate social norms messages about the actual prevalence of positive attitudes and behaviors among peers (e.g., “94% of ____ Middle School students believe students should NOT shove, kick, hit, trip, or hair pull another student.”). There were significant decreases in students’ perceptions of peer-bullying and pro-bullying attitudes as well as personal bullying perpetration and victimization in schools exposed to these messages (Perkins, Craig, &amp; Perkins, 2011).</td>
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<th>Mass Media/ Social Marketing</th>
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<td><strong>Program H</strong> in Brazil utilized a variety of approaches, including social marketing through billboards and radio, to target young men and adolescent boys aged 15–24 to reduce dating violence perpetrated against adolescent girls. The program directly targeted injunctive and descriptive norms with messages, often conveyed by male celebrities, that indicated men in the community support gender-equitable behaviors. An evaluation of the program found that, following 6 months of program exposure, males in the intervention sites showed significant increases in gender equitable attitudes compared to males in the comparison sites (Pulerwitz, Barker, Segundo, &amp; Nascimento, 2006). An anti-bullying intervention targeting adolescents, aged 11 to 14, in New Jersey, USA used posters hung in middle schools to disseminate social norms messages about the actual prevalence of positive attitudes and behaviors among peers (e.g., “94% of ____ Middle School students believe students should NOT shove, kick, hit, trip, or hair pull another student.”). There were significant decreases in students’ perceptions of peer-bullying and pro-bullying attitudes as well as personal bullying perpetration and victimization in schools exposed to these messages (Perkins, Craig, &amp; Perkins, 2011).</td>
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<th>Social Movement</th>
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<td><strong>Bachpan Bachao Andolan</strong>, the save the child movement, is a grassroots social movement which seeks to eradicate child labor and trafficking in India. Through its leadership of a large, grassroots civil society campaign, the Global March Against Child Labor, the movement works with a coalition of unions, teachers’ organizations, and child rights organizations to shift perceptions around the acceptability of child labor and has contributed to numerous policy interventions including the adoption of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act in 2010 (Association for Voluntary Action).</td>
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such as the Health Belief Model, which seeks to shift attitudes by introducing people to the harmful effects of a given behavior and the benefits of avoiding that behavior (Rosenstock, 1974). Such interventions posit that if enough people within a social group shift their attitudes towards a given behavior, eventually, the injunctive norms related to that behavior will also change. The Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS), for example, worked with boys and girls ages 12–14 in Mumbai, India to shift students’ attitudes and beliefs related to gender-roles, violence, and health. Through group discussion, engagement with teachers, and a school-based campaign, the intervention improved students’ attitudes towards equitable gender roles, physical violence, and sexual and reproductive health, in turn, shifting social norms among the school children in these areas as well (Achyut, Bhatla, & Verma, 2015). For example, the proportion of male and female program participants reporting gender-equitable attitudes more than doubled after six months (Achyut et al., 2015). Table 2 provides additional examples of programmatic approaches that target attitudes to shift social norms related to violence in childhood.
Change behaviors to shift social norms

Additional interventions target social norms by focusing on behaviors. Structural interventions, for example, seek to alter the structural context in order to make certain behaviors more or less easy to perform (Blankenship, Friedman, Dworkin, & Mantell, 2006). They may shift costs, policies, or the built environment. Formal laws, for example, impose sanctions which are less desirable than the informal, social sanctions imposed by violating social norms (Posner & Rasmusen, 1999). Conditional Cash Transfer interventions provide economic incentives to change behavior which may be stronger than the social sanctions imposed for violating a social norm (Diepeveen & Stolk, 2012). Eventually, the goal of a law or conditional cash transfer intervention is to change the prevalence of a behavior, in turn, shifting related descriptive and injunctive norms. However, in some cases, structural interventions may shift behavior without ever changing the targeted social norms. For example, the Apni Beta Apna Dhan (ABAD) Conditional Cash Transfer Program in India aimed to keep girls in school and unmarried until the age of 18 and also change community perceptions of girls’ value and ability to contribute to society. An evaluation showed that program participants were more likely to delay marriage until after age 18 and to have completed 8th grade than non-participants. However, the results suggest that there was no change in perceptions of the value of girls and that, in fact, the cash received was often used as dowry to marry girls to a more desirable suitor at the age of 18 or 19 (Nanda et al., 2016).

Although limited theory illuminates the pathways through which behavior change can shift social norms (Blankenship et al., 2006), Nudge Theory provides one hypothesized mechanism. Nudge Theory suggests that making small changes to the built environment can “nudge” people towards more desirable behaviors without restricting their choices (Leonard, 2008). In theory, if enough people are “nudged” into a certain practice, it will eventually become a descriptive social norm. Table 3 provides several examples of programmatic approaches that target behaviors to shift social norms related to violence in childhood.
There are a number of core principles and strategies related to programmatic perspective, or motivation, and design that should be taken into account when planning interventions that target social norms related to violence in childhood.

The perspective that programs take to address violence in childhood is central to effective social norm change. Successful interventions often use public health frameworks that conceptualize violence as an issue that can be systematically studied and prevented (Ransford & Slutkin, 2016). Cure Violence, for example, treats violence as a public health problem, transmitted between individuals and social groups through, in part, social norms. Their model suggests that preventing violence requires: interrupting violent conflict, identifying and treating people who are at highest risk for perpetrating violence, and mobilizing social groups to change the social norms that drive violence (Cure Violence, 2016). Engaging girls and boys to critically examine gender norms and stereotypes has been effective in addressing the gender dynamics that perpetuate violence against children. For example, the GEMS project works with students to evaluate attitudes and beliefs, such as perceptions around “masculine” behavior, that perpetuate gender-based violence in childhood (Achyut et al., 2015). Last, a rights-based perspective acknowledges existing power dynamics between victims and perpetrators while empowering individuals with resources and opportunities to make their own decisions (Blanchet-Cohen & UNICEF, 2009; UNFPA, 2016).

Table 4 details specific evidence-based strategies that have proven effective in operationalizing these perspectives and approaches.

**Limitations**

The authors used a traditional, as opposed to systematic, review process in order to research and write this manuscript. As such, the theoretical and practice cases presented in the text should be considered illustrative examples rather than a comprehensive review of the theory and practice related to social norms and violence in childhood.
The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals call on the international community to promote well-being and equality for all (UNDP, 2015). Violence in childhood is a public health problem that poses a threat to the health, well-being, and human rights of children and adults worldwide. Preventing violence in childhood requires a multi-sectoral response that unites the research, program, and advocacy communities to better understand, implement, and advocate for evidence-based responses to this urgent threat.1

Social norms are a critical driver of violence in childhood that should be an integral component of any comprehensive effort to mitigate this threat to human rights. People’s perceptions, particularly with regard to their own social groups, are a powerful force in

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**Table 4. Strategies for social norm change interventions aimed at preventing violence in childhood.**

1. **Incorporating bystander training:** Social norm campaigns directed at the family and community levels should incorporate bystander intervention training. In the case of childhood violence, individuals cannot assume that others will intervene. Instead, potential bystanders should be trained in tested and safe strategies for intervention (Cismaru, 2013).

2. **Mobilizing community values:** Incorporate core values that are already shared in the community in intervention messaging instead of employing top-down, negative messaging (Alexander-Scott, Bell, & Holden, 2016). For example, a campaign to prevent spanking might highlight the fact that, globally, 70% of adults do not believe corporal punishment is necessary for raising a child properly (UNICEF, 2014).

3. **Delivering combination prevention strategies:** Interventions that target multiple levels of engagement tend to be more effective than those that target one level only (Sallis, Owen, & Fisher, 2008). Laws alone, for example, are rarely enough to change social norms. However, interventions that engage families and communities, in addition to altering the legal environment, may be effective in shifting social norms around violence in childhood. Voices for Change in Nigeria prevents violence against women and girls by supporting the passage of bills aimed at increasing gender equality while simultaneously engaging opinion leaders to spread ideas condemning violence against girls at the community level (V4C Nigeria, 2014).

4. **Involving stakeholders:** Collaborating with stakeholders who will take ownership over and support the social norm change intervention can help to ensure community buy-in and sustainability over time. Partners can range from traditional leaders, to the private sector, to children themselves (Blanchet-Cohen & UNICEF, 2009). The Good School Toolkit, for example, engages teachers and administrators in schools as well as a team of community members to champion the program (Devries et al., 2015).

5. **Planning for long-term engagement:** Although there is no required timeframe for social norm change to occur, evaluations of successful interventions suggest that at least eighteen months to two years is required for sustained social norm change.

6. **Avoiding the boomerang effect:** Research suggests that social norms interventions can inadvertently increase undesirable behaviors by highlighting their high prevalence in communities. In communities where perpetration of violence is practiced by the majority, interventions should instead use reward-focused messaging which celebrates individuals who practice the desired behavior (Burchell et al., 2013). The MenCare Campaign, for example, celebrates engaged, non-violent fathers (José Santos, 2015).

7. **Collecting sex-disaggregated data on violence in childhood:** Data on violence in childhood is very limited. To further understand what strategies are effective in shifting the social norms that drive violence in childhood, it is necessary to collect data on violence, particularly through community and population-based surveys (Runyan, Wattam, Ikeda, Hassan, & Ramiro, 2002; UNICEF, 2014). The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Violence Against Children Surveys, implemented in at least 11 countries across Asia, the Caribbean and East and Southern Africa have been instrumental in awareness-raising around violence in childhood, in some cases contributing to policy change (Chiang et al., 2016).

8. **Making context-specific prescriptions for change:** Violence in childhood is context-specific. Interventions aimed at preventing violence in childhood should adapt best practices and theory-driven programming to fit the context in which they will be implemented (Alexander-Scott et al., 2016). This includes understanding the culture around violence in childhood, the nature of the system of message delivery, and the culture of the target social group (Berkowitz, 2003) and can be achieved through formative research and local experience.
shaping human behavior. Understanding how these perceptions are shaped, propagated, and can ultimately be altered through evidence and theory driven programming is crucial to preventing violence in childhood.

Note

1. Know Violence in Childhood is one such effort to unite the international community around childhood violence prevention through mapping, consultations, thematic papers, and advocacy.

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