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# **Behavioral Regularities and Norm Stickiness: The Cases of Transracial Adoption and Online Privacy**

NORMS ARE RULES ABOUT WHICH THERE IS SOME DEGREE OF CONSENSUS AND THAT are socially enforced (Horne 2001).<sup>1</sup> Norms can mandate, encourage, allow, discourage, and forbid behaviors. When norms are in place, people expect others to react negatively to violations and positively to compliance (Horne 2009). Thus norms can be conceptualized as expectations about the social acceptability of behaviors. We refer to such expectations as *normative expectations* (Bicchieri 2017). While some scholars have identified factors that contribute to the emergence of new norms (Coleman 1990; Ullmann-Margalit 1977), researchers still understand relatively little about how norms change.

We argue that behavioral regularities help explain norm change and stability. Whatever the reason for a particular pattern of behavior, that pattern affects people's normative expectations regarding how others are likely to react (Horne 2009; Willer, Kuwabara, and Macy 2009). So, if there is a persistent pattern of behavior (whatever

the cause of that pattern), people would expect others to approve of the behavior. And if behaviors change, then people would expect others to approve of the new behavior. The implication is that there is a feedback loop—patterns of behavior lead to normative expectations that, in turn, affect behavior.

We test our argument using two vignette experiments that describe very different substantive contexts. The first focuses on segregation in intimate family relationships. In the United States, despite widespread norms favoring colorblindness and integration, racial segregation remains widespread in most social arenas. We test whether manipulating levels of segregation in a community affects people's normative expectations about transracial adoption, and in turn, their evaluations of potential transracial adoptive parents.

The second experiment focuses on online privacy. Although there is widespread concern about privacy and unease about the potential for increases in privacy violations, people nonetheless tend to use potentially privacy-violating technology. We test whether manipulating the frequency with which people use such technology affects individuals' normative expectations regarding privacy, and in turn, their interest in using the technology.

Thus the two experiments are set in different empirical contexts—one in which norms have changed while behavior has not, and a second in which behavior is changing rapidly and norms appear to be lagging. In both contexts, we find that behavioral regularities affect normative expectations, and, in turn, decisions that are consistent with those regularities. We discuss the implications of our theory for understanding persistent racial segregation and Trump-era race norms, as well as contradictions between widespread concerns about privacy and individuals' privacy-related behaviors. Our theory contributes to understanding of variation in the “stickiness” of norms.

## **THEORY AND HYPOTHESES**

As described above, *norms* are rules that are socially enforced. When norms are in place, people *expect* negative reactions to violations.

*Descriptive norms* are behavioral regularities, reflected in people's perceptions of what most others do (Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren 1990).

In any social situation, people seek to determine the appropriate course of action—those behaviors that are socially acceptable. To do so, they look for clues to help. One source of clues is descriptive norms. Research suggests that norms are affected by existing patterns of behavior (Diekmann and Przepiorka 2016; Opp 2004), in particular, normative expectations regarding the behaviors that others approve (Horne 2009; Willer, Kuwabara, and Macy 2009). This is because people rely on others' behavior to infer what those others think about that behavior. In turn, these normative expectations have implications for individual decisions. Individuals comply with what they think others will approve and avoid behaviors they think others will disapprove—thereby perpetuating descriptive norms. Below, we consider the implications of this argument for two substantively important domains—race relations and online privacy.

### **Segregation and Transracial Adoption**

Race relations are a useful substantive context in which to explore norm change because of the disjuncture between norms downplaying the significance of race and persistent patterns of racial segregation. US norms mandate a colorblind approach to race. Since the mid-twentieth century it has become increasingly unacceptable to say that one racial group is inferior to another (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Krysan 2011) and to express disapproval of interracial relationships. Indeed, recent public opinion data show that only six percent of white and three percent of black Americans say they would not be supportive if a close relative chose to be in a white-black interracial marriage (Wang 2012). And in a recent case, when a Louisiana justice of the peace refused to marry an interracial couple, there was a public outcry and the man was fired (Katz 2009). (It is worth noting that since the Trump 2016 presidential campaign, there appears to have been some breakdown of social consensus on the unacceptability of racism [Costello 2016]; our data were collected before campaigning began.)

At the same time, the United States remains highly segregated. Most black and most white Americans attend segregated schools (Reardon and Owens 2014) and churches (Edwards, Christerson, and Emerson 2013), live in different neighborhoods (US Census 2010), and tend to befriend and marry individuals of the same race (Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2007; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears 2006; Moody 2001). They are also unequally positioned in the opportunity structure. Black Americans, on average, experience higher unemployment rates, have lower incomes, accumulate less wealth, and complete less school than whites (Reskin 2012). Americans are aware of this gap (Gilens 1996; Kaplowitz, Fisher, and Broman 2003). Thus, while there is variation in the level of integration across communities, in general, most Americans are exposed to high levels of white-black segregation and inequality.

What is the role of these behavioral regularities (descriptive norms) for understanding normative expectations about interracial relationships? As described above, research shows that behavioral regularities affect normative expectations about how much others are likely to approve or disapprove of a behavior (Eriksson, Strimling, and Coultas 2014; Horne 2009; Welch et al. 2005; Willer et al. 2009). Status legitimation research similarly provides evidence that patterns of behavior affect perceptions of what others think (Ridgeway et al. 2009; Brezina and Winder 2003). These expectations, in turn, lead individuals to engage in behaviors that are consistent with their expectations and create normative social structures that validate their beliefs (Ridgeway and Berger 1986). The implication is that whatever people personally believe about interracial relationships, they may rely on descriptive norms of segregation across domains to infer that others do not support such relationships. They draw from patterns of segregation in neighborhoods, the workplace, schools, and churches to infer that others disapprove of racial mixing. Such normative expectations lead people to make decisions that discourage interracial relationships and perpetuate the segregated status quo. Accordingly, our first hypothesis is as follows:

H1a: Descriptive norms of segregation will weaken normative expectations that others approve of racial mixing and, in turn, lead to more negative evaluations of potential transracial families.

The norms and race literatures suggest two alternative types of expectations that could follow from exposure to high levels of racial segregation. Norms researchers argue that descriptive norms provide information regarding behaviors that are likely to be successful or problematic. Those *expectations of problems* are thought to explain at least part of the effect of descriptive norms (Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren 1990; Rimal et al. 2005). This work suggests that descriptive norms affect expectations of problems, which in turn are associated with decisions. In the adoption context, this would mean that people infer from patterns of segregation that transracial families will face unique problems or challenges.

The race literature focuses on a different set of expectations. It shows that racial discrimination and opposition to integration reflect the structural positions of blacks and whites (Blumer 1958; Bobo 1999). When racial groups are in different structural positions and have few interactions with each other, people infer that blacks and whites are different from and in conflict with each other (Cosmides, Tooby, and Kurzban 2003). In this view, community segregation affects *expectations about interracial conflict*, which in turn affect behavior. From these arguments, we derive our second hypothesis:

H1b: Descriptive norms of segregation will increase expectations of problems and racial conflict and, in turn, lead to more negative evaluations of transracial families.

### **Online Privacy**

Like race relations, privacy is regulated by norms (Nissenbaum 2010). Communities have always regulated privacy, though what is seen as acceptable or unacceptable has varied across time and place (Moore

1984). In the United States, the proliferation of new information and communication technologies has led to increased public concern (Rainie et al. 2013). People want control over their personal information. Seventy-four percent of Americans value being in control of who gets information about them, and 65 percent want to control what information is collected Rainie 2016. People revolt against companies whose privacy policies they dislike (boyd and Hargittai 2010). Among citizens, activist groups, scholars, government policy makers, and technology industry insiders, there are frequent calls for increased attention to privacy protection. Thus norms favor privacy protections and discourage privacy invasions.

At the same time, however, the adoption of new technologies is widespread. People regularly use technologies that have the potential to threaten their privacy—technologies that companies do in fact use in privacy-violating ways (wbur 2016; Masters 2016). People seem willing to provide others with access to their personal information. Thus descriptive norms have changed and continue to change in a direction of less privacy.

Our argument suggests that such changes in patterns of behavior lead to shifts in normative expectations. People infer what others think about privacy from those others' privacy-related behavior. Further, they may also rely on others' use of technology that has the potential to violate privacy to infer that others approve of such violations. In turn, they will be more willing to use potentially privacy-violating technology. This argument forms the basis for our final hypothesis:

H2: Descriptive norms of technology use will strengthen normative expectations that others approve of privacy violating behavior and, in turn, increase interest in using potentially privacy-violating technologies.

## **METHODS AND RESULTS**

We test our hypotheses using two online vignette experiments. One examined transracial adoption, the other examined online privacy.

Details regarding the experimental manipulations, measures, and results for the two studies can be found in the online appendix at <https://www.socres.org/online-supplements>.

### **Study 1: Interracial Relationships**

For this study, we focus on a particular type of interracial relationship—transracial adoption involving blacks and whites. Segregation in intimate family relationships, particularly adoption, is especially persistent. Since the 1970s, law, social worker practice (Hansen 2006), and public opinion (Herzog et al. 1971; Howard, Royce, and Skerl 1977; Simon 1978) have eroded the legitimacy of race as a consideration in adoption. The Multi-Ethnic and Inter-Ethnic Placement Acts of 1994 and 1996 prohibit the use of race as a deciding factor in adoption placement. Accordingly, actors in the adoption system (social workers, attorneys, etc.) can no longer use race categorically to choose between possible parent-child matches. The few recent studies on public attitudes towards transracial adoption show that between 71 percent and 93 percent of people in North America approve of transracial adoption (de Groh 1993; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute 2002; Hollingsworth 2000). Despite these changes, segregation in child adoption, particularly black-white segregation, persists (Quiroz 2007). For example, white adoptive parents adopt Asian and Hispanic children at significantly higher rates than they adopt black children (Baccara et al. 2010; Maldonado 2006). As of 2010, 24 percent of households with adopted children included parents and children of different races (Kreider and Lofquist 2014). In contrast, only 2.6 percent involved black children and nonblack parents (Kreider and Raleigh 2011). This statistic is particularly striking given that many states offer steep discounts to parents who adopt black children, and there is a disproportionate number of black children in foster care awaiting adoption (DeVooght et al. 2011).

Our study asked participants to evaluate prospective white adoptive parents as a match for a black child available for adoption.<sup>2</sup> Participants read a home study summary that described the



prospective adoptive family and its community. For half the participants, we described the community as highly integrated (e.g., people of different races lived in the same neighborhoods, attended the same churches, shopped in the same stores, and went to the same schools; multiracial families were common), and for the other half, we described it as highly segregated (e.g., people of different races lived in different neighborhoods, attended different churches, shopped in different stores, and went to different schools; multiracial families were rare). Participants were also provided with information about the child available for adoption, including the child's race.

After participants read the information, we asked them how good a match the parents were for the child. We also asked them about their normative expectations—that is, their expectations about how positively or negatively people in the neighborhood viewed transracial adoption. Finally, we asked them about their expectations regarding likely problems the family might face and racial conflict in the community.

We found that people who read the version of the home study that described high levels of segregation expected community members to disapprove of transracial adoption more than those whose study materials described high levels of integration. In turn, participants also saw the white parents as a worse match for the black child. These findings are consistent with our argument that descriptive norms of segregation affect normative expectations regarding transracial adoption, which then are associated with decisions that maintain the status quo.

We also looked at the effects of community segregation on participants' expectations of family problems and community racial conflict. Consistent with the research on descriptive norms, participants expected more family problems in the segregated than integrated community. Consistent with the race literature, they expected more racial conflict in the segregated community. These expectations were also associated with participants' evaluations of the prospective parents. However, the effects for the family problem and racial con-

flict expectations were weaker than the effects for normative expectations. These results support our hypothesis that descriptive norms of segregation lead individuals to expect that others do not approve of transracial adoption, and, in turn, lead to more negative evaluations of potential transracial matches. The findings are consistent with our argument that descriptive norms affect normative expectations, and in turn, lead to decisions consistent with the status quo.

### **Study 2: Privacy**

Study 2 described a technology (a new household energy app) that can potentially be used to violate users' privacy.<sup>3</sup> We could have described any of a number of technologies that have privacy implications (Foschi 1997). We focused on an energy-related app because of the relevance of such technologies for substantively important problems such as climate change (Horne et al. 2015; Frickel et al. 2017).

In this study, half the participants read a vignette that described the app as very popular; the other half read that the app was unpopular. After participants read about the app, we asked them about their expectations regarding the extent to which others approve or disapprove of privacy violations by technology companies, as well as about their interest in using the app. We found that when the app was described as popular, participants expected more approval of technology providers that violate privacy. And, the expectation that others approved of privacy violations was associated with interest in using the app. That is, descriptive norms of technology use affected normative expectations regarding privacy, and in turn, interest in using the technology.

The results of Study 2 support our expectation that descriptive norms (popularity of a potentially privacy-violating app) affect normative expectations regarding privacy, and, in turn, willingness to use a technology. More generally, they are consistent with our argument that descriptive norms affect normative expectations, which encourage behaviors consistent with those descriptive norms.

## Discussion

We find that behavioral regularities affect people's normative expectations, leading to decisions that are consistent with existing behaviors, but our findings raise questions. If descriptive norms of segregation produce normative expectations that others disapprove of racial mixing, why is there abundant evidence that, in the United States, norms prescribe the opposite? And, if norms favor privacy (as survey data suggest), why does our study find evidence that descriptive norms lead to normative expectations inconsistent with those privacy norms? Our results suggest that behavioral regularities and normative expectations ought to be consistent with each other, but there is evidence that they conflict.

The distinction between implicit and explicit norms provides one possible explanation (Yoshida et al. 2012). We define *explicit norms* as those that are publicly communicated, widely supported by individuals, and reinforced through social institutions such as media and law. These include, for example, norms that support interracial and same-sex marriage (Tankard and Paluck 2017). We define *implicit norms* as those that people believe others actually support—even if there is little, if any, public expression of adherence. Implicit and explicit norms can exist simultaneously. For example, laws forbid sexual harassment, yet, in some settings, people who are victims of harassment know that if they complain, nothing will be done. In other words, they know that despite widespread explicit norms discouraging harassment (as evidenced by legal prescriptions, company policy, and public statements), implicit norms on the ground condone it. “Pluralistic ignorance” is a widely studied phenomenon involving situations in which people comply with a norm that they (incorrectly) believe others support. We suggest that in some instances people are not ignorant. Instead, they recognize (even if they cannot articulate) the coexistence of conflicting norms.

In the case of race relations, our findings show that segregation produces normative expectations that others do not support racial mixing. It is possible then that explicit public norms support

racial mixing, even as implicit norms (those that result from people's observations of existing behaviors) do not. In the United States, there is reason to think that both explicit and implicit norms have existed simultaneously for a long time. For example, even as people have publicly expressed nonracist views, their behavior has undermined efforts to promote integration (Bobo and Kluegel 1993; Sears and Kinder 1985). This pattern is consistent with what one would expect if people were relying on existing patterns of segregation to infer what social norms are actually operating. People say they support integration in order to comply with explicit norms, but their behavior reflects implicit norms—their understanding of how others are likely to react to integration efforts.

Donald Trump's campaign and presidency have arguably upset this dynamic. As noted above, our data were collected before Trump's presidential campaign, during a time when colorblind mandates and prointegration rhetoric were widespread. Since then, the openness of racist rhetoric has increased. By appearing to support racist sentiments (for example, Trump's statements following the Charlottesville rally, and his pardon of controversial former sheriff Joe Arpaio), Trump is arguably making existing underground race norms explicit.

In the case of privacy, our findings show that when many people use a potentially privacy-violating technology, individuals infer that others approve of privacy violations. In the United States, people express concerns about privacy violations and react negatively when companies are perceived as going too far. But, at the same time, the widespread adoption of new "smart" technologies means that individuals assume that others are not concerned. Even though individuals and companies publicly express privacy concerns and support privacy protections (for example, no company would publicly claim that it does not care about customers' privacy—doing so would subject it to social disapproval), changes in descriptive norms may be driving changes in individuals' normative expectations. These new norms are, in large part, implicit in the sense that people and businesses do not publicly advocate flouting privacy concerns.

It may be that explicit norms affect what people publicly admit. People say things that are consistent with the explicit norm in order to avoid social sanctions. At the same time, they do things that are consistent with the implicit norm—because they recognize the potential (unstated) social consequences of violation. In the context of race, people verbally support integration, but persistent behavioral regularities appear to have maintained underground racist norms (including negative social consequences attached to integration efforts) that now are being exposed. In the case of privacy (which is arguably less socially charged in the current US climate), changes in behavioral regularities may be catalyzing changes in norms.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The two studies described here show that behavioral regularities produce normative expectations that in turn lead to decisions consistent with those existing behaviors. The results of Study 1 suggest that persistent segregation undermines mandates encouraging integration and inhibits movement toward a more equal, integrated society. Study 2 suggests that as potentially privacy-violating technologies become more widely used, normative expectations regarding privacy may shift to become more accepting of privacy violations. Thus descriptive norms impede change in one case and support it in another. In both, descriptive norms work through normative expectations.

One implication of these findings is that altering behavior (or at least perceptions of behavior) may produce more robust change than trying to shift norms in the hope that such shifts will produce behavior change. This is not happy news for those who wish to harness the power of norms to create change. The results here suggest that behavioral change precedes change in the norms that people perceive.

Our studies also suggest a possible explanation for the finding that when observed behavior and norms conflict, people conform to what they observe rather than comply with norms (Keizer, Lindenberg, and Steg 2008; Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren 1990). We find that descriptive norms affect expectations that deviations from common

behavior will be problematic. But they also affect normative expectations. Whatever the explicit norm, people may use patterns of behavior to infer not only the likelihood of damaging consequences, but also the extent to which others approve or disapprove of the behavior. Behavioral evidence along with its associated implicit norm and information about likely success may carry more weight than the explicit norm alone.

### **Implications for Race Relations**

Our results suggest that simply sensitizing whites to the discrimination experienced by black Americans is unlikely to be effective. Race research highlights the importance of the existing racial hierarchy for people's perceptions of race relations; our findings regarding expectations of racial conflict suggest a similar conclusion. Even if people have no racial biases, as long as they see segregation around them, the social expectations that reasonably derive from their experience would discourage change efforts. Instead, successful interventions may need to be collective—changing not only individuals' attitudes, but also their expectations of others. Such interventions have been effective at relatively small scales. For example, changing social expectations regarding people in well-defined intermarrying groups eradicated footbinding in China (Mackie 1996). Addressing racial segregation in the United States is a more difficult challenge, in part because intermarrying (and interacting) groups are diffuse and scholars have less understanding of how to produce such large-scale change. Promising approaches suggest beginning by changing the behaviors of trendsetters (Ellickson 2001; Paluck, Shepherd, and Aronow 2016) and focusing initially on small, cohesive groups (Young 2015).

### **Implications for Online Privacy**

Our results suggest that a weakening of privacy norms—without any systematic consideration of the consequences—may come about as a result of increased adoption of new information and communication technologies. When people make decisions about using technology,

they are often not considering the larger privacy implications. But the widespread rollout and adoption of smart technologies may be having unanticipated consequences for privacy norms.

While the inferences that people draw from descriptive norms in the race context are correct (in the sense that they accurately capture norms to which a significant number of people adhere), they may be wrong in the privacy context. We show that people draw inferences about others' normative commitments based on those others' technology use. However, the use of technology may be driven by structural constraints rather than norm adherence. Because people often do not see these structural causes, they are likely to attribute behavior to individual normative commitments. For example, people may see others using social media accounts and assume that those others do not value privacy. But others may use social media because it is necessary for maintaining social relationships, and may actually be uncomfortable with the privacy implications. Thus people's attributions about others' privacy concerns may be wrong. Our findings suggest that people use behavior to infer others' norms and attitudes. They think that others' behaviors are driven by their attitudes. This assumed association between others' attitudes and behaviors may not always be correct.

Our findings have implications for understanding the “privacy paradox”—why people who claim to value privacy are nevertheless willing to give away their personal information. Explanations for this paradox frequently focus on characteristics of individuals (Acquisti, Brandimarte, and Loewenstein 2015), but some draw attention to the social context. Nissenbaum (2010), for example, proposes contextual integrity as an alternative. She argues that behaviors are regulated by norms but that those behaviors may also change in response to new sociotechnical systems. Accordingly, she explains the difference between people's behaviors and attitudes by focusing on the challenges posed by new sociotechnical systems. However, she takes norms for granted—leaving unanswered the question of how informational norms emerge and change (Coleman 1990). Given the rapid devel-

opment of information and communications technologies, an explanation of the privacy paradox requires a theoretical framework that also accounts for the emergence and change of norms. Our theory both considers the privacy behaviors of others and explains shifts in norms—providing additional insight into the privacy paradox.

### **Summary**

We find that behavioral regularities affect normative expectations, which in turn are associated with decisions consistent with existing behaviors. People use descriptive norms to infer what others actually approve. This dynamic can lead to contradictions between implicit and explicit norms, and can both impede and foster norm change.

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### **NOTES**

1. Such norms are referred to as “injunctive norms” (Cialdini and Trost 1998). For purposes of this paper, we use “norms” and “normative expectations” throughout.
2. The results described here are part of a larger study that also looked at monoracial families. Because monoracial families are not relevant for our argument regarding the effects of descriptive norms of segregation on normative expectations about transracial adoption, we do not include them here.
3. The study described here is one of a series of experiments we conducted looking at factors affecting privacy expectations and attitudes.

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