

# The influence of social norms on health-related practices

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LONDON  
SCHOOL of  
HYGIENE  
& TROPICAL  
MEDICINE



# It all started with an unresolved mystery.

 Why did parents practice FGMC in Senegal? UNICEF asked 2000-2010

They all loved  
their daughters.

Some knew it's not a  
religious obligation.

Most knew it's dangerous  
for their daughters.

Some even  
preferred not to!

# A forgone assumption hidden in many projects

(Material resources aside)



New  
knowledge



New  
behaviour

But then **failure** might come  
(for the brave ones who embrace it)



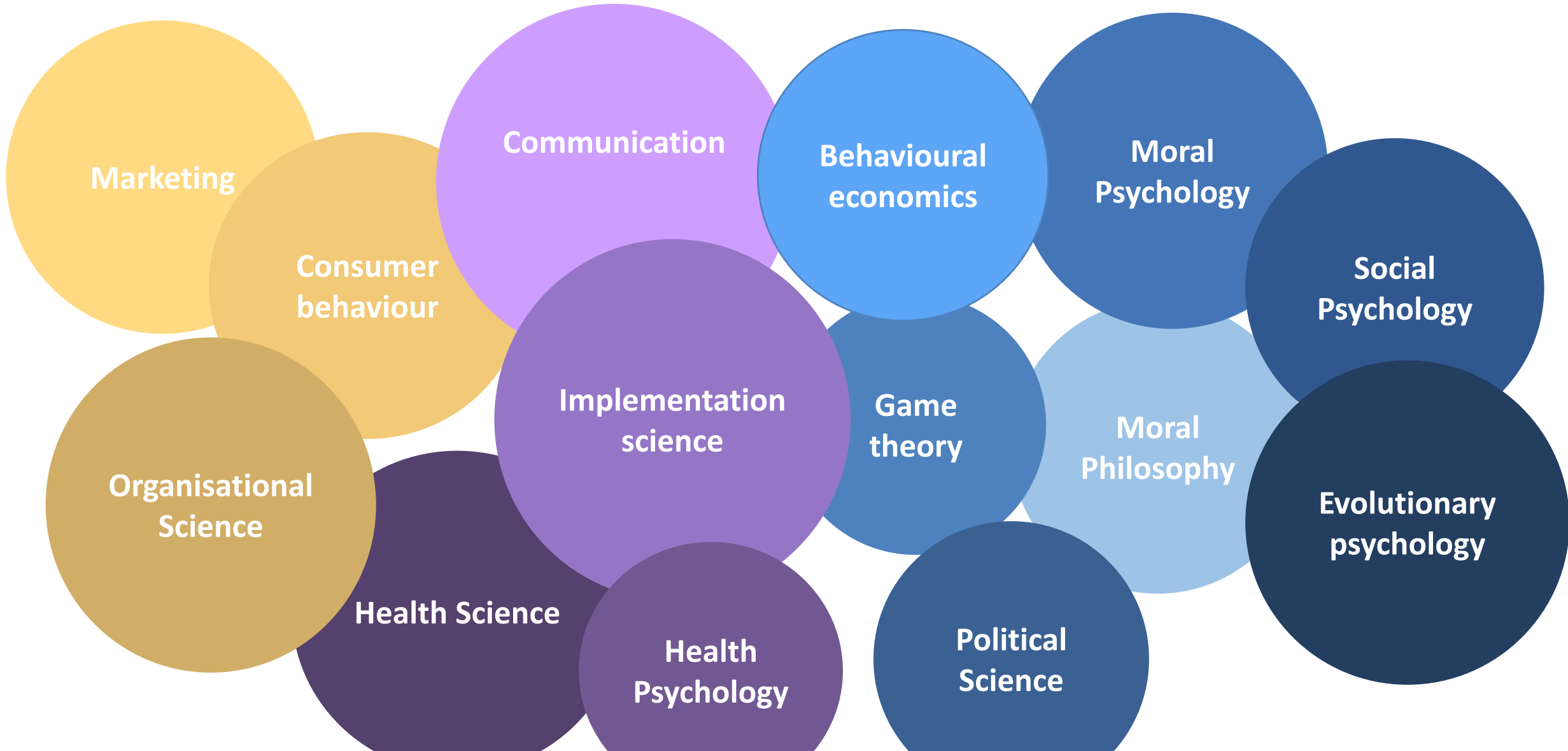
“Despite an extensive promotion campaign **we found only moderate compliance with the intervention**”

**Have you**  
**experienced, witnessed or heard of**  
**similar shortcomings?**



What are  
**social norms?**

# There are many schools of social norms as beliefs.



**Social norms regulate what behaviour is “normal.”**





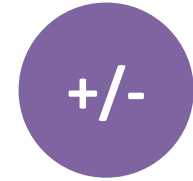
# Social Norms defined



**Unwritten rules about what is acceptable** in a given society or group of people (“reference group”)



**Examples:** Bring gifts after a travel abroad, offer water to a visitor, leave a tip to the waiter



Often maintained by positive and negative social sanctions

# Knowing and complying with social norms is beneficial for one's health.

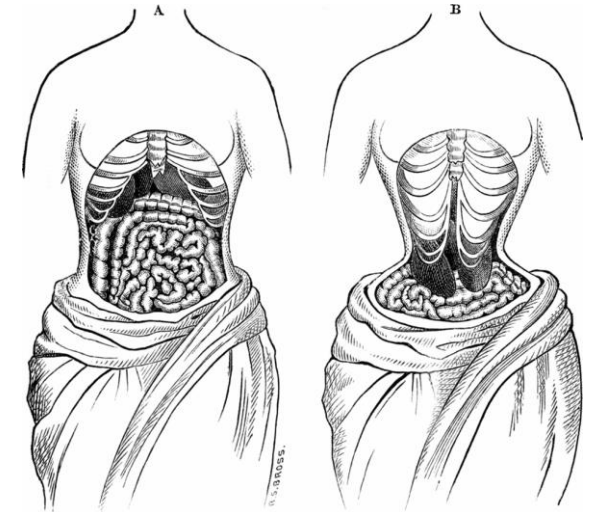


Knowing the social norms of a group (Cultural Consensus) is correlated with normal blood pressure (Dressler and Bindon 2000)



Being **accepted** in a group (Social Integration) is correlated with physical and mental health (Berkman et al 2000)

**But complying with social norms  
can also result in harm to self or others.**



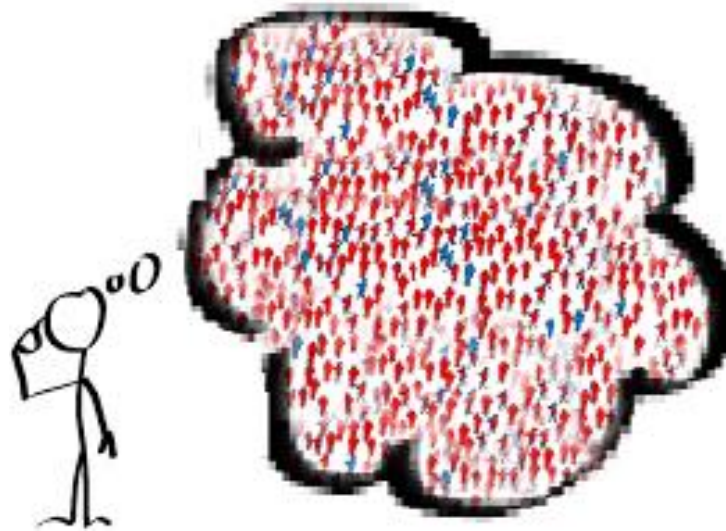
Today we will be discussing the harmful side of norms specifically,  
but let's bear in mind many norms also have positive effects.



# A working definition of **social norms**

# Social Norms as Beliefs

1. What people believe others do



**(Descriptive norms or empirical expectations)**

2. What people believe others approve and disapprove of



**(Injunctive norms or normative expectations)**



Focus:

**Descriptive Norms**

# Descriptive:

## What do people believe others in their group do?



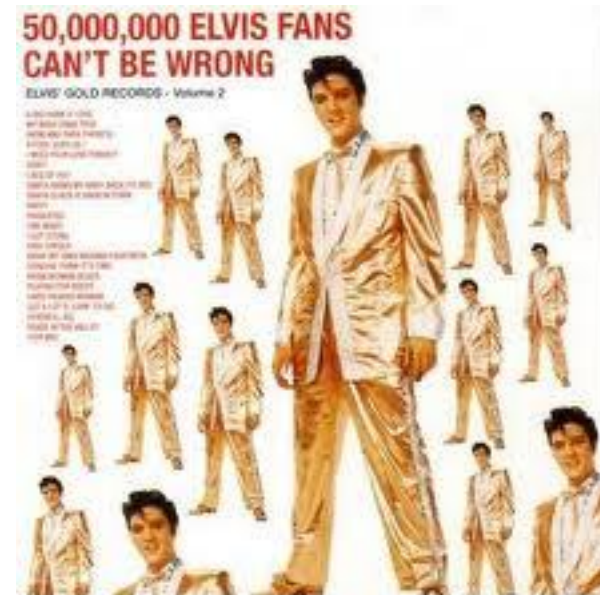




# HIDDEN CAMERA SOCIAL EXPERIMENT PROVES



# Marketing strategy use the power of descriptive norms: “everyone does it”

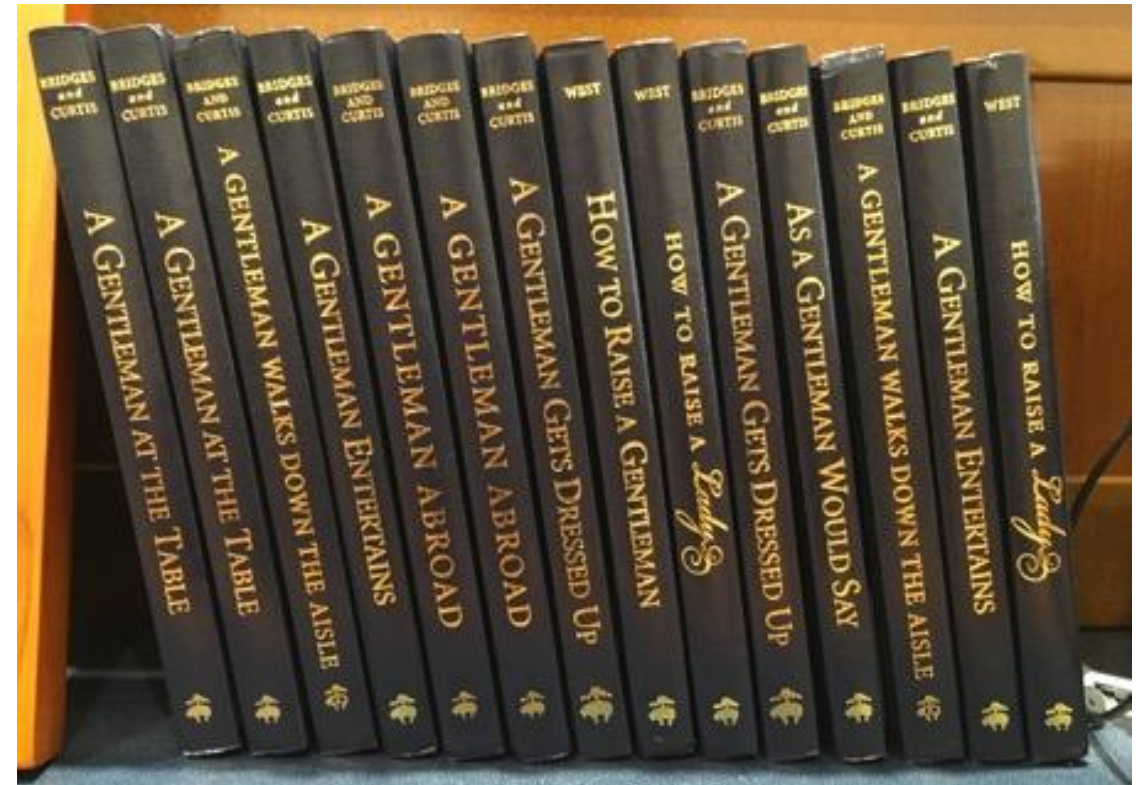
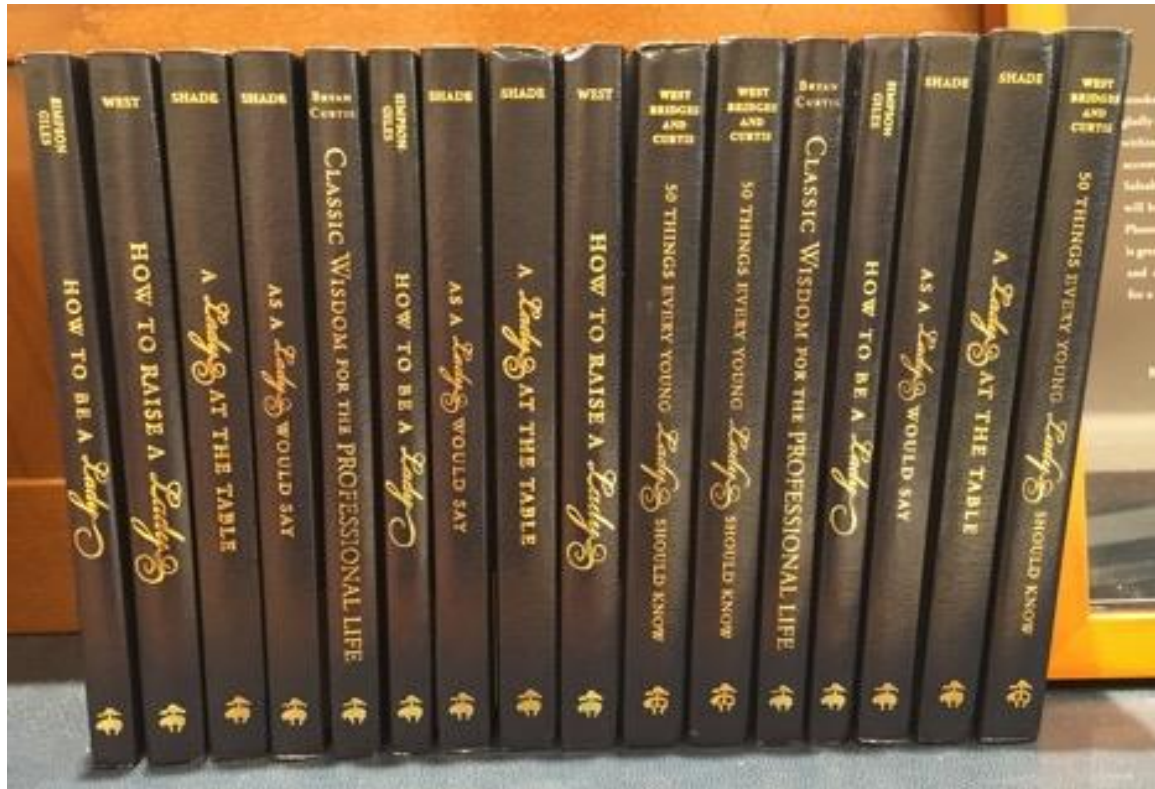




Focus:  
**Injunctive Norms**

# Injunctive:

To what extent do people believe others in their group approve of something?



(what are others approving of? What do they think I should do?)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4VbHh4JAzA0>

Not just “good” manners, but the **appropriate manners** to be considered good members of a group.





Focus:  
**Sanctions**

# Sanctions:

What do people anticipate happens to (non) compliers in their group?



# A working definition of social norms

(Mostly) unwritten rules of a **group** that group members follow because of

1

what they think others  
do (or/and)

2

what they think others  
approve and disapprove

...and they anticipate positive and negative **sanctions** for compliers and not compliers respectively



A Social Norm is **NOT** a personal attitude.





What is the state  
of the **evidence**?

# Social norms influence...



**Child Marriage**  
(Lee-Rife et al. 2010)



**Female Genital Cutting**  
(Mackie and LeJeune, 2009)



**Family planning**  
(Bongardt et al. 2016)



**Women's Economic Empowerment**  
(Marcus, 2018)



**Child Vaccination**  
(Sato and Takasaki, 2019)



**Intimate partner violence**  
(Bass et al. 2016)



**Handwashing**  
(White et al. 2020)



**Maternal Health**  
(Kuzara et al. 2019)

# Examples of harmful social norms



I wouldn't like to smoke (attitude), but I ought to do it (norm) to look cool



I wouldn't like to drink that much (attitude), but hey: you have got to fit in so I do (norm)!



I can't wear a helmet when cycling (norm) – that's just for the geeks!



I would like to defend that person that is bullied at school (attitude), but I don't want to be seen with him (norm) because everyone think s/he is a nerd (and would disapprove of me)



I would like to report the teacher that hits the child (attitude) but nobody does it (norm) and I think others would stop talking to me and call me a "policeman"

# Solving the mystery

2000-2010 UNICEF asked: **why did parents practice FGMC in Senegal?**

**These parents thought that:**

- 1) everyone in their group got their daughters cut, and/or
- 2) everyone approved of them getting their daughters cut, and/or
- 3) if they don't they will be considered bad parents, and their daughters won't get married

# Three Questions & Clarifications

(15 minutes)

# Group Discussion

(15 minutes)

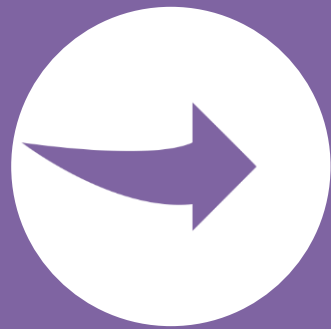
**What harmful norms come to your mind that are relevant in your work?**

# Feedback from Group Discussion

(15 minutes)


**What harmful norms come to your mind that are relevant in your work?**





Some advanced  
**key points**

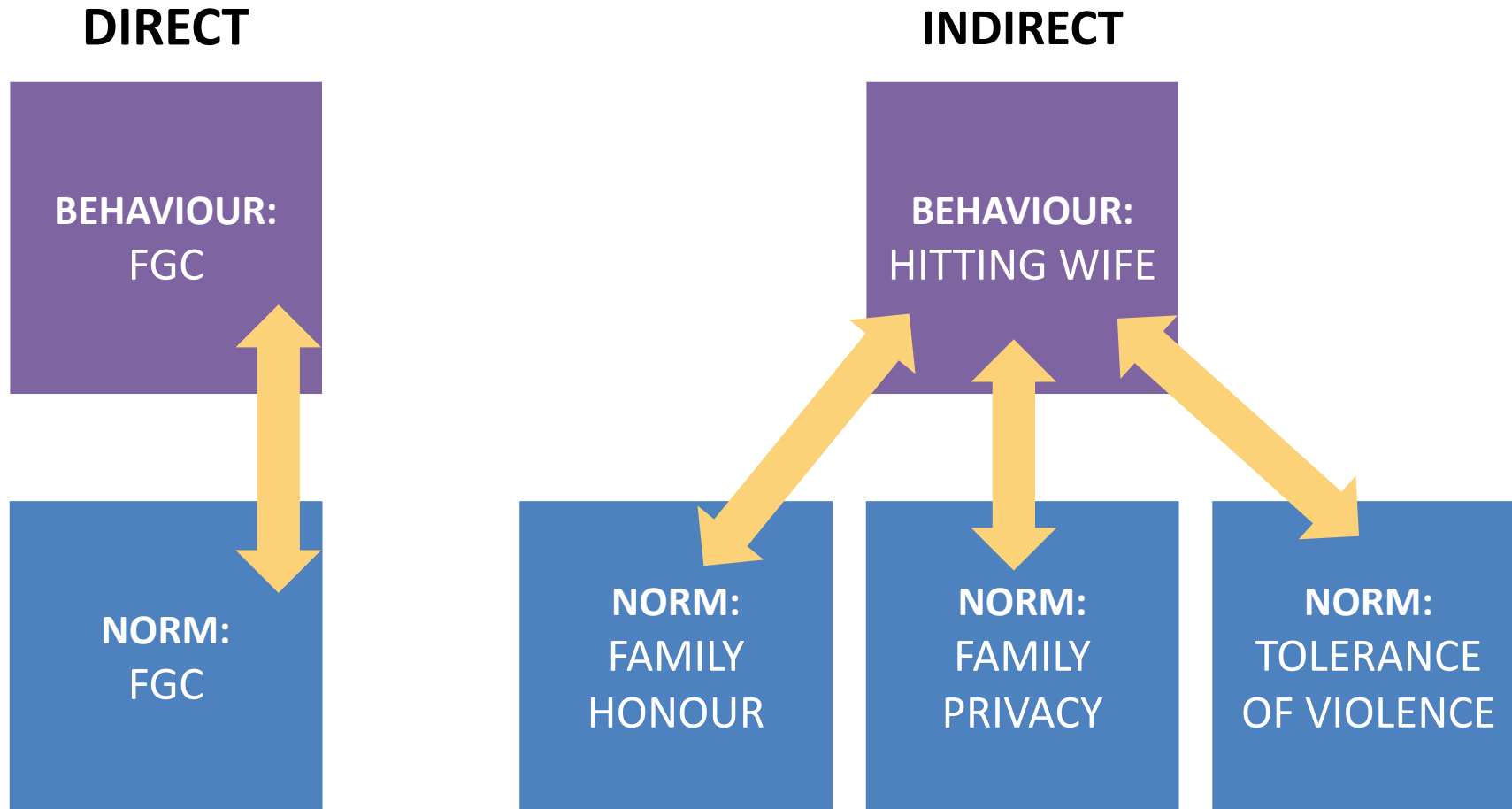


A young boy with a short haircut is looking down and to the left. In the background, a white banner with the word 'Poké' in large, stylized yellow and blue letters is visible. The boy is wearing a dark blue t-shirt. The image has a slightly grainy, video-like quality.

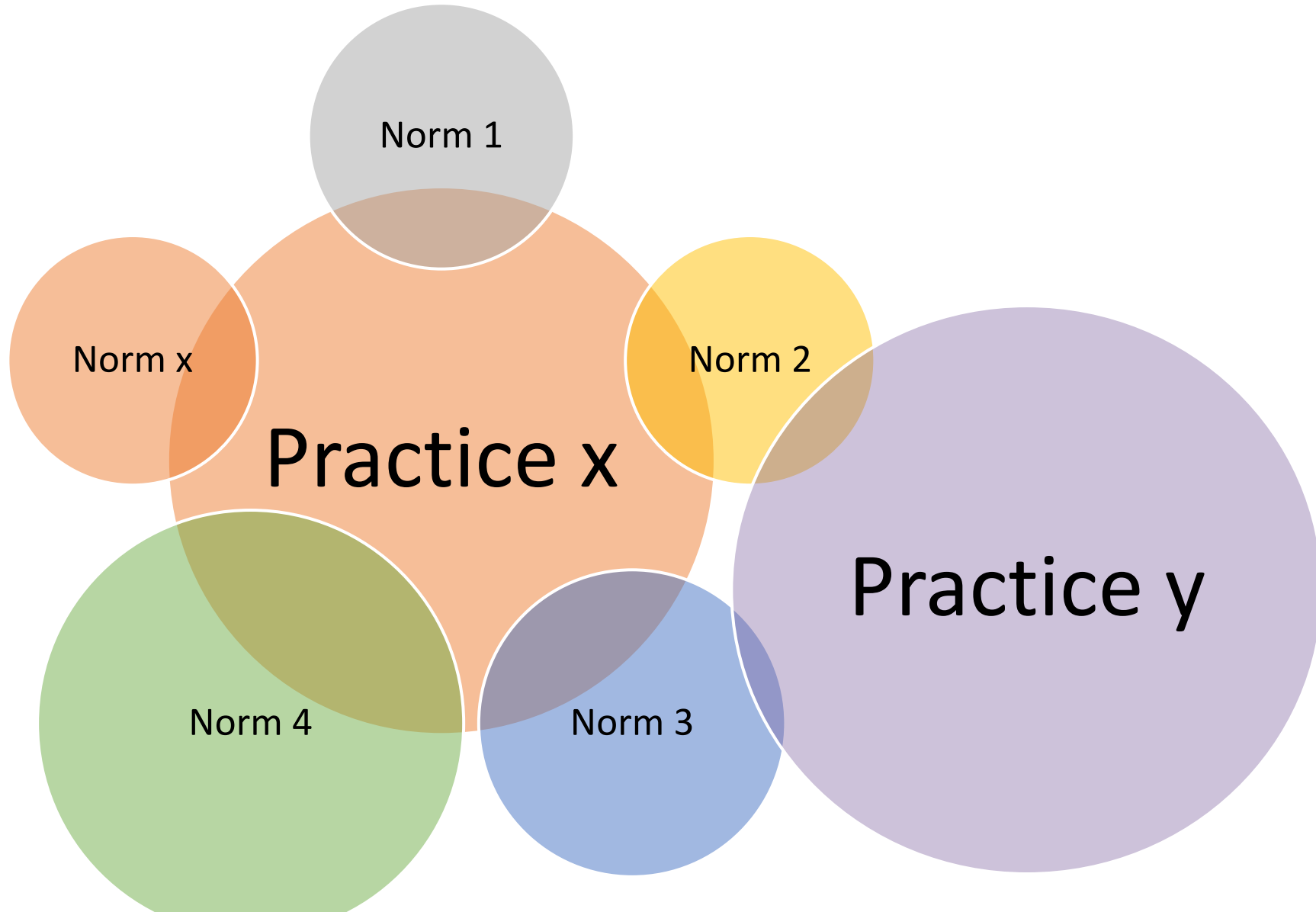
"If you can't get one,  
you're not part of the  
gang. Definitely."

2

A practice can be sustained by “indirect” norms.

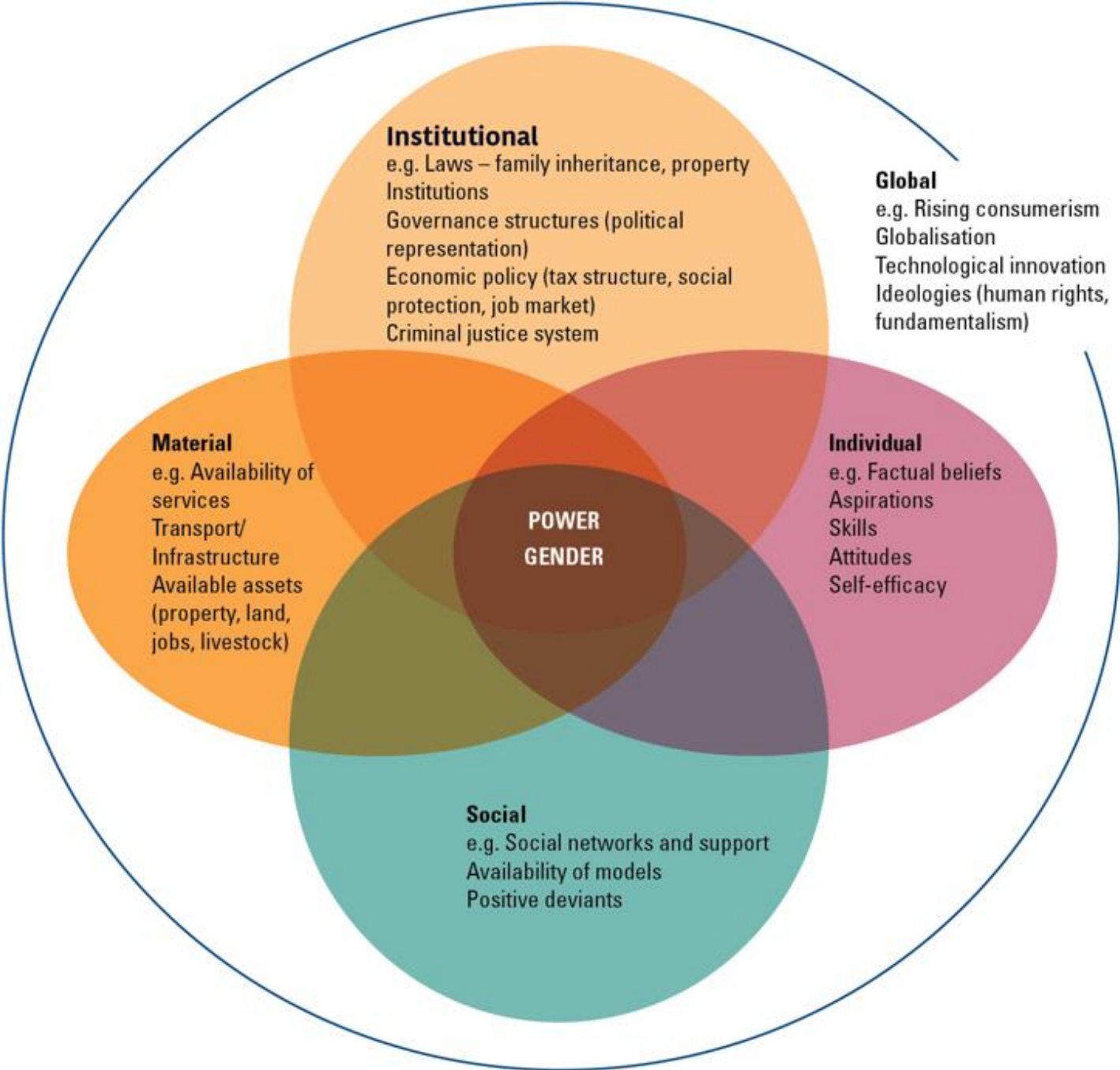


**A practice can be sustained by multiple indirect norms.**



3

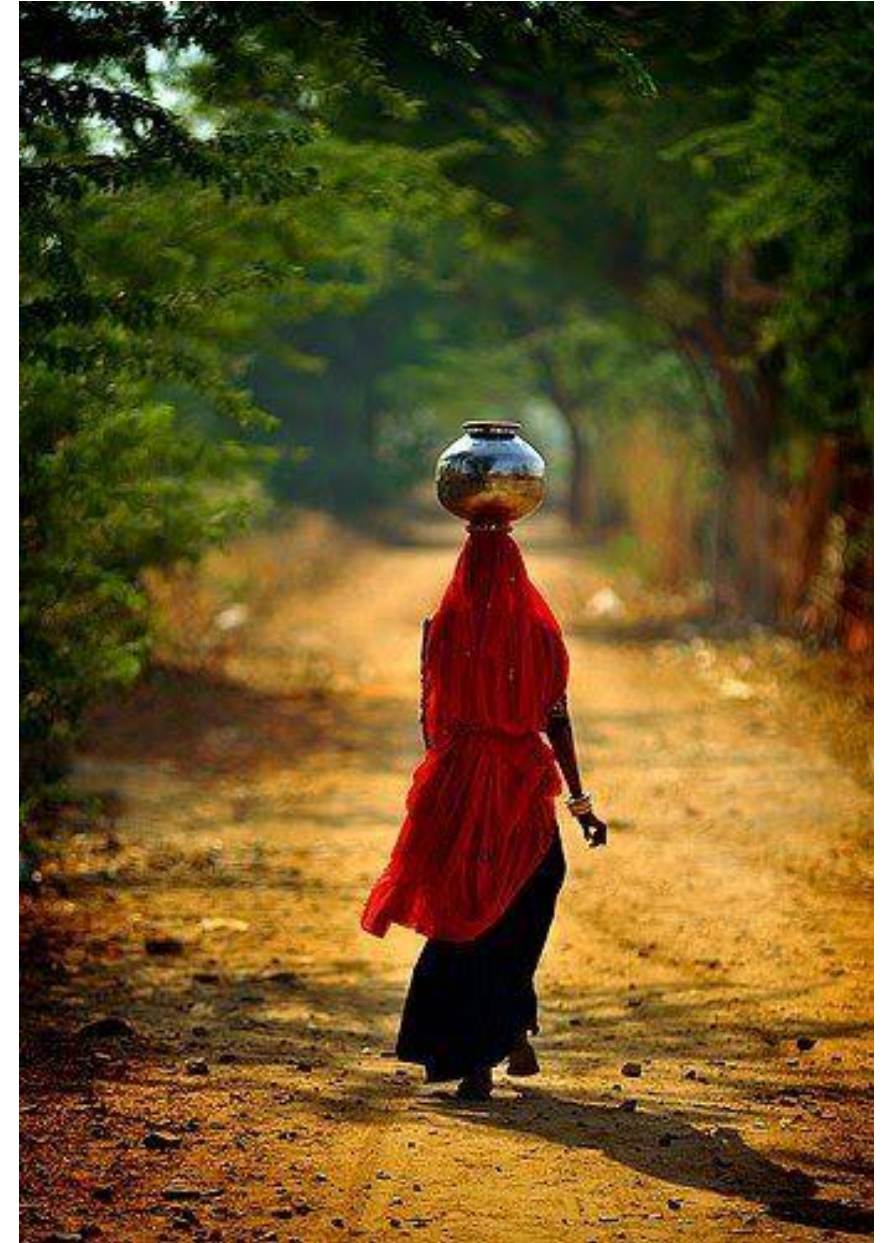
**Norms are in a system of structural factors that intersect and sustain action.**



## 4 Gender Norms

- Gender norms are **social norms defining acceptable and appropriate actions for women and men** in a given group or society.
- **They are embedded** in formal and informal institutions, nested in the mind, and produced and reproduced through social interaction.
- They **play a role in shaping women and men's (often unequal) access** to resources and freedoms, thus affecting their voice, power and sense of self.

*Cislaghi B, Heise L (2019); Gender norms and social norms: differences, similarities and why they matter for prevention science. Sociology of Health and Illness. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.13008>*





“Numerous studies ... show that men’s attempts to prove their masculinity ... marginalize women workers ... and alienate men from their health, feelings, and relationships with others. **The price of men’s striving to demonstrate their masculinity is high, and both individuals and organizations pay it”.**



# Key Takeaways

1

Social norms are beliefs of two types: descriptive (what one believes others do) injunctive (what one believes others approve of)

2

Different social norms apply across different groups.

3

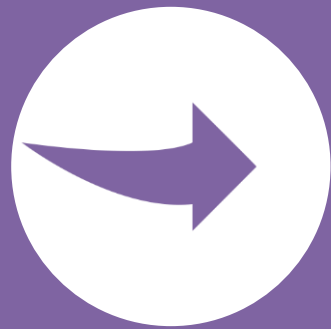
Different social norms can together sustain a practice (not necessarily 1 practice – 1 social norm)

4

Social norms can be the main driver, or not (they can intersect with other non-normative factors).

5

Some norms specifically contribute to defining men's and women's place in the group, structuring hierarchical relations. These are called gender norms



Reflection Task

# In preparation for the next webinar

Select one practice that you are working on and note up to three norms that you think protect from and/or sustain the practice.

Use the following model:

<b>Practice:</b>	Child Marriage
<b>Norm # ... :</b>	Respectable women marry early
<b>Function:</b>	Contributing / <del>Protective</del>
<b>Subject:</b>	Adolescent girls who reached puberty
<b>N or P Sanctions:</b>	(N) Less desirable marriage prospects at age 18...
<b>Reference Group:</b>	Community members (future in-laws and husbands)
<b>Active in:</b>	Communities in the North of the Country



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