Introduction to Social Norms Theory
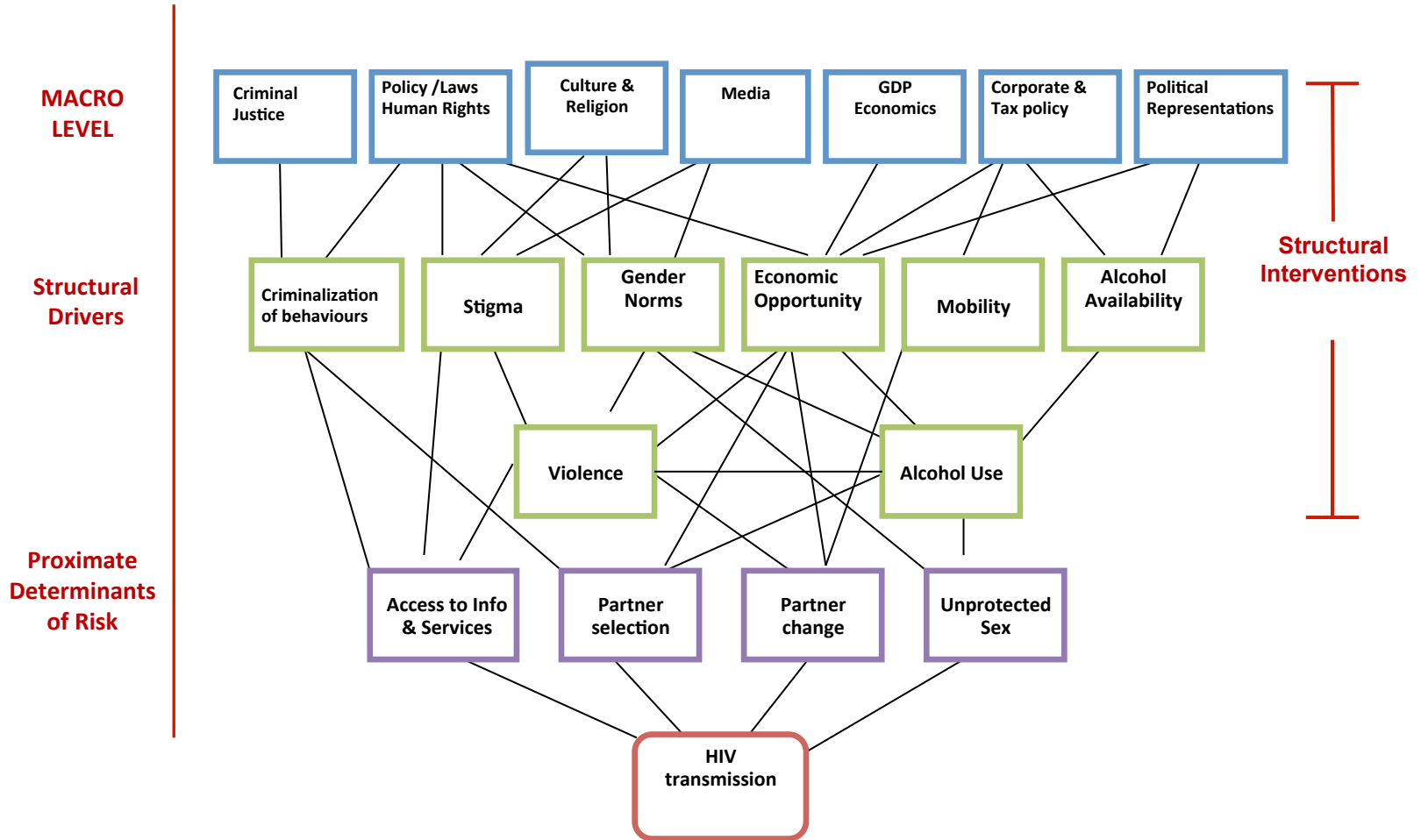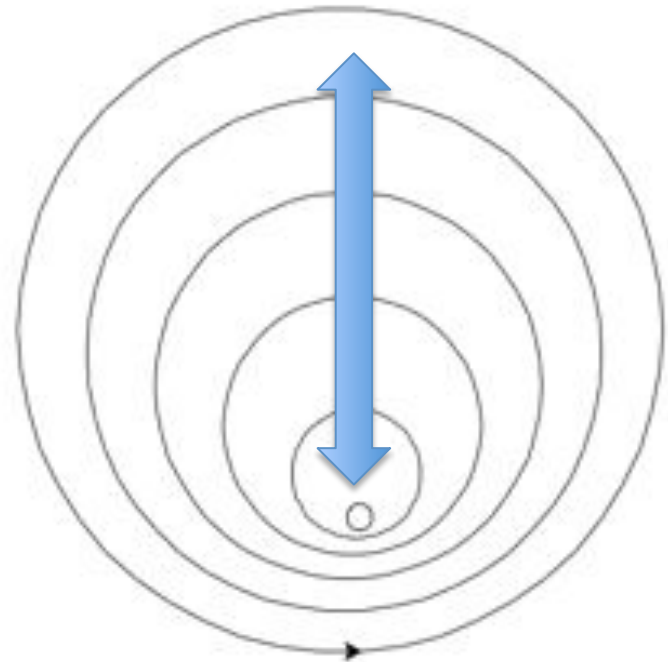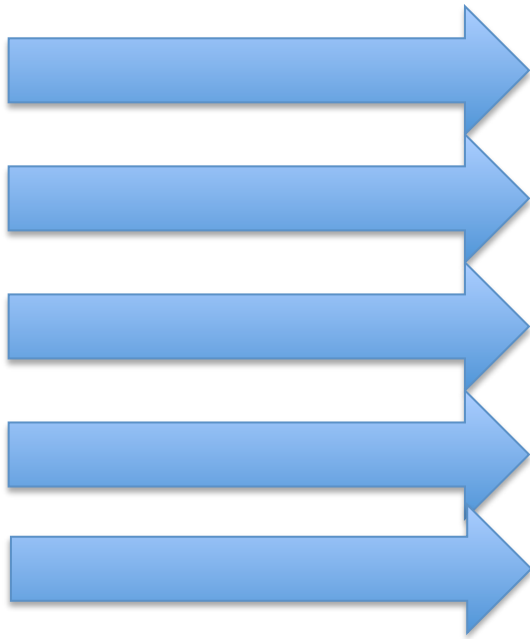
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STRIVE Conceptual Framework
from Lori Heise

Multiple Determination of Action

- Past causes at different levels

- Levels of Causation in Present

What are Norms?

- Statistical
  - Average height of 6th graders in Nepal
- Rules that Influence Human Action
  - **Social norm**
    - Descriptive Norm: Typical action in a group
    - Injunctive Norm: Appropriate action in a group
  - Legal norm, law
  - Moral norm, do regardless of what others do or think one should do

Preview

- Social norms exist within some reference group
- Personal attitude can differ from social norm
- Social norms involve highly interdependent actions and beliefs which require most, many, or enough people to obtain stable change
- Social norms are constituted by an individual's beliefs about others
- To change a social norm, change an individual's beliefs about others
- Social norms and power

A Social Norm Exists Within a Reference Group

Average water consumption per household in Bogotá 1993 - 2006
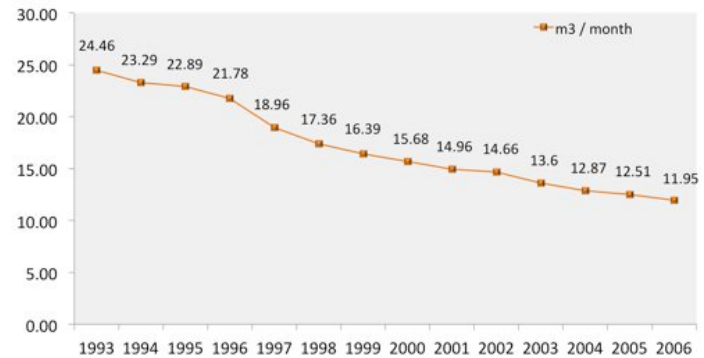
Source: Empresa de Acuedo y Alcantarillado de Bogotá

Personal Attitude

- If one cares about what others in one's reference group do, and what they think one should do,
  - one may comply with a social norm even if it is contrary to what one would do in its absence
- Thus,
  - measuring personal attitudes is unlikely to indicate a social norm,
  - changing personal attitudes is likely not sufficient for changing a social norm

More Independent Action
Individual Adoption of Oral Rehydration Therapy
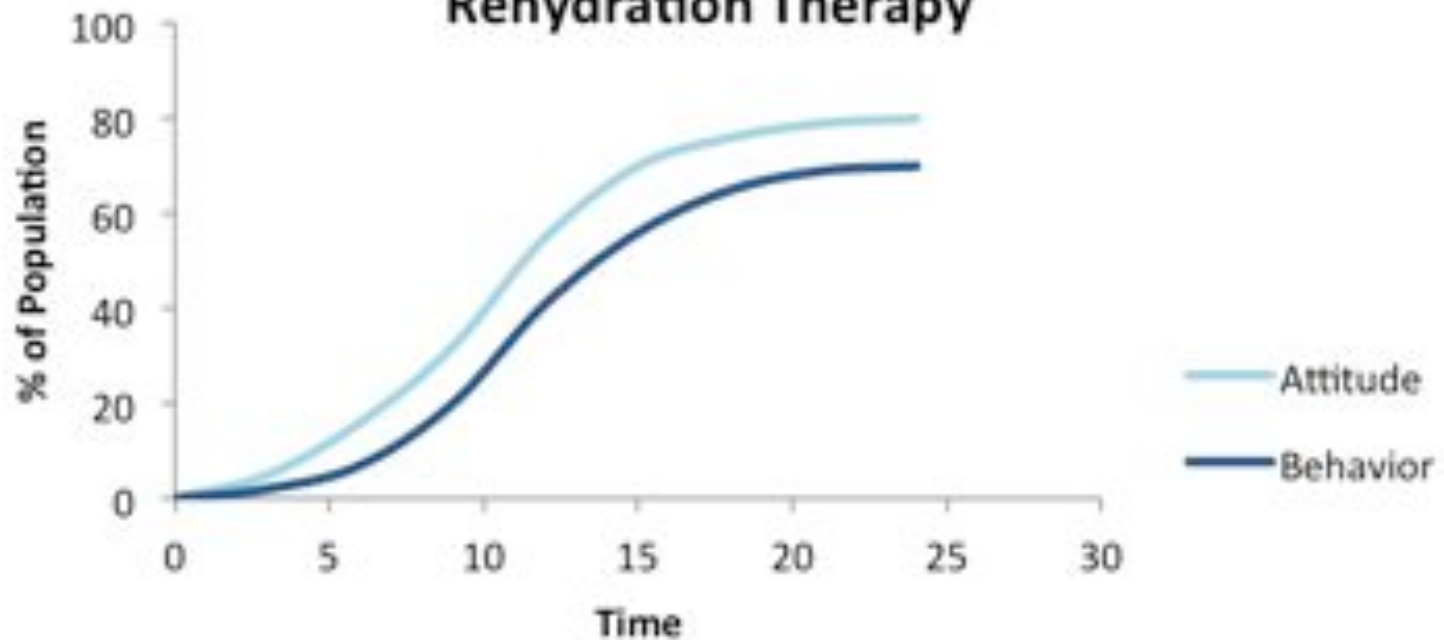
More Interdependent Action
Shift to Community Latrine Usage
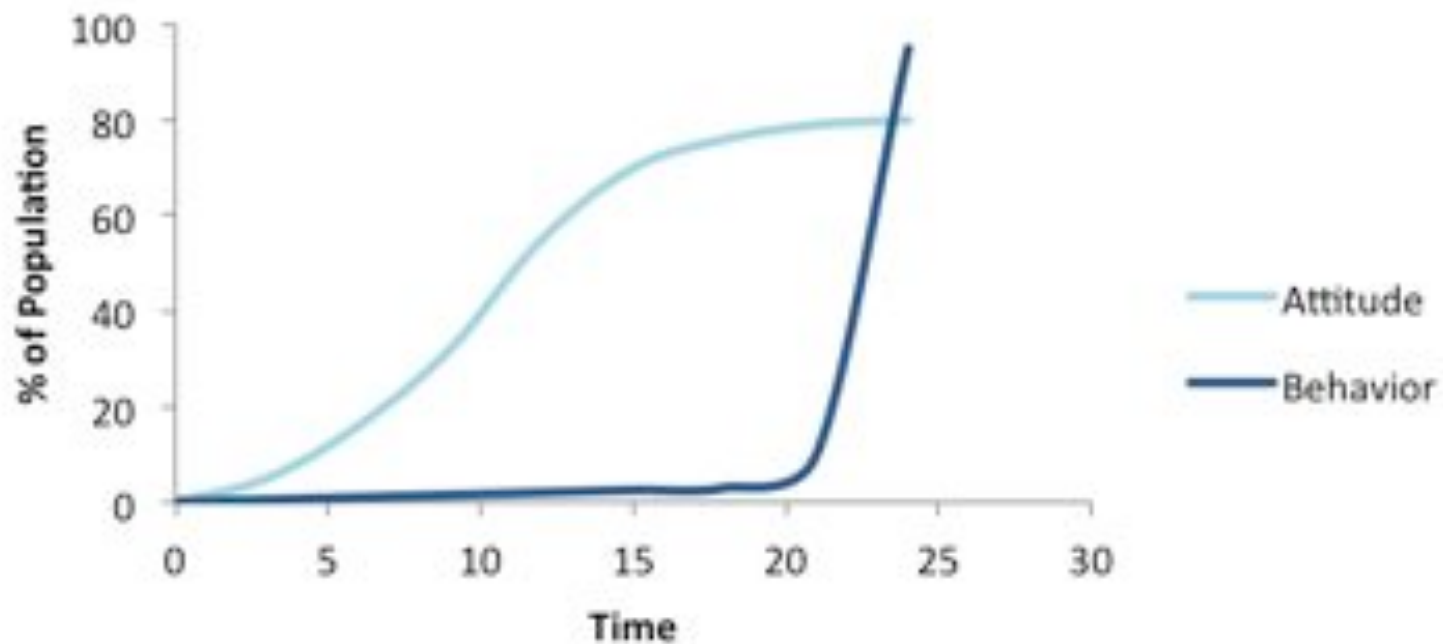
Observe Regularities of Behavior Across Individuals in a Population of Interest

- What causes the regularity?
  - Population Regularity (external to population)
  - Social Proof (one-way descriptive)
  - Social Convention (many-way descriptive)
  - Social Norm (descriptive and injunctive)

  - Legal Norm (state command +)
  - Moral Norm (inner imperative)

Population Regularity

- A cause external to the population of interest: individuals' responses to an extragroup constraint
  - Program Response: change the cause external to the population

Social Proof (One-Way Dependent)

- Following a rule because others do, typically because one believes they know better what they are doing (one-way descriptive)

  – Program Response: provide credible information to opinion leaders (or to many individuals)

Social Convention (Many-Way Interdependent)

- Following a rule because one believes that others do and because others believe one does; mutual coordination (many-way descriptive)
  - Program Response: coordinate in the group a shift from a harmful convention to a more beneficial one

Social Norm
(Descriptive *and* Injunctive) (Bicchieri: Empirical Expectations *and* Normative Expectations)

- Descriptive Aspect
  - Empirical Expectations
    - What I believe others do

- Injunctive Aspect
  - Normative Expectations
    - What I believe others think I am socially obliged to do

- Social Expectations =
  - (Empirical Expectations + Normative Expectations)

Empirical Expectations and Normative Expectations

- The expectations construct directs attention to
  - Beliefs about others, beliefs about what
    - Other people in the reference group do
    - Other people in the reference group believe one should do
  - Which constitute a social norm

- Note: a norm exists for a person even if her beliefs about others are wholly false

Main Points

- To measure social norms
  - Measure beliefs about others

- To change social norms
  - Change beliefs about others
    - Coordinate on new social-normative regulation – change normative expectations
    - Coordinate on new pattern of action – change empirical expectations

Bicchieri on Social Norm, illustrated by Guillot

A social norm

is a → **pattern of behavior**

such that → **individuals prefer to conform to it**

on condition that they believe that

* **most people in their relevant network *conform* to it [empirical expectations]**

* **most people in their relevant network *believe they ought to conform* to it [normative expectations]**

How do we change current social expectations, create new social expectations, or both?

Why Comply with Normative Expectations?

- One recognizes the legitimacy of enough others' normative expectations
  - My fellow villagers made an effort to build latrines, clean the environment, and prevent disease; I should reciprocate,
- Or, one believes that some others in the reference group will positively sanction compliance or negatively sanction noncompliance
  - Esteem, acceptance, pride; Disesteem, exclusion, shame
- **Useful approximation: Social approval and disapproval**

Existing Social Norms are Mostly Automatic

- Social norms are often learned tacitly, and maintained automatically, are nonconscious
- One way to begin a process of change is through spectacular disruption of normal expectations
  - Bringing the old norm into consciousness
  - Prompting reflection about its rationale, its harms, and about the possibility of a beneficial new norm

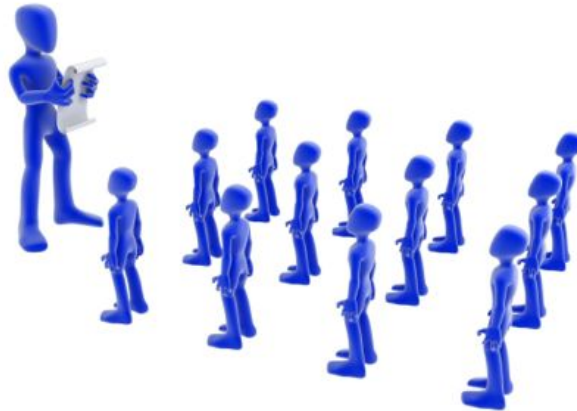# What if the Injunctive Norm Conflicts with the Descriptive Norm?

Legal Norm

- Formally adopted and enforced by state institutions (and other features)
  - Program Response: Harmonize with Moral and Social norms, Guillot ahead

Moral Norm

- Much less conditional on what others do or think one should do than are social norms

- Core moral intuition: Do not injure others, help those in distress, *except for good reason*
  - Program Relevance: For example, when most people agree that violence is morally wrong, but *lack a social norm of violence prevention*

Focus Theory of Normative Conduct (Cialdini)

- Descriptive Norm, Injunctive Norm, Legal Norm, Moral Norm; or Norms of Different Content (e.g., Reconciliation, Revenge)...
  - If they conflict, the more salient norm governs conduct
    - All else equal, descriptive norms are more salient than injunctive norms
- Program Response:
  - Make salient the most beneficial of conflicting norms
  - Mockus: harmonization of norms

Social Norms and Power
adapted from powercube.net

- **Power Over**
  - Greater control of variety of resources: material, human, intellectual, financial
    - *Among those resources are subjects' shared beliefs that the power-holder holds authority over some domain (e.g., husband has authority over household decisions)*
  - More resources = more bargaining power. Responses:
    - Build capacities, resources, of subject individuals (power within, power to)
    - Subjects unite their resources to equalize bargaining power (power with)
    - *Also, subjects coordinate on a more fair assignment of authority, removing that resource from the unfair power-holder (power with)*

Norms and Power, continued
adapted from powercube.net

- **Visible Power**: Observable Decision-Making

- **Hidden Power**: Setting the Political Agenda
  - *E.g., social norm that women can't speak in public*
  - Observable decision-making may seem fair, but women's issues are absent from the decision agenda

- **Invisible Power**: Faceless, Behind our Backs
  - Inherited beliefs, *social norms, roles, authority relations, broader institutions* that result in systematic inequities

Gender Roles: What Women Do
(Role as population regularity, descriptive norm, injunctive norm)

- Natural capacities – e.g., pregnancy, nursing, early childhood care, overlapping due to multiple births – motivating gendered division of labor in many (but not all) societies or settings (Eagly and Wood's biosocial model)
  - Remedies: reproductive modernization, occupational differentiation
- Natural and acquired capacities, and gendered division of labor, create unequal bargaining power between, say, husband and wife
  - Program Response: increase individual and collective capacities of women, including education, more effective rights, and greater freedom to exit relationships

Gender Roles: What Women Should Do

- With little knowledge of alternatives, or opportunities to pursue them,
  - **What Women Do turns into What Women Should Do, Descriptive = Injunctive**

- Program Response: Change Injunctive Norm
  - Women should be free to do what they think it best to do

Back to Structure

- Social structure is the patterns of expectations that agents have about each other's behavior; the patterns of causal connection and interdependence among them; the mostly tacit beliefs and action tendencies of agents (adapted from Elder-Vass 2010)
- Rather than SOCIETY or CULTURE vs. individuals
  - Structure is multiple informal normative institutions and formal organizations, many of them at the middle-level, overlapping or containing one another, horizontally and vertically
- Thus, much of structure can be understood within the framework of social expectations within a reference group

Thanks!!!

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- Graduate student researchers at UC San Diego: John LeJeune, Holly Shakya, Elaine Denny

"Oh, I think not," Varys said, swirling the wine in his cup. "Power is a curious thing, my lord. Perchance you have considered the riddle I posed you that day in the inn?"

"It has crossed my mind a time or to," Tyrion admitted. "The king, the priest, the rich man— who lives and who dies? Who will the swordsman obey? It's a riddle without an answer, or rather, two many answers. All depends on the man with the sword."

"And yet he is no one," Varys said. "He has neither crown nor gold nor favor of the gods, only a piece of pointed steel."

"That piece of steel is the power of life and death."

"Just so…yet if it is the swordsmen who rule us in truth, who do we pretend our kings hold the power? Why should a strong man with a sword ever obey a child king like Joffrey, or a wine-sodden oaf like his father?"

"Because these child kings and drunken oafs can call other strong men, with other swords."

"Then these other swordsmen have the true power. Or do they?" Varys smiled. "Some say knowledge is power. Some tell us that all power comes from the gods. Others say it derives from law. Yet that day on the steps of Baelor's Sept, our godly High Septon and the lawful Queen Regent and your ever-so-knowledgeable servant were as powerless as any cobbler or cooper in the crowd. Who truly killed Eddard Stark, do you think? Joffrey, who gave the command? Ser Ilyn Payne, who swung the sword? Or…another?"

Tyrion cocked his head sideways. "Did you mean to answer your damned riddle, or only to make my head ache worse?"

Varys smiled. "Here, then. **Power resides where men believe it resides. No more and no less**."

"So power is a mummer's trick?"

"A shadow on the wall," Varys murmured, "yet shadows can kill."

Descriptive and Causal Beliefs about the World

- Sources of beliefs
  - Direct Experience
  - Inference
    - Induction, Deduction, Coherence, , Similarity and Contagion (Magic)
  - **Testimony of credible others**
    - Source of most beliefs
      - A social aspect to some of them:
      - I believe what others do, I am born into a set of beliefs
- To change harmful beliefs:
  - Direct experience can outweigh testimony
  - Public deliberations, e.g., making beliefs more coherent
  - Credible provision of information to opinion leaders in population (or to all)

Human Action

- Independent
  - Roulette
  - Take my blood pressure medicine
  - Program Response: change individual's attitude
- Dependent
  - Simon Says
  - Adopt oral rehydration therapy through community
  - Program Response: change attitudes of opinion leaders
- Interdependent
  - Poker
  - Community Sanitation
  - Program Response: change attitudes of much of group, shift to new pattern of action, and to new social norm to sustain it

A Social Norm is Harder to Change

- The worse the consequences are for individual noncompliance

- The higher the proportion of the reference group is needed for a stable shift away from harmful past practice

- The larger or vaguer is the relevant reference group