

How have new social norms emerged as COVID-19 has spread?

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As COVID-19 spread around the world, it became clear that different countries were responding differently to the virus. Penn's Cristina Bicchieri, who studies social norms and how they evolve, wanted to

understand how a national response had affected individual behaviors.

"We decided to do a study in nine different countries, which included Mexico, Colombia, China, South Korea, Italy, Spain, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States," says Bicchieri, the Harvie Professor of Social Thought and Comparative Ethics in the School of Arts & Sciences.

She and Enrique Fatas, a distinguished fellow in Penn's Master of Behavioral and Decision Sciences program, which Bicchieri runs, created a survey focused on how COVID-related norms like social distancing and mask wearing have emerged. Broadly, they found that such changes come about under three conditions, two of which relate to expectations about the actions and beliefs of relevant others. These "others" aren't just family, friends, and neighbors but also people who live in the same city or county and generally people whose behavior matters.

"Public information and the media may change people's expectations about what others do and what others believe is appropriate to do," she says. But even new expectations may not alter behavior. "A crucial step in creating a new social norm is that people must want to change precisely because they have these new expectations," she says. "In other words, their preference for engaging in new types of behavior must be conditional on having certain expectations."

To test this in the context of COVID, Bicchieri and her team presented vignettes to subjects from the nine countries, varying the expectations of the story's main character, then asked participants the likelihood that person would practice social distancing and stay home.

The researchers found that motivating people to modify their behavior requires changing their expectations. "This is very important," Bicchieri

says. "It's not enough to say that sending a message about what others do or approve of will induce a behavioral change. We want to be sure that these social expectations actually push people to behave in a different way."

But is changing expectations enough? In a [public health crisis](#) like the COVID-19 pandemic, Bicchieri says it's crucial not to underestimate the importance of trust in science.

"When we have major public health issues, if people don't trust science, it's useless to convince them that most people are complying with the new rules," she says. "In fact, if you expect the majority to social distance and stay home but you don't trust what scientists say, then you'll be tempted to free ride since you'll believe your risk of contagion is low."

She offers several recommendations the research has shown can make norm-nudging successful. In circumstances like the pandemic, governments shouldn't downplay science nor should they send conflicting messages. Beyond that, they should shape their messages for the audience they want to reach.

Bicchieri gives the example of young people minimizing their risk of getting COVID-19. "A common message, both in Italy and the U.S. was, 'Older people and people with pre-existing conditions are the most vulnerable.' A lot of young people thought, 'I'm not old, I don't have a pre-existing disease, therefore it's safe for me,'" she says. "You have to consider tailoring different messages and changing how you send these messages to different groups."

That speaks to Bicchieri's final point. In communication, showing what people actually do far outperforms telling what they approve of. Describe a person who has accepted the lockdown and follows social

distancing rules, for example, and most people will infer such a person approves of these behaviors. That same inference doesn't happen when someone is simply described as supporting the measures. "Words and deeds are different," Bicchieri says. "We may approve of something and yet still be tempted not to do it. But if we do something, we tend to approve of it."

Future work in this realm will consider whether gender, income, or level of instruction matter in eliciting [behavior](#) change. "We live in a world so globalized that pandemics will happen more than once," she says. "We have to be prepared to try to change people's behaviors. There is a lot of work to be done."

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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