

# Social norms underlying health behaviors: Developing a feedback theory of social norm adoption for public health

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## **Abstract**

Social norms play an important role in understanding health behavior in public health, health disparities, and social determinants of health. This research draws system dynamics to develop a feedback theory of social norm adoption based on published literature. Using grounded theory, the research develops a system dynamics causal loop diagram and identifies three major sets or subsystems of social mechanisms: interpersonal, intrapersonal, and institutional. In the interpersonal, social norm adoption happens from building a critical mass, conforming, belonging, creating a trusting image, social identity, social learning, herding, and acculturation; and, social norm adoption is dissuaded through complacency and changing social pressure. Intrapersonal mechanisms of social norm adoption that reinforce adoption are internalization and self-identity, while strategic ignorance balances adoption. Finally, an institutional mechanism of rewarding encourages social norm adoption, and changing sanctions and weighing costs limit social norm adoption. Across all social mechanisms, power is found to be essential in distinguishing who creates versus follows social norms. The resulting feedback theory of social norm adoption can serve as a launching point for public health researchers to conduct systems-level, equity-focused research.







