



How Are Social Norms Different: Not Just An Academic Exercise

Short Guide Series for Practitioners

October 2021



WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS SHORT GUIDE?

This guide explains how social norms are different from attitudes, behaviors, morals, conventions and values and why that matters to programming. It follows upon our **second short guide**, which explores why integrating social norms into accountability, corruption or integrity related programming matters and highlights possible negative consequences of the failure to do so. Our **first short guide** offers an overview on social norms and corruption.



Why is it important to understand the distinction between social norms and related concepts?

The strategy and tactics that are effective in changing one concept may not work for another. For instance, changing attitudes is rarely effective for changing knowledge or social norms. The same applies to knowledge, values, conventions or morals. **Understanding the differences between these phenomena enables better corruption analysis and leads to more effective anti-corruption strategies.** However, distinguishing between these various concepts is not always easy.

What are social norms?

Social norms are the unwritten rules about the right way to behave within a group. These rules take the form of mutual expectations about what is appropriate and typical behavior for that group in a particular context.

Mutual expectations are made up of beliefs that are often implicit and based on:

- a.) what we see or believe others do; and,
- b.) what we think others expect us to do.



How do attitudes and social norms differ?

An attitude is a personally held belief or judgment (e.g., favor or disfavor) about something or someone.

Attitudes are not contingent on expectations about what others do or think, though they may be influenced by others. This distinguishes them from social norms which only exists in relationship with others.



How do behaviors differ from social norms?

The acts of paying a bribe, giving preferential treatment to family, and demanding sexual favors in return for a promotion are all behaviors. **What an individual actually does is a behavior.** They result from a combination of factors such as social norms, attitudes, abilities, circumstances, and morals as they play out in a particular context. **Social norms can incentivize behaviors but are not the same thing as a behavior.**

Do attitudes or social norms drive behavior?

In a simple world, attitudes would have a direct influence on our behavior; for instance, if one feels that referring his/her unqualified nephew for a job position is a bad thing to do, then he/she would not do it.

However, research shows that attitudes can be overridden by social norms. When faced with a sufficiently strong social norm, people will do things they do not agree with. Thus, even if one felt that referring his/her unqualified nephew was a bad thing to do, but experienced the pressure of social approbation to do so, one might do it anyway.



What is the distinction between morals and social norms?

Like attitudes, morals may be influenced by but are not dependent on what others do or think a person should do. **Morals are individually held standards regarding right versus wrong, applicable to all situations at all times.** The mutual expectations of the “right way” to behave should not be confused with the “morally right” thing to do. For social norms, “right” means the expected and accepted thing to do, not a conviction about what morality demands.



What is the relationship between culture and social norms?

Culture is all around us, influencing individuals and being influenced by individuals. It is socially transmitted and encompasses much more than social norms. It includes the social institutions, language, history, geography, religion, arts, attitudes, common behaviors, and cuisine of people that collectively inform their way of life. **Social norms are a dimension of culture, but not equivalent to it.**



How is a convention distinct from a social norm?

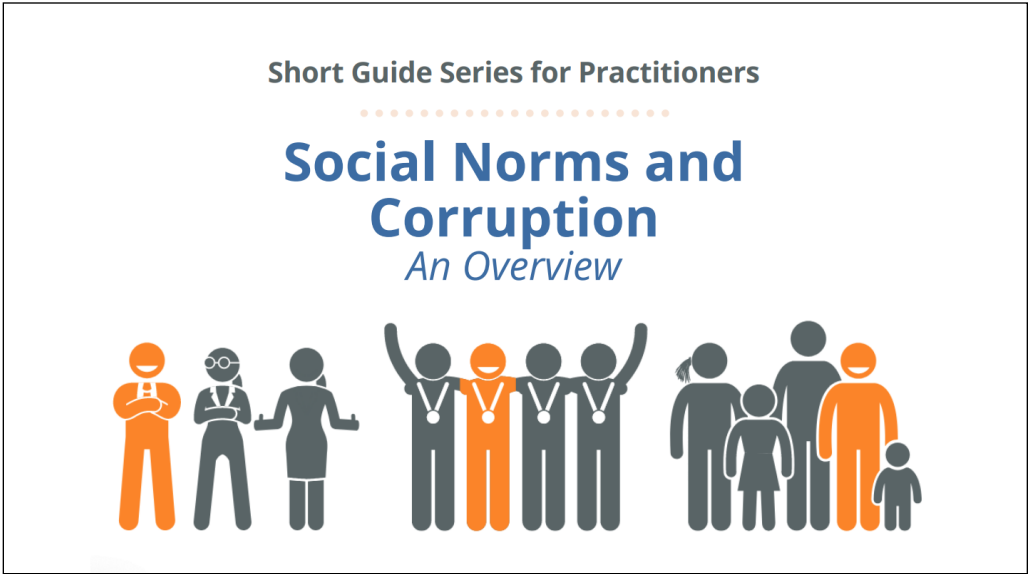
Behaviors that are commonly carried out to meet a need or for convenience are called conventions. Unlike social norms where social pressure is a critical motivation behind compliance, **there is no role of social expectation driving a convention.**



What are values and how do they differ from social norms?

Values are internally held belief systems that inform our conduct and influence how we see the world. They are not specific to certain circumstances or situations but are more like general principles to live by. Values could include honesty, hard-work, or respecting tradition. Conversely social norms are created and maintained within the web of relationships found in a group and are highly situation specific. **Norms and values both drive behavior but the former is due to the social pressure exerted by the group, while values influence us internally.**

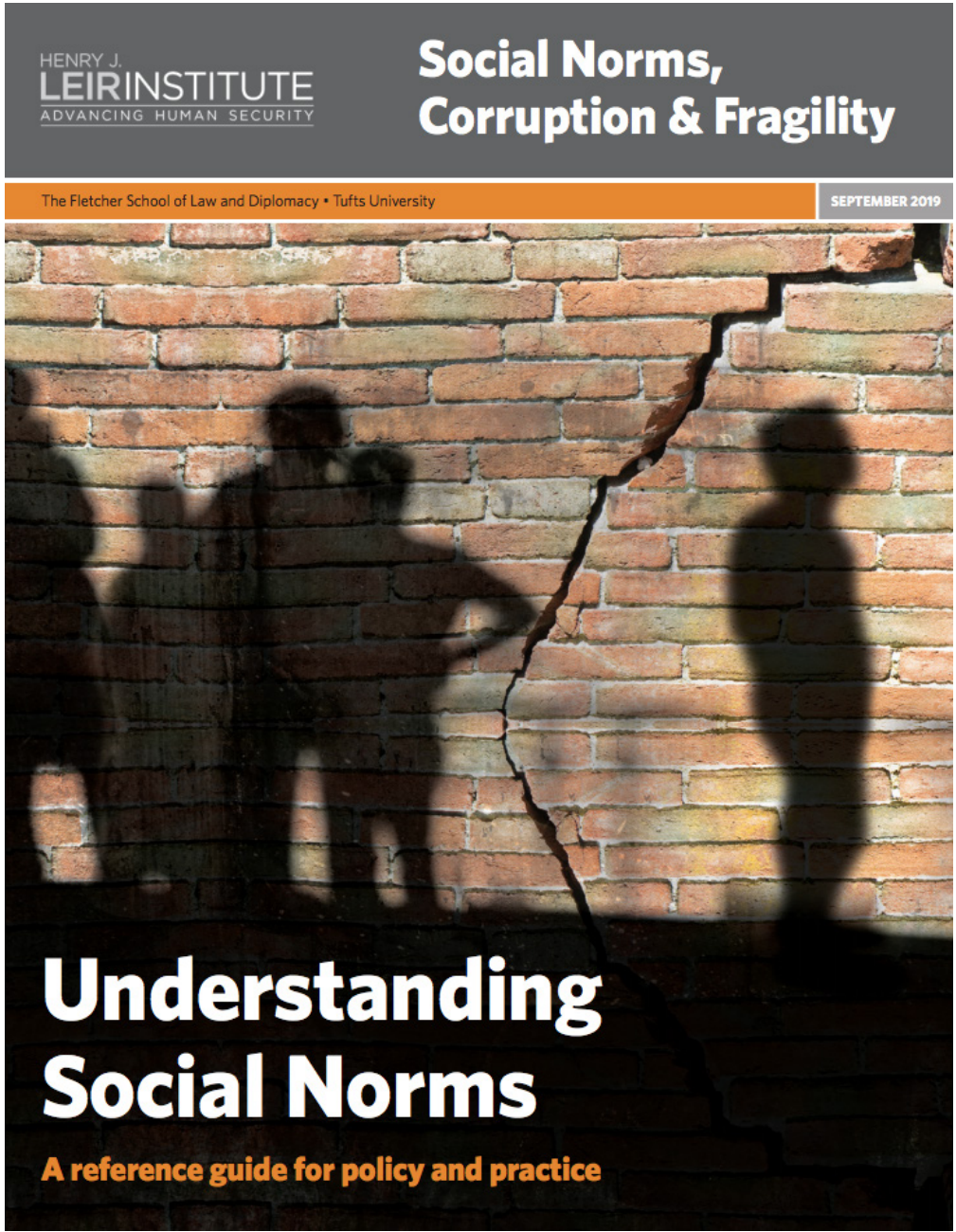
For more about social norms and their role in corruption refer to:



**CJL's first short guide for practitioners:
Social Norms and Corruption (An Overview)**



**CJL's second short guide for practitioners:
Why Social Norms Matter to Anti-Corruption**



**CJL's comprehensive reference guide
for understanding Social Norms**



**CJL's review of Social Norms Change M&E
for the Anti-Corruption M&E Professional**

WHAT IS THE CORRUPTION JUSTICE AND LEGITIMACY PROGRAM?

The Corruption, Justice, and Legitimacy (CJL) Program is a research-to-practice initiative committed to improving the effectiveness of anti-corruption programming in contexts of endemic corruption. The program has developed a systems-based approach to corruption analysis that empowers practitioners to see the interconnected nature of drivers and enablers of corruption. After testing the approach in several fragile states, CJL realized that more effective responses would also require more insight into the conflict, peacebuilding, and corruption nexus along with greater practical guidance on how to integrate social norms into programming.



For more from the CJL Program follow:



WEBSITE



**THE CORRUPTION IN FRAGILE
STATES BLOG**



LINKEDIN