



Social influences on the motivation to quit smoking: Main and moderating effects of social norms

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ABSTRACT

The present study extends the previous research on the social influences on quitting by investigating inconsistencies between different types of social norms and their main and moderating effects on quitting intentions. The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) served as the theoretical framework. Social influences were operationalised by subjective quitting norm (significant others' expectations that one should quit), descriptive quitting norm (significant others' quitting behaviour), and descriptive smoking norm (partner's smoking). Because gender differences had previously been reported, norm effects were also analysed with respect to gender. A total of 168 smokers who had a partner (47% men, mean age $M = 34$, $SD = 16$) completed measures of TPB variables (including subjective quitting norm), descriptive quitting norm, descriptive smoking norm, and smoking behaviour. Subjective and descriptive quitting norms were more inconsistent in women than in men. The descriptive quitting norm enhanced the TPB prediction of intention by 5%. A three-way interaction accounted for an additional 3% of the variance and revealed both that subjective and descriptive quitting norms interacted in their prediction and that gender moderated this effect: the subjective quitting norm correlated positively to quitting intention only in women with a strong descriptive quitting norm. All analyses were controlled for number of cigarettes per day. These findings confirmed that it is important to distinguish subjective and descriptive norms and that differences exist in how these norms motivate women and men to quit smoking. Consistent quitting norms such as quitting of significant others in combination with their expectations that one should quit appear to be less common but more important in women to form a corresponding intention.

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1. Introduction

Smoking is the largest single cause of preventable death and disease in the world (WHO Report on the Global Tobacco Epidemic, 2008). Given increasing efforts to ban smoking, many smokers perceive a social pressure to quit (Royce, Corbett, Sorensen, & Ockene, 1997) and this pressure is associated with quitting intentions (van den Putte, Yzer, & Brunsting, 2005) and changes in smoking behaviour (West, McEwen, Bolling, & Owen, 2001; Westmaas, Wild, & Ferrence, 2002). At the same time, many smokers have a partner who smokes (McGee & Williams, 2006), which hinders their chances of quitting (Bjornson et al., 1995; Chandola, Head, & Bartley, 2004; Homish & Leonard, 2005; Manchon Walsh et al., 2007). By contrast, the quitting of one's partner increases the chances of personal quitting (Coppotelli & Orleans, 1985). Even

though the social pressure to quit appears to be stronger in female than in male smokers (Royce et al., 1997), it appears only to increase the chances of quitting in male smokers (Westmaas et al., 2002). In addition, female smokers appear to be more likely than male smokers to have a partner who smokes (Homish & Leonard, 2005; Manchon Walsh et al., 2007), which hinders their chances of quitting (Bjornson et al., 1995; Homish & Leonard, 2005; Manchon Walsh et al., 2007); however, female smokers seem to have increased chances of quitting when their partner quits (Coppotelli & Orleans, 1985). These different social influences demonstrate how norms are communicated either by the expectations of others prescribing an approved behaviour (i.e., social pressure or subjective norm) or by the behaviour of others indicating an approved behaviour (i.e., descriptive norm). Furthermore, these norms can be inconsistent (e.g., approving of quitting and smoking). To extend these findings further, the present study examines subjective and descriptive norms within the theory of planned behaviour (TPB), taking gender differences into consideration. Specifically, we tested any inconsistencies between the norms, and main and moderating effects of each in the prediction of quitting intention. In doing so, we tested whether the effects differed by gender.

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1.1. Theory of planned behaviour

The theory of planned behaviour (TPB; Ajzen, 1991) is one of the most widely applied models of the cognitive determinants of behaviour, and it takes into account social and personal influences. Social influences are conceptualised by one’s perceptions of whether the people who are important to oneself think one should or should not adopt a specific behaviour (*subjective norm*, e.g., “significant others think that I should quit”). Personal influences comprise one’s positive evaluation of that behaviour (*attitude*, e.g., “quitting prevents me from suffering from serious diseases”) as well as the degree of control one believes to have over the behaviour (*perceived behaviour control*, PBC, e.g., “I am able to quit”). The TPB postulates these three cognitions to influence behaviour through their impact upon *intention* (e.g., “to quit”). Thus, a stronger subjective norm, a more positive attitude, and stronger PBC in relation to certain behaviour should result in a stronger intention, which, in turn should lead to increased chances of adopting that behaviour.

The TPB has been applied successfully to a wide range of behaviours and is supported by several meta-analytic reviews (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Hagger, Chatzisarantis, & Biddle, 2002; Sheeran & Orbell, 1998). In the context of smoking, the stronger a smoker’s subjective norm to quit (Bledsoe, 2006; Droomers, Schrijvers, & Mackenbach, 2004; Hu & Lanese, 1998), the more positive his or her attitude towards quitting (Bledsoe, 2006; Droomers et al., 2004; Godin, Valois, Lepage, & Desharnais, 1992; Hu & Lanese, 1998; Norman, Conner, & Bell, 1999), and the stronger his or her PBC over quitting (Godin et al., 1992; Hu & Lanese, 1998; Norman et al., 1999), the stronger his or her quitting intention was found to be. Meta-analyses, however, have found the subjective norm to be less predictive of intention than attitude or PBC (e.g., Armitage & Conner, 2001; Ravis & Sheeran, 2003). It has been argued that this relative weakness of the subjective norm’s influence indicates that the social influence construct is weakly operationalised, plays a less important role on intention formation, or is conceptualised too narrowly. This latter argument highlights the importance of distinguishing clearly between different types of social norms.

1.2. Normative influences and the theory of planned behaviour

Considering normative influences on behaviour, it is crucial to discriminate between the *ought* (injunctive) and the *is* (descriptive) meaning of social norms (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). As displayed in Table 1, the injunctive social norm, corresponding to the subjective norm construct of the TPB, characterises perceived social pressure, i.e., people’s expectations of social rewards from significant others for approved behaviour (e.g., quitting) or punishments for disapproved behaviour (e.g., smoking). The *descriptive social norm* refers to perceptions of what significant others do in a given domain (e.g., quitting or smoking). That is, people watching others receive consensus information about what is normal or approved which may motivate them to engage in the same behaviour. Smokers, whose partners also smoke, for example, perceive smoking as normal behaviour and thus might have more difficulty in quitting (Bjornson et al., 1995; Chandola et al., 2004; Homish & Leonard, 2005; Manchon

Walsh et al., 2007). Similarly, smokers whose partners have quit perceive quitting as approved behaviour and so may be more likely to quit themselves (Coppotelli & Orleans, 1985).

Growing evidence supports the role of the descriptive norm as an additional predictor of intentions within the TPB. In their meta-analyses, Ravis and Sheeran (2003) demonstrated that descriptive norms explain an additional 5% of the variance in intention after the TPB variables have been taken into account. Furthermore, the descriptive norm had a higher predictive value than the subjective norm, suggesting that perceiving others’ behaviour is of greater importance for the formation of an intention than perceiving their expectations. One recent study in the domain of smoking cessation confirmed this finding regarding the intention to quit smoking (Rise, Kovac, Kraft, & Moan, 2008).

1.3. Main and moderating effects of social norms

Research has shown that social norms have independent effects on intentions: the stronger the subjective and descriptive norms regarding a particular behaviour, the stronger intentions people form to adopt it (Ravis & Sheeran, 2003). Because different types of social norms may apply to a specific behaviour, some norms can be inconsistent (see Table 1). For example, a smoker might perceive a strong subjective norm approving quitting, even while perceiving a strong descriptive norm approving smoking. This competition between normative influences suggests that social norms interact when influencing both the formation of intention and the adoption of behaviour (cf., Cialdini & Trost, 1998). In light of such interactions, consistent norms should strengthen each other. Thus, a smoker perceiving a strong subjective quitting norm may form a stronger quitting intention and be more likely to quit if he or she also perceives a strong descriptive quitting norm or a weak descriptive smoking norm. Inconsistent norms, by contrast, may attenuate each other: another smoker perceiving a strong subjective quitting norm, but also perceiving a strong descriptive smoking norm or a weak descriptive quitting norm may form a weaker quitting intention and, as a result, be less likely to quit.

1.4. Gender differences

Social norms comprise gender-role norms and expectations concerning gender-appropriate behaviour, including proscriptions against women engaging in health-risk behaviours such as smoking (Waldron, 1991). Although the social acceptance of women’s smoking has increased since the early twentieth century, women may still perceive higher social disapproval of smoking than do men (Waldron, 1991). Similarly, female smokers may experience stronger social pressures to quit than do male smokers (Royce et al., 1997). In the past, social disapproval of women’s smoking has prevented women from smoking, as reflected by the persistence of a lower prevalence of this behaviour in women, particularly among older cohorts (WHO Report on the Global Tobacco Epidemic, 2008). Following this, female smokers are more likely to have a partner who smokes (Homish & Leonard, 2005; Manchon Walsh et al., 2007).

Table 1
Different types of social norms: definition and operationalisation.

	Subjective norm (social pressure; injunctive norm)	Descriptive norm
Definition	Expectations of significant others that one should adopt a specific behaviour (i.e., the “ought” to be done)	Behaviour of significant others indicating a normal or approved behaviour (i.e., the what “is” done)
Information	Normative	Consensus; competence
Study constructs	Subjective quitting norm	Descriptive quitting norm
Operationalisation	Most people who are important to me think that I should quit smoking / want me to quit smoking (2 items)	Most people who are important to me have quit smoking themselves (1 item) Descriptive smoking norm Does your partner smoke? (1 item)

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