



**To:** City Development

**From:** Adrian Davis

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**Subject:** Essential Evidence on a page: No 62 'Nudge': Normative social influences on behaviour change

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Top line: Research suggests that normative information is a powerful but undetected form of social influence. Although people may not believe that the behaviours of others should motivate them to change their behaviours, such as to conserve energy, their behaviour is powerfully influenced by it nonetheless.

Over the past decade a growing body of evidence has been developed around the importance of normative social influences ie that people will change or adapt behaviours to those which they see as accepted by those around them eg neighbours/colleagues and other peers. For example, in one study simply telling hotel guests that a majority of other guests reused their towels boosted towel reuse by more than 34% more than telling them to do it for the sake of the environment.<sup>1</sup> The attractiveness of this 'nudge' theory is now recognised within the No. 10 Unit within the UKCoalition Government.

One of the central aspects derived from research into normative social influences has been the finding that people do not consciously admit to the influence of such peers. In studies exploring personal actions to address climate change, for example, it has been contended that individuals sorely underestimate the extent to which their actions in a situation are determined by the similar actions of others. In examining the relationship between conservation efforts and beliefs about saving energy, saving money, benefiting future generations, and protecting the environment the strongest predictor of energy conservation was the belief that other people are doing it, despite the fact that it was rated as the least important motivating factor.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, an intervention using information printed on door hangers distributed to residents about energy saving using 4 simple messages, followed by electricity meter readings, found that the three messages using arguments based on environment, economic, and social responsibility motivations were rated highest by residents interviewed. However, these messages faired worst at spurring conservation behaviour than just providing people with normative information about their neighbours' conservation efforts. Again, residents did not detect the influence of the normative messages, rating them as least motivating.

The above results are consistent with a growing body of research on environmental education and pro-environmental behaviour that appealing to people to do the right thing, or protect the environment, rarely succeeds in increasing levels of pro-environmental behaviour. This is not to say that environmental protection or social responsibility cannot motive pro-environmental behaviour, only that messages promoting an increase in conservation fail to produce behaviour change. It may be that some are already engaging in conservation efforts for these reasons. However, what is needed, the nudge theory argues, is an alternative motivational basis that appeals to a different portion of the population or an alternative behaviour that has not yet been linked with environmental or social responsibility.

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<sup>1</sup> Cialdini, R. 2001 *Influence: Science and practice*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

<sup>2</sup> Nolan, J., Schultz, W., Cialdini, R., Goldstein, N., Griskevicius, V. 2008 Normative social influence is under-detected, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34: 913-924.