

# Social Norms:

What are they? How can we change them?

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# Macro and microanalysis

- Different ways to approach collective behaviors (especially social norms)
  - **Functions** performed within a culture, economy,...
  - **Reasons** why people engage in these behaviors
- We need to understand reasons (a micro-analysis) if the goal is to change behavior.

# Concepts used

- Preference
- Belief
- Social Expectation
- Reference network

- Preferences may be strictly *individual*, or *social*. A social preference is one that takes into account the preferences of other people that matter to the decision maker.
- Preferences may be *unconditional*, in that one's choice is not influenced by external factors, like the belief that others do certain things or approve/disapprove of certain actions.
- Or they may be *conditional*, in that one's choice will depend upon what one think others do and/or believe should be done.

➤ **Expectations:** *Expectations* are beliefs.

- Beliefs may be *factual*, like “I believe that this table is broken”
- Beliefs may be *normative*, like “I believe that all women should cover their heads and faces”
- *Social expectations*: beliefs about other people’s behaviors and beliefs

- Social expectations can be factual, *empirical*: beliefs about how other people are going to act or react in certain situations.

*“In the Maya community, girls always marry right after puberty”*

- Social expectations can be *normative*: express our belief that other people *think* that certain behaviors are praiseworthy and should be carried out, and others should be avoided (second-order beliefs).

*“In the Plateau region of Congo, young mothers believe that people think that a woman should never disobey her mother in law”*

# Reference network

- People that matter to one's choices (family, village, friends, clan, religious authority, co-workers, ...)

In Brazil, favelas dwellers punish stealing within the group, but not stealing outside the group

- *What I expect them to do matters: it influences my choice*
- *What I think they think I ought to do matters: it influences my choice*

# Putting these concepts to use:

- Observe a **collective pattern of behavior**
- Distinguish among patterns according to the **reasons** people have to adhere to them
  - Are their choices influenced by social expectations?
  - If so, which expectations are most important?

# Using umbrellas



# Custom

*Is a pattern of behavior such that individuals prefer to conform to it because it meets their needs*

- Consistency of pattern is *caused* by actors' similar motivations and conditions. Each acts individually, and the result is an emergent pattern of action that reproduces itself
- Preferences are **unconditional**: *“Whatever other people do, I will use my umbrella if it rains”*
- Empirical expectations (expecting others to do..) do not motivate us to act: *“Yes, I know lots of people use umbrellas, so what?”*

# A fashion



# Descriptive norm

*Is a pattern of behavior such that individuals prefer to conform to it on condition that they believe that most people in their relevant network conform to it (empirical expectation).*

➤ *Conditional preferences*

➤ *Empirical expectations motivate us to act*

# A signaling system



- Examples of descriptive norms:
  - Fashions
  - Fads
  - Rules of etiquette
  - Conventions like signaling systems
  - ‘Salting’ the tip jar
- **Unilateral** vs. **multilateral** expectations:
  - imitation vs. coordination

# Why conditional preferences?

It is in our interest to conform because:

- Informational influence (want to be right)
  - Uncertain, ambiguous situations
  - Herding behavior
  - What influential people do (“dress for success”)
  
- Normative influence (want to be liked, to belong)
  - Social pressure
    - Usually light with descriptive norms
  
- Coordination motive

# Waiting in line



# Social norm

*A rule of behavior such that individuals prefer to conform to it on condition that they believe that (a) most people in their relevant network conform to it (empirical expectation), and (b) most people in their relevant network believe they ought to conform to it (normative expectation) and may sanction deviations.*

- *Conditional preferences*
- *Empirical expectations*
- *Normative expectations*

A definition of norms in terms of preferences and expectations has several advantages:

- It allows to differentiate various types of collective patterns of behavior
- It is *operational*

Check for the presence of norms: If individuals share the same normative expectations, it indicates the presence of a social norm

Make *testable predictions* about the conditions under which a norm will be followed. (What happens if people's expectations change?)

Allows to identify causally relevant variables

# Conditional preferences

- *Conditional preferences* imply that I have a **reason** to be fair, cooperate or practice FGC, which may be different from my liking and endorsing fairness, cooperation or FGC
- A conditional preference for following a norm is different from an unconditional preference for what the norm stands for
- Conditional preferences imply that one may follow a social norm in the presence of the relevant expectations, but do not follow the norm in the absence of such expectations

# Consequences

- To **abandon** a social norm, it is necessary to change people's expectations within their reference network
- To **create** a social norm, it is necessary to induce the right kind of expectations (empirical and normative) in a reference network

# Empirical expectations

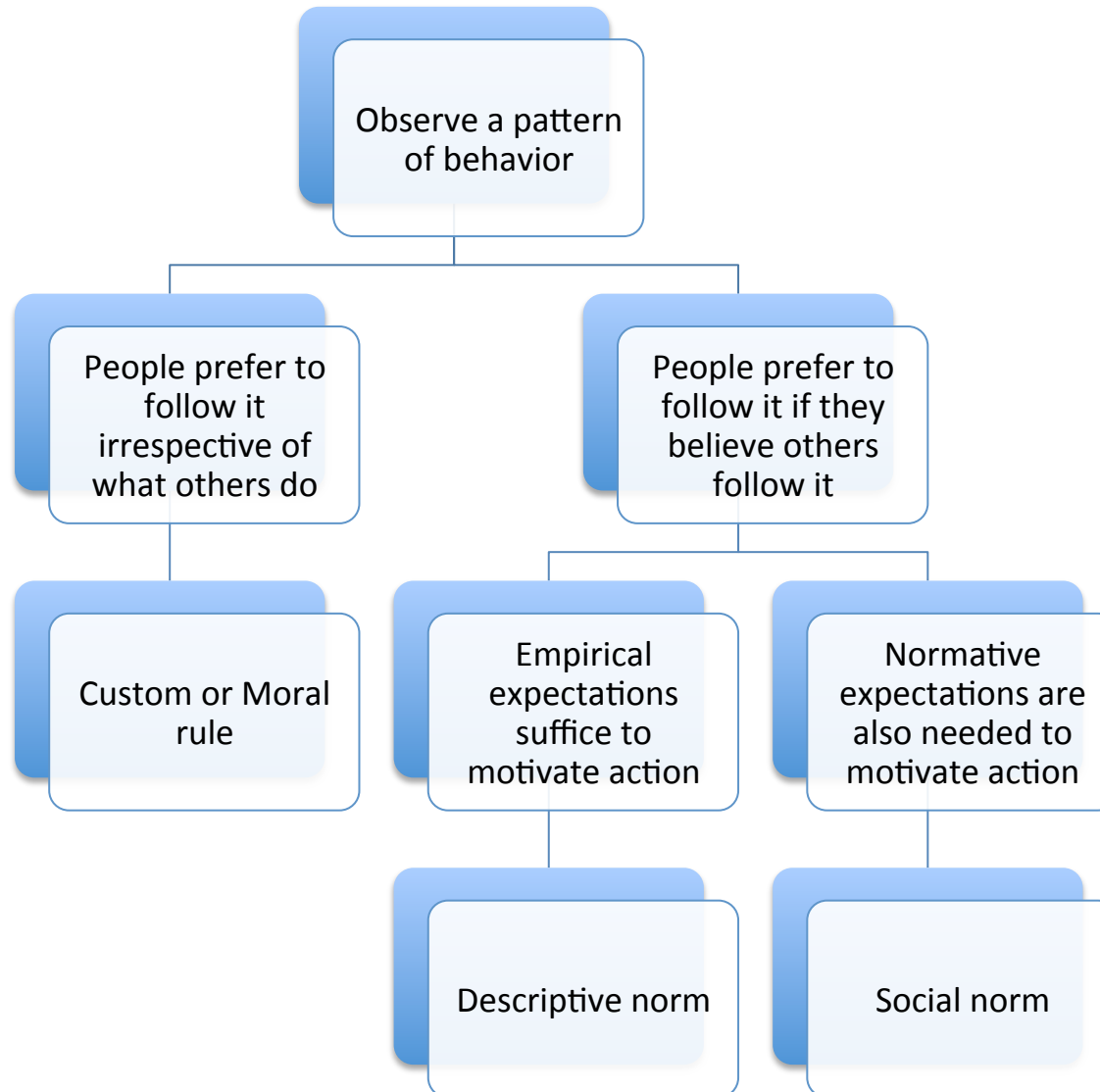
- we believe that most people do...
  - we have seen that most people do...
  - we are told by a trusted source that most people do...
- Empirical expectations *may not be sufficient* to motivate compliance with a social norm (we may be tempted to cheat..)

# Normative expectations

To further motivate conformity to a social norm, we need *normative expectations*, too

- we believe that most people think we ought to do...
  - we know that most people think the right thing to do is...
  - we know that we will be ostracized if we do...
  - we believe that we will be admired if we do not do...
- Sanctions involved

# Diagnostics



- Important to distinguish between personal normative beliefs and normative expectations:
  - **Personal normative belief:** “I believe I ought to marry my daughter as soon as possible”
  - **Normative expectation:** “I believe my fellow villagers think that I ought to marry my daughter as soon as possible”
- We know that personal normative beliefs, alone, do not positively correlate with behavior, nor they can predict what a person will do (*70% of Dutch are pro organ donation, only 28% signed up*)
- Strong correlation with appropriate behavior when mutual normative expectations are present

# A few problems we may encounter

- **Belief traps:** personal beliefs/attitudes do not match observable behavior. Misperception of norms
- **Inconsistent expectations:** what people observe is different from what everybody preaches

# Belief traps

*In a UNICEF study on violence on children, caregivers who report a negative judgment on punishment still punish in large numbers (country median: 50%). It may be the case that those caregivers observe punishment, or what they think are the consequences of punishment, and **have no reason to believe** that those who conform to the norm dislike it as much as they do. So they do not dare speak out or openly transgress, and a norm nobody likes keeps being followed or, if transgressions occur, they will be kept secret.*

# Pluralistic Ignorance

- A cognitive state in which one believes one's attitudes/ personal normative beliefs are *different* from those of similarly situated others, even if public behavior is *identical*

*I observe extensive child beating, and assume parents beat their children because they believe it is right and good for the child. I think that it is excessive punishment, and does not benefit the child. In fact, many of us think corporal punishment is not right. But we do not talk openly about it. So we keep beating our children.*

# What went wrong?

- Individuals engage in social comparison with their reference network
- Others' behavior is observable, or its consequences are observable
- No transparent communication is possible
  - Do not express views that may put us to disadvantage
- Assume that others' behavior is consistent with their attitudes and beliefs
- Infer that all endorse the observed norm
- Conform to shared norm

## ***Female genital cutting prevalence vs. support to the practice among women 15-49***

<b>Area name</b>	<b>Time period</b>	<b>Prevalence</b>	<b>Support</b>	
Somalia	2006	97.9	64.5	MICS 2006
Guinea	2005	95.6	69.2	DHS 2005
Djibouti	2006	93.1	36.6	MICS 2006, table CP5.
Egypt	2008	91.1	54	DHS 2008, table 15.1, page 197.
<b>Sudan</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>89.3</b>	<b>23.7</b>	<b>SHHS 2006</b>
Mali	2007	85.2	76	DHS 2006
Ethiopia	2005	74.3	31.4	DHS 2005, table 16.13, page 253.
<b>Burkina Faso</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>72.5</b>	<b>11.1</b>	<b>MICS 2006, table CP5.</b>
Mauritania	2007	72.2	53.4	MICS 2007
<b>Chad</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>44.9</b>	<b>49.4</b>	<b>DHS 2004, table 11.1, page 170.</b>
Yemen	1997	22.6	41	DHS 1997

# How to detect PI

- Collect personal normative beliefs
- Collect second-order normative beliefs (normative expectations)
- Check for mutual consistency of normative expectations
- In PI perceived and objective consensus differ

# Inconsistent expectations

- What happens when empirical and normative expectations diverge?

*“We know that bribing is common, but we also know that people condemn it”*

*“We know that good parents are expected to marry their daughters after puberty, but now many families wait and send their daughters to school”*

- When empirical expectations clash with normative expectations, people will tend to follow what other people do, not what they say ‘should be done’

## We now have a more precise understanding of social norms

A social norm

is a

rule of behavior

such that

individuals prefer  
to conform to it

on conditions that  
they believe that

- most people in their relevant network conform to it [empirical expectations]

- most people in their relevant network believe they ought to conform to it [normative expectations]

How can we change (or induce) these social expectations?



# Common features of norm creation/ change

- Collective action problems
- Shared reasons
- Collective change of expectations
- Coordinated action

# Norm creation

When do we need norms?

# Open Defecation

*"Sanitation or lack thereof is a public health issue, and people are affected by their neighbors and communities' sanitation status, as well as their own, and the costs of open defecation are felt throughout the community."*

*"Open defecation also has considerable social costs; loss of dignity and privacy or risk of physical attack and sexual violence may not be easily valued in monetary units. But these issues are the reality when sanitation facilities are not available."*(The Water and Sanitation Program)

# When a social norm is needed

## Social Dilemma

- A situation in which what is in the best interest of each individual makes everyone worse off.
  - OD is individually good (saves building and maintaining toilet) but bad for the community → diseases spread more rapidly
  - Not washing hands → transmit diseases

## Tragedy of the Commons

- A situation in which multiple individuals, acting independently and rationally, deplete a shared, limited resource, even when it is clear that it is not in anyone's long-term interest for this to happen
  - Use of scarce water → depletes water supply
  - Unregulated groundwater extraction

# Subsidies do not work

- Effort aimed at improving sanitation in poor countries such as Ghana suggest that provision of facilities such as toilets, alone, is not sufficient to improve communities' health through improved sanitation
- Monetary incentives do not work
- Even people who own toilets will practice OD

# What works?

What is common to successful programs?

- Information shared within the entire community (why a practice has negative consequences for all)
- Collective change of factual beliefs and attitudes (*elicit disgust*)
- Collective decision to enact change (coordinated action)
- Realize social dilemma problem: **Norm creation**

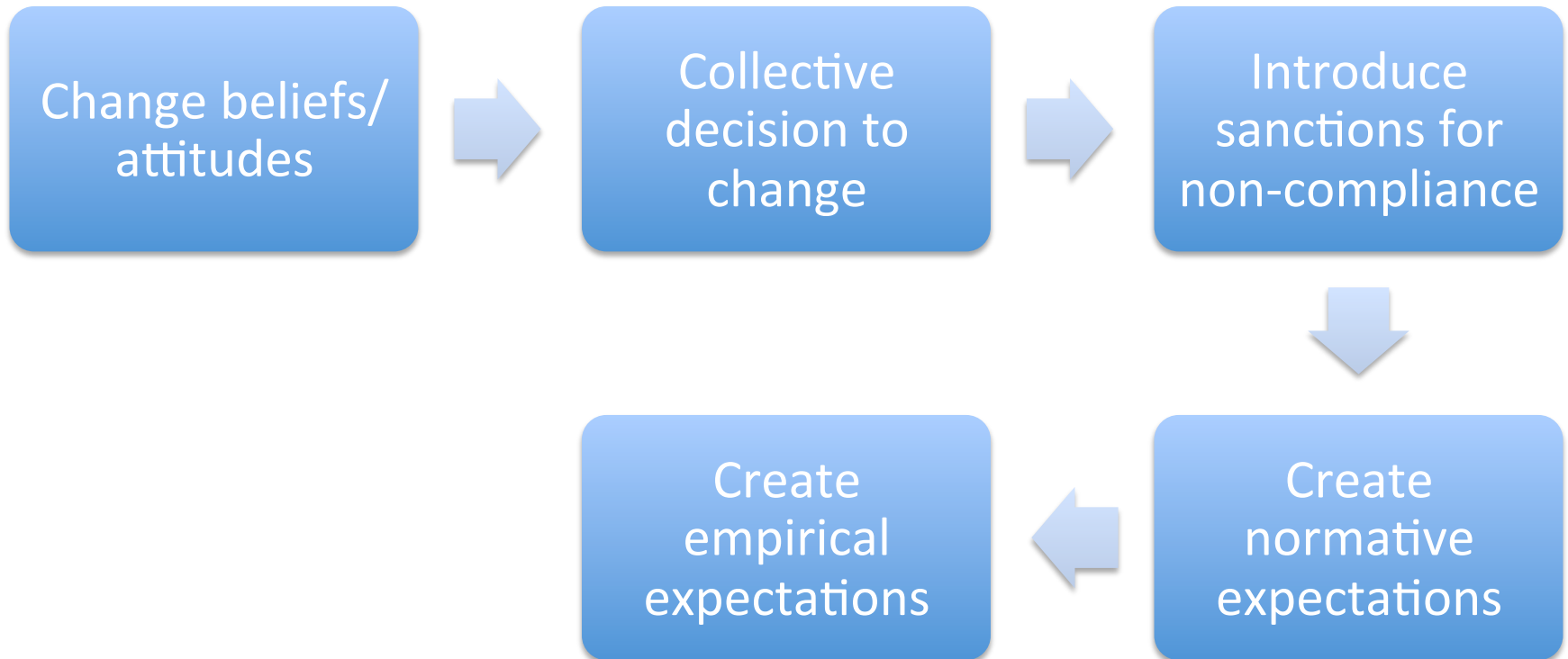
OD



# Norm creation

- Development of new practice
  - Implementation and monitoring by whole community
- Decide/enact sanctions on transgressors and stress positive rewards (*competition between communities*)
  - Form **normative expectations**
- Observe compliance
  - Form **empirical expectations** about group behavior

# Norm creation



# Why must normative expectations come first?

- To achieve a healthy environment, *all* have to abandon OD
- Temptation: take advantage of everyone else using latrines and not use them oneself
- If everyone else uses latrines, the environment is much more clean and a single deviation will not create much damage
- A single deviation, one may reason, will go unnoticed, and the deviant will reap the benefits without a cost....

# Norm abandonment/change

We just saw the structure of norm creation

Often there exist negative norms we would like to abandon

# Norm abandonment/change

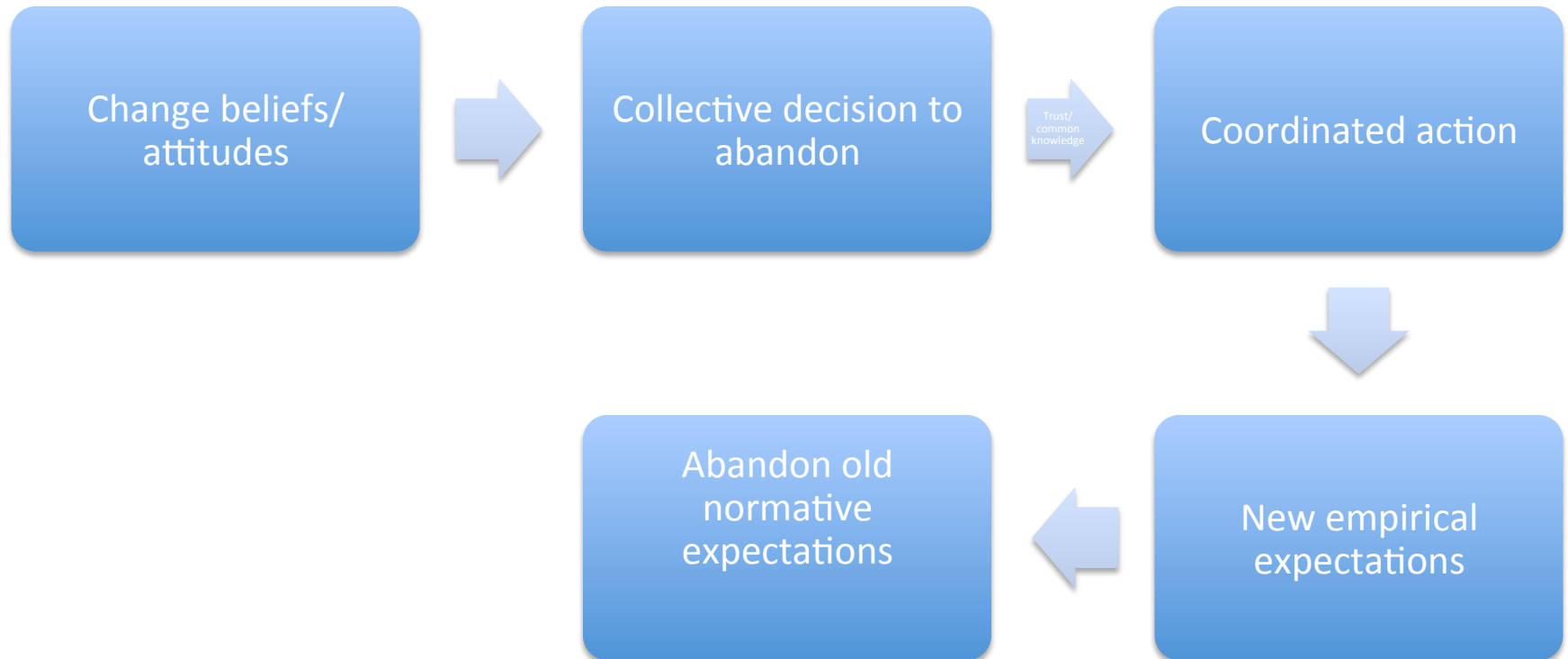
How can a negative norm be abandoned?

What is the difference between creating and abandoning a norm?

# Norm change involves

- Shared reasons to change
- Collective change of expectations
- Coordinated action

# Norm abandonment



➤ Actors must **first** recognize there are problems with the current norm

Several possible situations (may overlap):

a. Lack of knowledge of possible alternatives

b. Do not see problems with current norm

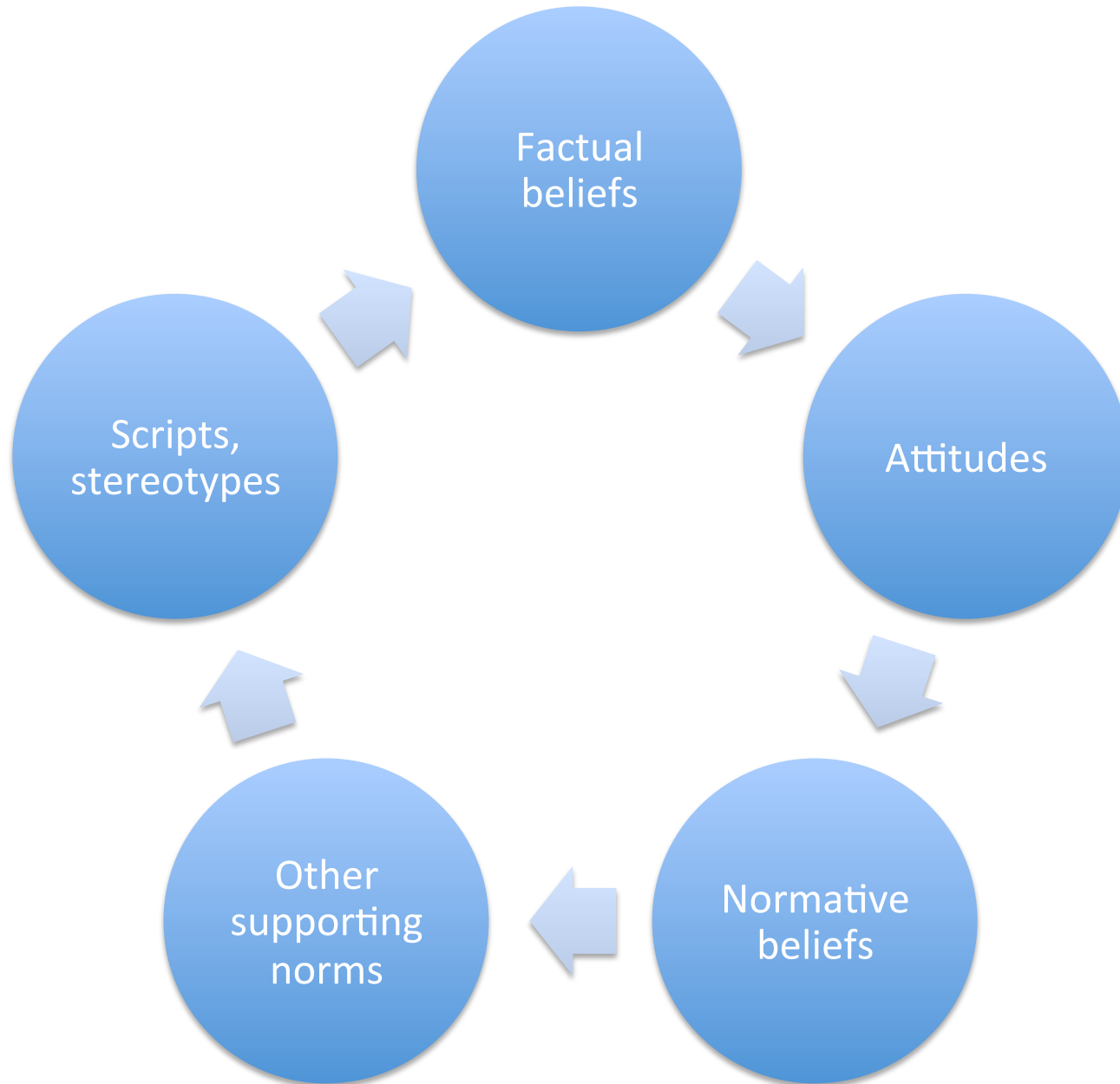
Even if presented with alternatives, may defend their ways as superior

c. Pluralistic ignorance

➤ All are reasons to resist discussing or changing a norm

# Norms do not stand alone

There is a web of beliefs, values, expectations and scripts a norm is embedded into



# Change personal beliefs

- When individuals have positive attitudes towards a norm, various ways to intervene:
  - Educational campaigns
  - Media campaigns
  - Legislative interventions
  - Intensive verbal group communication
- Goal: **collectively** change factual *and* personal normative beliefs/attitudes

# Problems

- Factual beliefs may be hard to change
- Even if change occurs, action may not follow
- Collective action problems

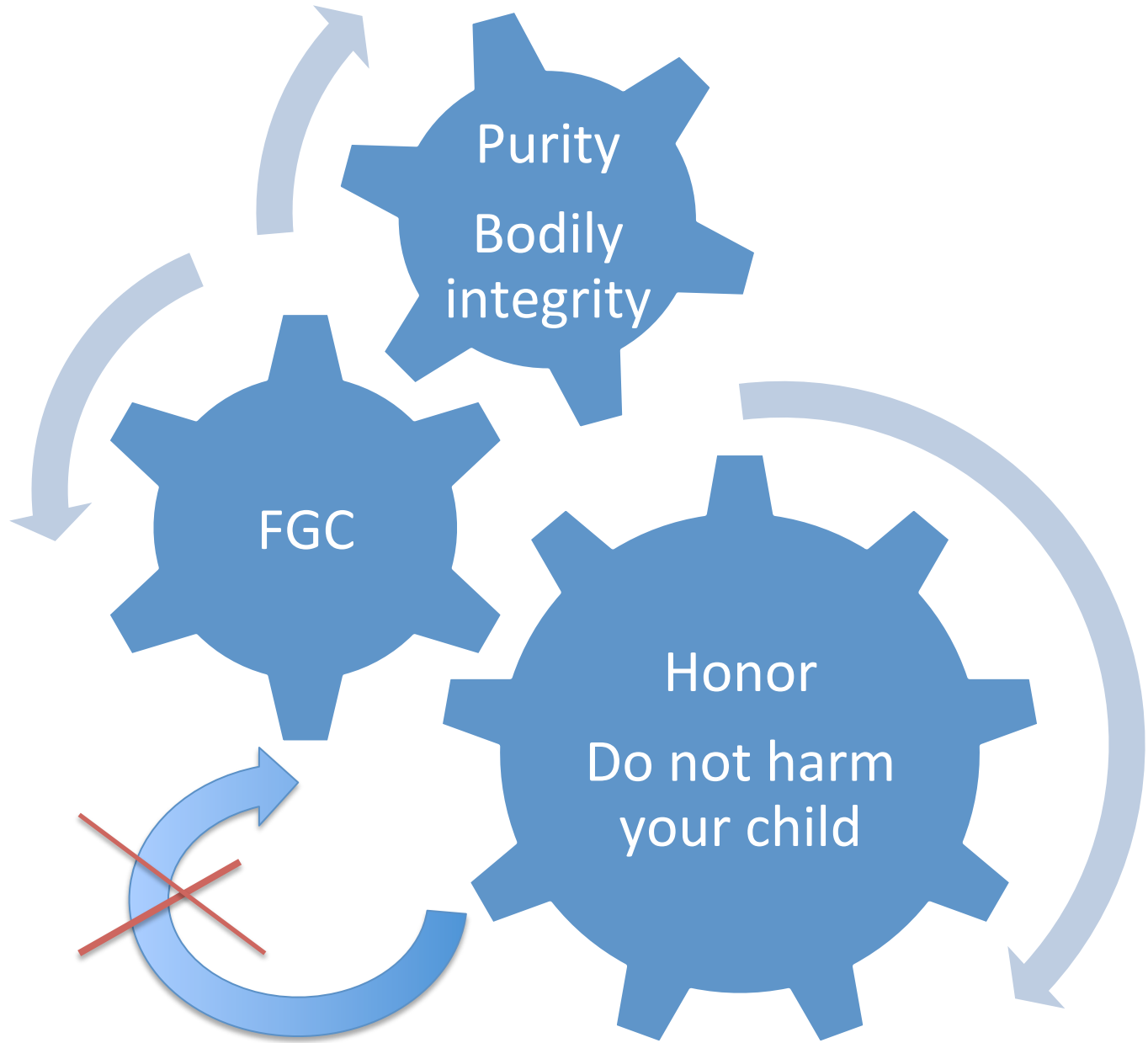
# Why deliberation?

Everybody can express their opinion

People have ample time to interact:  
they can give arguments, counter-arguments, try various ways to think about the problem

# Deliberation advantages

- We can convince people by making them realize that their beliefs are inconsistent
- When people *deliberate*, they can point out inconsistencies in each other's beliefs and thus reach better beliefs
- Help coordination by making beliefs and attitudes explicit
- People tend to accept final conclusions



Purity  
Bodily  
integrity

FGC

Honor  
Do not harm  
your child

# Ways to attain common knowledge

- Common discussion and deliberation → know what others think, know that belief change occurs
- Use of media campaigns → awareness of common beliefs/values/attitudes shift (*'everyone is hearing that'*)
- Legislative interventions → signaling function

# Collective change

- Belief change may not lead to behavior change...
- Because of collective action problems

*I do not want to be the only one that....*

*I will be punished, ridiculed... if I do not...*

# Too much knowledge, too little action

*If marriage markets norms encourage early exogamous marriage, local attitude change will not suffice. Reference network includes other communities of potential mates*

- Several communities will need to be involved

*“How shall I trust that my daughter will find a husband if she marries later?”*

# Behavior change

- **Coordinate** on collective shift...  
how?

# A success story: community norm change

- Core groups
- Engage in sustained deliberation
- Organize diffusion of deliberation out of core groups
- When a sizable majority is attained (tipping point), coordinated abandonment

# Trust by commitment

- During collective deliberation, often people promise to follow up with appropriate actions
- We stand by what we promise
  - Pro-social behavior in social dilemma and trust games shows effect of communication when promises are exchanged
- Reputation effects
- Publicly stating a viewpoint make one more resistant to opposite messages

# Public declaration

Medina Sambe Kandé, Senegal, 2004



# Empirical expectations change

- Collective promising → ground shared belief that change will follow
- We know that when empirical and normative expectations diverge, people disregard what ought to be done in favor of what is in fact done
  - *“If they do it, they must support it”*
  - *“nobody will be punished if all do it”*

# Normative expectations follow

- Attaining common knowledge of new attitudes and confidence that appropriate actions will follow is always necessary to abandon an inferior norm
- To abandon a norm, **empirical expectations have to change**. It is not sufficient to work on factual beliefs and attitudes/personal normative beliefs
  - *Individuals must be convinced not only that a given practice has negative consequences, but also that many others are abandoning it, so individual 'deviance' will not be punished*

# Abandoning a norm

If compliance with social norms is conditional on expectations:

- A change in empirical expectations must occur
  - *“I believe what I see”, “most other people have abandoned...”*
- A change in (old) normative expectations will follow
  - *“if they no longer do..., then nobody will punish me if I do not do...”*
- Often collective discussions will lead to establish a **new norm** more in line with the values/needs of the community → sustainability

# Norm abandonment

