A Handbook for Social Change:
Bicchieri's *Norms in the Wild*

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Cristina Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social Norms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 239pp, $29.95PB

"Philosophy isn't useful for changing the world," parents of philosophy students and Karl Marx tell us (at least about non-Marxist philosophy). Cristina Bicchieri's new book *Norms in the Wild* provides an impressive antidote against this worry. It stands to change of social practices as Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare* stands to political revolutions. Bicchieri combines hands-on advice on how to change social practices with compelling theoretical analyses of social norms. She draws heavily on her influential earlier work on norms, but the book doesn't presuppose familiarity with it. Many of her examples stem from her work with UNICEF and other NGOs; they include female genital cutting, open defecation, child marriage, and many more. I cannot do full justice to Bicchieri's rich book here, but will instead focus on three points.

1. Bicchieri offers a detailed and helpful botanization of collective behavior. Purely behavioral definitions of the relevant categories are inadequate. We must look at preferences and beliefs in order to know, e.g., whether something is a social norm.
2. Intentionally changing social norms is a complex process that requires several steps and extensive diagnostics. Simple information campaigns or provision of resources are unlikely to be successful.
3. Trendsetters and scripts often play a crucial role in norm change. Any approach that doesn't look at psychological mechanisms and variables that are unevenly distributed across the population is inadequate.

Let's start with the first point. Bicchieri divides collective behaviors into two broad categories: independent and interdependent behaviors. Independent behaviors are behaviors in which we engage regardless of what other people do or expect us to do. Habits, customs, and morality belong here. At least ideally, we act morally, e.g., regardless of what others do or think. Interdependent behavior is behavior that we want to engage in under the condition that other people also engage in it or expect us to engage in it. Signaling systems, fashions, and social norms belong here.

Independent and interdependent behaviors can look alike from the outside; the difference between them lies in the preferences that motivate them. The preferences fueling interdependent behavior motivate only if the agent has certain social expectations. These social expectations come in two flavors: (i) empirical expectations, which are beliefs about what other people will do, and (ii) normative expectations, which are beliefs about what other people believe ought to be done, i.e. about other people's normative beliefs. Here, "people" refers to what Bicchieri calls our reference network, i.e. the people about whose actions and opinions we care.

Descriptive norms are behaviors that are interdependent. The preferences that motivate them, however, depend only on empirical expectations, not on normative expectations. Imitation and coordination fall into this category. Imitation is unilateral because the imitating person wants to do what the imitated person does, but not vice versa. In cases of coordination, like signaling systems, the preferences to do what the others do is multilateral. In order to be understood, everyone wants to use the signaling system that everyone else uses. Bicchieri defines a social norm as "a rule of behavior such that individuals prefer to conform to it on condition that they believe that (a) most people in their reference network conform to it (empirical expectation), and (b) that most people in their reference network believe they ought to conform to it (normative expectation)" (35).

Now to my second point. Bicchieri shows that her classification of collective behaviors is useful in thinking about social change. In order to change collective behavior, we must know whether we are dealing with a social norm, a descriptive norm, a custom, or something else. Moreover, we must take into account interactions between these different collective behaviors and beliefs and preferences.

Changing independent collective behaviors, like customs, is mostly a matter of changing incentive structures and moral beliefs. Sometimes the most effective way to change an incentive structure is to create a social norm. In order to change a custom like open defecation, e.g., we must probably create a social norm that prohibits it. In the case of descriptive norms, if people think that adherence is more common than it actually is, informing people about their collective ignorance can eliminate the descriptive norm because people lose their empirical expectations. If we want to change or eliminate a social norm, however, like a norm against feeding babies colostrum, we must change empirical and normative expectations. We must convince people that others in their reference network are neither likely to follow the norm nor likely to think that one should follow the norm. Hence, it will not suffice to change incentive structures by providing resources. Nor will it suffice to convince people individually that the norm is undesirable.

So the first step in changing collective behavior is to find out with what kind of behavior we are dealing. We must measure both, empirical and normative, expectations and we must determine whether preferences are conditional on them. Bicchieri explains how we can gather the required information in the field. She gives advice on how to use hypothetical scenarios and vignettes and how to correct for biases by incentivizing accurate answers.

Once we know what the facts are, we can try to eliminate or create a social norm. A precondition is that people have collective reasons to change their ways, but that is not sufficient. In order to create a social norm, Bicchieri argues, we must first create the relevant normative expectations; empirical expectations will follow. She describes the creation of a social norm as a five-stage process: (i) change in factual and normative personal beliefs, (ii) collective decision to change, (iii) introduction of sanctions for non-compliance, (iv) creation of normative expectations, and (v) creation of empirical expectations. In order to eliminate a norm, by contrast, we must first eliminate empirical expectations, then change in the normative expectations will follow.

The complex processes of norm creation and abandonment depend not only on socially shared factors but also on details of individuals' psychology. This brings us to my third and final point: the role of scripts and trendsetters. Norms are embedded into scripts (i.e. schemata for events) that contain empirical and normative expectations. Scripts are difficult to change because they come with biases that support them. The fundamental attribution error, e.g., supports stereotypical gender schemata. Moreover, scripts lead to general beliefs that take on a normative flavor over time. This mechanism supports normative expectations. Bicchieri discusses three models of how schemata can be changed: (a) the bookkeeping model that says that schemata will change as the agent encounters a steady flow of counterexamples, (b) the conversion model that says that a few salient counterexamples change schemata, and (c) the subtyping model that says that people change schemata by introducing subcategories to accommodate counterexamples. The bookkeeping model is generally the most successful. Subtyping is often an obstacle for social change.

Bicchieri offers fascinating discussions of various tools for changing norms, e.g. economic incentives, legal means and community deliberation. She advocates integrated interventions at the level of media, legal, and communal discussion. Perhaps the most innovative contribution of the book, however, is the analysis of trendsetters. Trendsetters are first movers who abandon or adopt a social norm before others do so. Bicchieri argues that trendsetters tend to have: "low risk sensitivity, low risk perception, low allegiance to the standing norm, high autonomy, and high perceived self-efficacy" (163). Roughly, trendsetters resist social pressure because they don't endorse the norm and either don't care much about sanctions and the opinions of others or think that sanctions are unlikely. They tend to be at the periphery of their social networks. Once trendsetters adopt a new behavior, this will reduce how risky others think this behavior is. If the effect is big enough, this will, in turn, lead to more people adopting the new behavior, and so forth until a tipping point is reached. Illustrations from the sexual revolution in the 60s and civil rights movement make Bicchieri's account engaging and easy to follow.

Trendsetters don't need to be real people. Bicchieri presents fascinating examples of characters from TV or radio shows functioning as trendsetters. In Peru, enrollment in literacy classes increased because of the TV show *Simplemente Maria.* In India, the radio soap opera *Tinka Tinka Sukh* led some villages to abandon dowry practices. Fictitious trendsetters are most effective when they are successful and like typical members of the audience except in very few aspects related to the relevant social norm. It is crucial that other people in the reference network watch or listen to the same shows because social expectations change if people know that everyone is exposed to the trendsetter.

To sum up, this is a fascinating book, and everyone interested in social norms and social change should read it.