Understanding Descriptive and Prescriptive Norms

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Social norm interventions are one of the most practiced policy nudges, and yet also one of the least understood. Though they can effect powerful changes in behavior (Miller & Prentice, 2016), they can also backfire (e.g. Choi, Beshears, Laibson, Madrian, & Milkman, 2015). We suggest that part of the variability of social norms interventions is due to an under-developed understanding of how different norms may require different intervention strategies.

METHODS

Step 1:
Ask 100 undergrads, what they do and what they think is ok

Step 2:
Ask 436 undergrads, what they think others do and what they think others think is ok

Step 3:
Compare.
Are we accurate?
If not, how so?

		Drinking Alcohol	Skipping Class	Wearing a Helmet	Exercise	Recycling	Composting
Descriptive		How many drinks per week do you have?	What percent of classes each quarter do you skip?	What percent of your time biking during a week are you wearing a helmet?	How many hours of exercise do you do on average per week?	What percent of goods do you throw in the garbage instead of recycling per week?	What percent of goods do you throw in the garbage instead of composting per week?
	M =	2.59 drinks	13.35% of classes	15.85% of biking	4.20 hours	21.00% of goods	24.05% of goods
Prescriptive		How many drinks per week do you think it's appropriate to have?	What percent of classes each quarter do you think it's appropriate skip?	What percent of your time biking do you think it's appropriate to wear a helmet?	How many hours of exercise do you think it's appropriate to do on average per week?	What percent of goods do you think it's appropriate throw in the garbage per week?	What percent of goods do you think it's appropriate throw in the garbage per week?
	M =	5.80 drinks	21.55% of classes	66.98% of biking	7.32 hours	27.80% of goods	30.20% of goods

RESULTS

People judge appropriate *higher* values than they enact.

Compare to

β = 0.05, SE = 0.007, t = 7.27, p < 0.001

Knowing the descriptive doesn't make improve accuracy in guessing prescriptive.

Compare & to

B =-3.25, SE = 1.30, t = -2.51, p = 0.012

Knowing the prescriptive doesn't make improve accuracy in guessing descriptive.

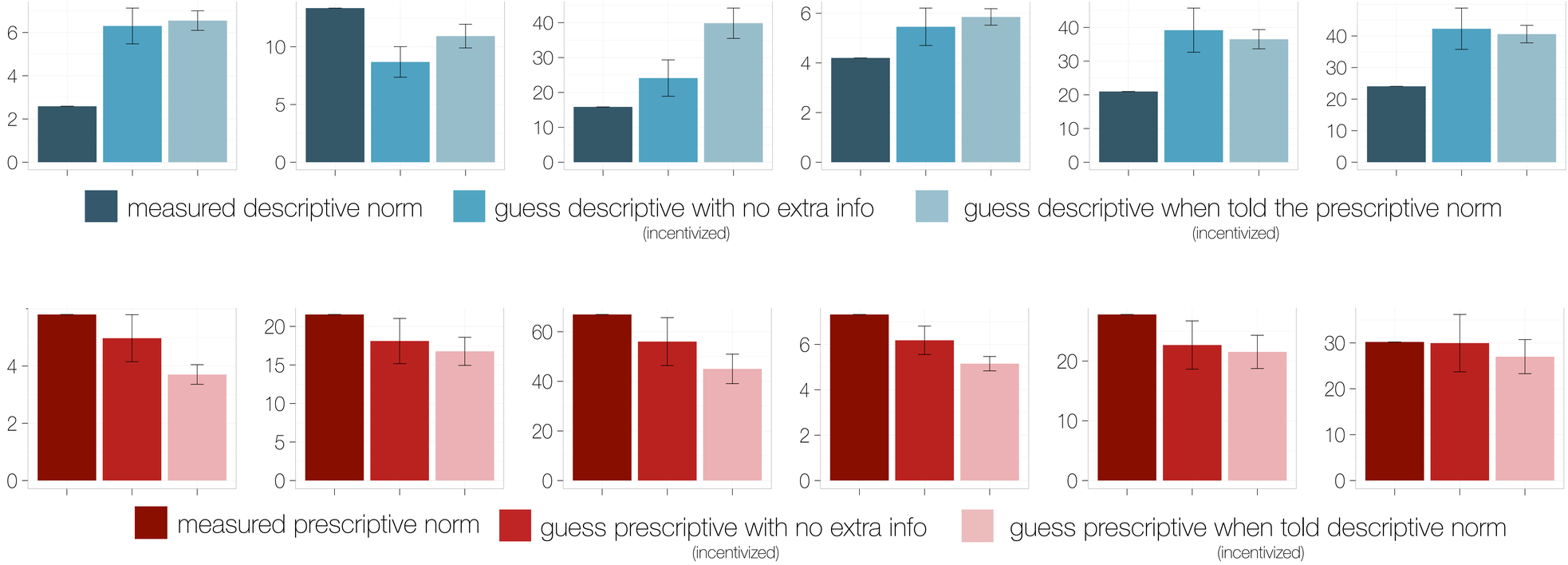
Compare & to

B =2.28, SE = 1.30, t = 1.76, p = 0.08

The descriptive anchors *low*;
The prescriptive anchors *high*.

Compare to vs to

β = 0.26, SE = 0.08, t = 3.18, p = 0.002



DISCUSSION

This suggests that if you want to *lower* a behavior's rate, use descriptive. If you want to *raise* a behavior's rate, use prescriptive.

There is considerable heterogeneity across norms in terms of:
(a) accuracy, (b) strength, (c) shape.

1. Miller, D. T., & Prentice, D. A. (2016). Changing norms to change behavior. Annual review of psychology, 67, 339-361.
2. Beshears, J., Choi, J. J., Laibson, D., Madrian, B. C., & Milkman, K. L. (2015). The effect of providing peer information on retirement savings decisions. *The Journal of Finance, 70*(3), 1161-1201.

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