Understanding Social Norms Methodology
Anti-corruption Research in Nigeria Paper

Introduction

A social norms approach to research can identify the underlying beliefs and expectations that cause a variety of collective practices. To understand practices that are widespread yet detrimental, it is important to find out whether such behaviour is motivated by social beliefs: are people engaging in the practice because they care about what others think and believe? If community or widespread beliefs are what motivates individuals to engage in certain practices, then they will only abandon such practices if the beliefs of their entire community change.

The social norms methodology, developed by Cristina Bicchieri and the University of Pennsylvania Social Norms Group, uses an innovative approach to test for the existence of social norms around particular practices. The Chatham House Africa Programme uses the social norms methodology in its governance and anti-corruption work to identify different drivers of corrupt behaviour, including when social norms motivate and sustain corrupt practices.

The social norms methodology can help to assess whether peers, local communities or wider society shape beliefs in relation to corruption and people's responses to it. Through careful evidence gathering, it is possible to show how society influences the types of corrupt (or other problematic) activity that individuals engage in or avoid and the factors that may inform these choices. The key benefit of the social norms approach is that it allows researchers to collect evidence of the types of expectations or beliefs that support a particular practice and evidence about whose expectations count.

Investigation into the causes of corruption and gathering evidence is a relatively new area of research. New methods of anti-corruption research seek to address the paucity of data on the subject by combining qualitative and quantitative methods to better understand the drivers that sustain specific corrupt practices, and to address and analyse the complex social characteristics of corruption. The Chatham House report *Collective Action on Corruption in Nigeria: A Social Norms Approach to Connecting Society and Institutions* is an example of such research, using the social norms methodology.

What does a specialized social norms survey measure?

As well as specifically measuring social norms, specialized surveys also assess other drivers of collective behaviour. Social norms are practices that are supported by particular beliefs. When societies engage in harmful practices, such as child marriage, female genital mutilation or open defaecation, it is critical to identify the beliefs that cause such practices to persist in order to change them.

The social norms methodology used in the Chatham House surveys also helps to classify the drivers of complex behaviour by distinguishing between independent and interdependent practices.[1] It uses experimental tools such as surveys and vignettes (relatable short stories), grounded in the local

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[1] Independent practices are unconditional practices that are not supported by what others think and believe i.e. brushing one's teeth. Interdependent practices are conditional and supported by what others believe and think i.e. driving on a particular side of the road.

context and a deep understanding of the political economy, to ascertain respondents' expectations to pinpoint practices that are shaped by social norms, and those that are the result of customs, traditions, moral convictions or rational responses.[2] This approach is more policy-relevant than a perceptions survey because it delves deeper to uncover the kinds of beliefs that may influence a person to engage in or avoid an activity, such as corruption.

While perceptions-based surveys are used in corruption studies, they only provide data on how people think or feel about a particular topic and tend to be unable to gather data on the causes of corrupt actions and behaviour. Additionally, such surveys do not distinguish between independent and interdependent practices. This distinction is crucial because perception surveys do not uncover the norms that sustain collective practices or how people's actions are motivated by what they believe other people think. Even popular tools for investigating collective practices such as knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) surveys are limited to only measuring factual beliefs (knowledge), personal-normative beliefs (attitudes) and collective behaviours (practices) but they typically do not test for social expectations.[3]

Social norms research identifies whether people engage in certain practices because they expect that others do, or because they believe other people expect them and others to engage in the practice. In the first instance it would then be the case that people's behaviour was motivated by empirical expectations (what they observe) while in the second instance they would be motivated by normative expectations (what they believe about others' beliefs/expectations). If it is a combination of both then the behaviour could be the result of a social norm.

Local Understandings, Expectations and Experiences Survey: Nigeria 2018

The 2018 study encompassed field research, interviews and a national household survey using a specially designed social-norms questionnaire. This national survey gathered data on people's beliefs about specific behaviours and the social expectations that influence their behaviour, as well as their beliefs about the behaviour of others. The data gathered from the national household survey is assessed across different age groups, socio-economic backgrounds and gender, to allow for comparisons between different groups.

Diagnosing a social norm requires identifying social expectations (empirical and normative)[4] and a conditional preference to conform to norms on the basis of social expectations. To test for the presence of social norms, the survey contained carefully crafted questions that considered key aspects of people's interactions and experiences:

- **Behaviour** – what did you do?

- **Prudential reason** – what are the advantages and/or disadvantages of the behaviour?

2 See note on 'other drivers of behaviour' below.
3 Bicchieri, C., Lindemans, J. W. and Jiang, T. (2014), 'A structured approach to a diagnostic of collective practices', *Frontiers in Psychology,* 5 December 2014, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01418.
4 Please see 'Key definitions' section.

- **Empirical expectations** – what do you think other people do?

- **Personal normative belief** – what do you think about the practice?

- **Normative expectations** – what do you think other people think should be done?

This approach combines qualitative and quantitative methods in a complementary manner to collect improved data.[5] It also used triangulation through cross-checking with other data sources to boost the validity of the evidence.

Additionally, randomization was utilized in two scenarios of this survey to carefully isolate the causal relationship between people's beliefs and expectations and their evaluation of corrupt behaviour.

Locations were chosen to represent each of Nigeria's six geopolitical zones and allow for some comparisons of experiences of corruption between Nigeria's states and regions. In addition, survey questions were translated and administered in the common local languages – Fulfulde, Hausa, Idoma, Igbo, Igede, Ikwerre, Ogoni (Khana), Pidgin English, Tiv and Yoruba – spoken in selected locations.

Implementing a social norms survey

Survey implementers should note that the survey questions are not themselves concerned with factual events. Instead, the questions are aimed at measuring people's beliefs about particular practices because the objective is to uncover both personal and social beliefs, rather than uncover or pinpoint acts or actual cases, in this study, of corruption.

To that end, implementers need to be very careful about priming particular kinds of responses from respondents by discussing or making any direct remarks about corruption or corrupt practices.

The integrity of the survey is infinitely more important than whether the answers given by respondents confirm any particular set of hypotheses or the implementer's personal observations or judgments. A high scientific standard of neutrality by survey teams is crucial.

Sample design

Sampling frame

Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) has developed and updated its National Integrated Survey of Households (NISH) frame covering all 36 states of the federation and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. This frame is comprised of 200 enumeration areas (EAs), which are grouped into 20 independent replicates with 10 EAs in each replicate.

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[5] Ibid.

The NISH EAs were drawn from a pool of 30 EAs selected for each local government area in each state of the federation and 40 EAs in each area council in the FCT. From this process, a total of 23,280 EAs were selected by the NBS from the frame of EAs demarcated by the National Population Commission (NPC) for the Housing and Population Census of 2006.

Sample size for the Local Understandings, Expectations and Experiences Survey 2018

A total of five replicates were studied in the six selected states (Adamawa, Benue, Enugu, Lagos, Rivers and Sokoto) and the FCT Abuja. Each replicate contains 10 EAs that provided a total of 350 EAs across the surveyed states and the FCT.

A total of 800 households were covered in each of the six states and FCT Abuja and 16 households were canvassed in each of the 50 selected EAs. A total of 5,600 households were interviewed across Nigeria for the 2018 survey. The survey was implemented through a test-run phase and pilot before the full rollout.

Questionnaire design

The act of asking questions is highly sensitive to context and must take into account the potential impact of inappropriate wording, ambiguous words and phrases, multi-use questions (i.e. questions that can simultaneously prompt two or more opinions), manipulative information, inappropriate emphasis, and sensitive or emotional 'trigger' words and phrases.[6]

For the 2018 Nigeria survey, questions were designed to minimize such problems by focusing on testing for single, rather than multiple, variables or factors. A training workshop was carried out to prepare survey implementers to stick closely to the script provided and avoid priming certain answers. The survey questions were designed in a self-explanatory way. Survey implementers had to be aware that even when respondents interrupted them during the process, they must avoid changing the wording of the questions. A pre-test phase followed the training workshop to provide an opportunity to identify any questions that respondents frequently interrupted for clarification and which questions were most likely to lead to improvisation by the survey implementer.

Implementers also needed to be careful of the social desirability bias – the tendency of respondents to provide answers they think are appropriate in a given situation, i.e. that they think are 'correct' (for example, morally or legally) instead of responses that reflect their true beliefs. Implementers can avoid this by ensuring they state their respective academic affiliation clearly and inform respondents that they are not undertaking the survey for the government or any political entity e.g. a political party.

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[6] Recanatini, F., Wallsten, S. J. and Xu, L. C. (2000), *Surveying Surveys and Questioning Questions: Learning from the World Bank Experience*, Policy Research Working Paper 2307, The World Bank, http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/234741468739530874/pdf/multi-page.pdf.

Key definitions

Social norms are composed of:

> *Empirical expectations:* individuals believe that a sufficiently large part of the relevant group/population conforms to the norm. This is a *first-order* expectation: a belief about what others do.

> *Normative expectation*: individuals believe that a sufficiently large part of the relevant group/population believes they ought to conform to the norm and may sanction behaviour. This is a *second-order* expectation: a belief about the beliefs of others.

> *Conditional preference*: individuals will prefer to conform to a social norm on the condition of holding the relevant empirical and normative expectations.

These two beliefs, plus a conditional preference to conform to the norms that they support, constitute an operational definition of a social norm.[7]

> *(empirical expectation + normative expectation) + conditional preference = social norm*

Other drivers of behaviour:

Not all collective practices are the result of social norms. Here are some examples of other beliefs that may encourage certain behaviour:

- *Moral rules:* These are usually unconditionally linked to shared social beliefs. For example, if an individual believes they should not eat a certain type of food (pork for Muslims, meat for vegetarians and so on), then it would not matter if the people around them do not share their moral convictions and instead eat these types of food.

- *Descriptive norm*: When individuals believe that most people in their community engage in a particular practice and do so as well, then they are conforming to a descriptive norm. Descriptive norms are conventions that often emerge as solutions to coordination problems for example, norms about driving on a particular side of the road.

- *Customs*: These are traditions that usually emerge for a reason that is relevant to a particular time or event. They tend to continue as customary practices simply because they are taught and passed on to succeeding groups of people.

- *Rational responses*: These are behaviours that people engage in because they believe these behaviours will maximize their benefits within a given incentive structure. For example, if giving a bribe to a police officer or road safety officer is cheaper than going to the station or

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[7] Bicchieri, C. (2005), *The grammar of society: The nature and dynamics of social norms*, Cambridge University Press; Bicchieri, C. (2016), *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure and Change Social Norms*, New York: Oxford University Press.

experiencing travel delays, then bribe-giving may be a rational response in the interest of cost reduction.

What are the questions measuring?

Scenario 1

Behaviour: Bribing power company employees

Questions 1–15

Question 1: Behaviour
Question 2: Behaviour
Question 3: Behaviour
Question 4: Behaviour
Question 5: Empirical expectation
Question 6: Personal normative belief
Question 7: Reason for personal normative beliefs
Question 8: Reason for personal normative beliefs
Question 9: Personal normative belief
Question 10: Reason for personal normative beliefs
Question 11: Reason for personal normative beliefs
Question 12: Legal knowledge
Question 13: Normative expectations
Question 14: Normative expectations
Question 15: Varying empirical and normative expectations (measuring conditionality)

Scenario 2

Behaviour: Examination malpractice

Questions 16–27

Question 16: Behaviour
Question 17: Empirical expectations
Question 18: Personal normative belief
Question 19: Reason for personal normative beliefs
Question 20: Reason for personal normative beliefs
Question 21: Personal normative belief
Question 22: Reason for personal normative beliefs
Question 23: Reason for personal normative beliefs
Question 24: Legal knowledge
Question 25: Normative expectation
Question 26: Normative expectation
Question 27: Varying empirical and normative expectations (measuring conditionality)

Scenario 3

Behaviour: Vote selling

Questions 28–39

Question 28: Behaviour
Question 29: Empirical expectations
Question 30: Personal normative belief
Question 31: Reason for personal normative beliefs
Question 32: Reason for personal normative beliefs
Question 33: Personal normative belief
Question 34: Reason for personal normative beliefs
Question 35: Reason for personal normative beliefs
Question 36: Legal knowledge
Question 37: Normative expectation
Question 38: Normative expectation
Question 39: Varying empirical and normative expectations (measuring conditionality)

Scenario 4

Behaviour: Use of government funds (randomizing religion)

Questions 40–48:

Question 40: Behaviour
Question 41: Personal normative belief
Question 42: Reason for personal normative beliefs
Question 43: Reason for personal normative beliefs
Question 44: Extra reason for action
Question 45: Personal normative belief
Question 46: Reason for personal normative beliefs
Question 47: Reason for personal normative beliefs
Question 48: Extra reason for action

Scenario 5

Behaviour: Awarding federal contract (testing in-group/out-group effect)

Questions 49–53:

Question 49: Behaviour
Question 50: Personal normative belief
Question 51: Reason for personal normative beliefs
Question 52: Reason for personal normative beliefs
Question 53: Extra reason for action