



Thinking and doing socially

What public policymakers need to know about the importance of the social context for understanding behavior

Summary

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Summary

Social policy is mostly based on the view that citizens are rational, independent and responsible actors (WRR 2017). The implicit assumption is that citizens generally behave in ways that serve their own interests. This is also tied to the belief that, if everyone were to act in this way, it would benefit society as a whole (Blijleven et al. 2023; Peters et al. 2024).

In general, policies are guided by the conviction that people make choices that seem favorable to themselves, without considering needs of others. This raises the question of whether scientific evidence actually supports such assumptions, and by implication, whether it is effective to develop or implement policy based on these (possibly incorrect) assumptions. In this policy paper, we review scientific insights indicating that the social groups people belong to constitute an important factor in understanding human behaviour – which is often overlooked. There is ample scientific literature to reveal how groups shape the moral values that guide people’s self-views, and define the social norms that impact on the behavior of individuals (See Figure S.1). Based on current insights from scientific research, we specify social influences and group-based concerns that are key drivers of individual behaviors. Based on these insights, we offer concrete tools to translate the knowledge about these social factors into policymaking, communication about policies, and the implementation of policies. The effectiveness of and support for policy interventions can be increased, by more effectively connecting with insights into the lived experience of citizens (see also WRR 2025).

Social factors are crucial to understanding human behaviour

Research in social psychology consistently shows that the groups that are subjectively important to people, perform multiple roles in their lives. Groups offer a sense of belonging. Groups provide meaning and continuity to notions defining who we are, what we consider important, and how we should behave. In psychology, the desire to ‘belong’ and be included in social groups is considered a basic human need. This drives individual choices and has far reaching implications for mental wellbeing and physical health. However, policy theories often pay insufficient attention to these group level factors that help understand origins and implications of individual behaviors.

Social groups offer a sense of identity and belonging through (informal) rules that inform group members of what is correct and appropriate behaviour. These social rules determine the characteristics of a ‘good’ group member and indicate what individuals should do to be respected and included by the group. Moral values – convictions about what is right and what is wrong – relate to generic principles as well as personal standards, and are formed by the social groups people identify with. Social groups constitute moral anchors that help people resolve moral dilemmas and determine what behaviour is right and wrong in specific situations. In other words, what we consider ‘good’ or ‘bad’ also depends on the groups we belong to and how we define ourselves (Ellemers en Van der Toorn 2015).

Moral judgments are key drivers of the way people view others, and how they view themselves. Because moral disapproval can lead to disrespect and social exclusion, it is very threatening to be confronted with one’s moral shortcomings. As a result, pointing out people’s moral failures is often counterproductive (Van Nunspeet en Ellemers 2024). If the aim is to change people’s behavior, it is more effective to focus on future possibilities for redemption and improvement, rather than insisting on the wrongness of past moral choices. By highlighting moral ideals that might be achieved - instead

of reminding people of obligations that need to be met, people are more effectively activated to rise to the challenge of adjusting their behavior (Does et al. 2011, 2012).

Whereas moral values help people to define the characteristics of a good group member, social norms help people to determine what behaviour is appropriate in specific situations. Relying on social norms is not an individual weakness. It serves important functions, for instance, in new situations where people are unsure about what would be the correct, most appropriate, or 'normal' thing to do. In this context, we distinguish between norms that mainly indicate what most people do (descriptive norms) and norms that prescribe what most people believe is good or important to do (injunctive norms).

To some extent, turning to social norms to understand and guide behavior can seem aversive. Indeed, norms can be invoked to demand conformity, limit people's freedom, or induce them to mindlessly 'follow the herd'. However, research shows that the role of social norms is both broader and more nuanced than that. Norms also help people to quickly analyse complicated situations and provide directions for how to concretely act in line with their moral values. For policymakers, professionals, and organisations that want to predict and guide behaviour, understanding the multiple forms and functions of social norms is indispensable.

Insight into social behaviour can help make policy more effective

In various policy areas, a lot of emphasis is placed on individual 'free choice' and 'self reliance, which are often valued as the 'highest good' for policy makers. As a result, government actions mainly aim to inform individuals before making their own choices, assuming they have the resources to follow through as intended. Measures that might protect individuals against self-defeating or inconsistent choices, or could help them follow through on their initial intentions (for instance by encouraging preferred options or limiting access to undesired options) tend to be seen as patronising (Blijleven et al. 2024). However, the emphasis on personal preferences in policies advocating free choice, can unwittingly communicate that selfish choices are the norm. Such self-fulfilling effects - where policies unwittingly induce the very behavior they aim to deter - have been documented more broadly. For instance when emphasizing accountability for choices made communicates distrust and stimulates calculating behaviour (Van den Bos 2025; Hertogh et al. 2018).

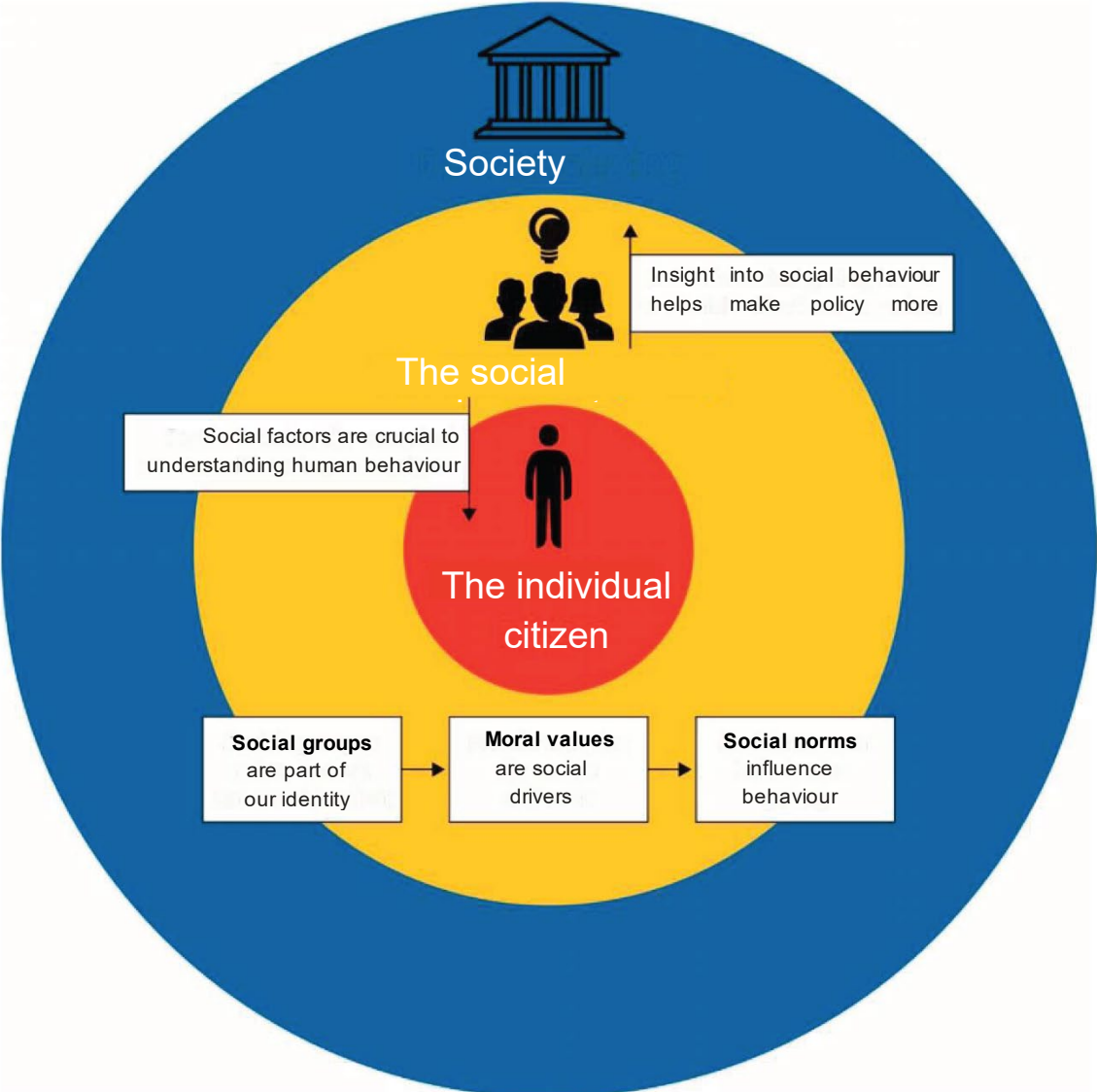
These insights from social psychological theory and research can be deployed in policymaking and communications about policies. They can enhance the intended impact and effectiveness of policies by improving the connection to citizens' lived experiences. First, we argue for communication strategies to attune to the social factors that are relevant to citizens. Second, we see opportunities for a new paradigm, where additional frameworks and assumptions are considered when developing policies, taking into account the social context that guides the behavior of individual citizens.

To more effectively communicate information about policy objectives and resources, we recommend messaging that clarifies how the policy aligns with a group's norms and values. Communications could for instance make visible the behaviour and opinions of others, in addition to providing information about the importance and urgency of the policy objective. Our advice to policymakers and communication professionals is to explicitly engage with norms and values that are central to groups, to correct misperceptions about the behaviour of others, and indicate where policies align with shared moral ideals. In general, such alignment will be more convincing when it is communicated by someone from the same social group. We note that communications from the

government may not be optimally effective when these are seen to be coming from an outsider, who represents a different group.

Applying existing knowledge about social determinants of human behaviour in the policy process can help avoid two recurring misconceptions. 1) the assumption that citizens are independent individuals who only make choices based on their own interests and 2) the assumption that a dichotomous choice has to be made between policy approaches: either highlighting free choice and autonomy or relying on coercion and imposed limits. Policies can also take a middle ground, by reminding citizens that they are part of a society, and acknowledging the tendency of individuals to identify with groups, consider the choices of others, and in turn influence the behaviour of those around them. Engaging with these human tendencies to develop joint and shared responsibilities, experience connectedness, and care for each other, offers a socially oriented picture of Dutch society that can provide a new framework to develop more effective policy.

Figure S.1. Visual representation of the role of the social environment in understanding citizens and the social factors discussed in this information memorandum



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