Greetings,

A few months ago you participated in a study about sun protection behaviour and said that you would be interested in hearing about the results. We appreciate your help with our research, and we are happy to tell you about the findings. The study was administered by Anna Cooke under the supervision of Dr. Winnifred Louis and Dr. Joanne Smith. If you would like to ask questions, to comment on what you read, or to find out more, you can contact project staff by phoning (07) 3346 9515, by emailing w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au, or by writing to Dr. Winnifred Louis, School of Psychology, McElwain Building / University of Queensland / St. Lucia, QLD 4072. You can also read about other studies that we’ve done about social influence and decision-making at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: DO NORMS EXPLAIN WHEN AND WHY A ‘SUN-SMART’ CAMPAIGN BACKFIRES?

WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR.

The primary goal of this study was to investigate students’ sun protection behaviour in relation to social influence. Extending on past research, we wanted to examine the impact of two types of social influence: descriptive norms (what others do themselves) and injunctive norms (what others approve of).

The theoretical concern is that campaigns to address health behaviours, like sun-protection, often target populations which are seen as unhealthy. This means (we thought) that simply hearing that a campaign is being run targeting their group could lead people to infer that the behaviour is uncommon, and/or that people in their group don’t support it, and this in turn could actually promote a backlash against the intervention. For example, students who are told that there is a university sun protection campaign could think that this means other students aren’t in favour of sun protection or aren’t doing it enough. We expected this phenomenon (if it occurred) to work against the effectiveness of the campaign and even result in less healthy behaviour after receiving the campaign message.

Accordingly, we brought students into the lab, pre-measured their attitudes to sun protection, and then told them that the uni was running a sun protection campaign (half got this message and half didn’t) and/or that a vast majority of UQ students approved of sun protection behaviour (half got this message and half didn’t). Then we measured perceptions of what students’ attitudes and actions were, as well as participants’ attitudes and intentions. Finally two weeks later students returned to the lab and reported their behaviour in the past two weeks.

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS

From March to May 2007, 149 students completed the study (along with others on financial and political decision-making). Participants ranged in age from 17 to 45 (but the majority were less than 20). Most were women (74%), born in Australia (85%), and of White/European heritage (82%), and most were recruited from a first year class in psychology (76%).

WHAT WE FOUND

OVERALL ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS. Before any intervention was delivered, the majority of participants (75%) agreed that sun protection was important. That is a
significant positive finding! However, when we look at what people reported two weeks later, the majority of participants (80%) said they engaged in sun protection behaviour less than half the time. Over a quarter of participants (26%) said they never engaged in sun protection behaviour at all. This is a serious concern, given that Queensland has the highest incidence of skin cancer in the world.

EFFECTS OF THE MANIPULATIONS. Consistent with our expectations, when students were told other students supported sun protection, they perceived that other students approved more of the behaviour and engaged in it more themselves. However, when told that the uni was running a ‘sun smart’ campaign for students, participants inferred that other students approved significantly less of the behaviour and that other students trended to engage in it less often.

We found that students had positive attitudes to sun protection regardless of info about the campaign and other students views. Moreover, learning about the campaign significantly heightened intentions and action to engage in sun protection, if and only if students learned at the same time that other students also approved of sun protection. If students learned about the university’s campaign and were not explicitly given the information that other students supported sun protection, then the campaign did not have any positive effects, and even trended to result in lower intentions and actions to engage in sun protection.

WHERE NEXT?
Looking at the dangers of perceived “targeting” of interventions is a line of work that we’ll be focusing quite a lot on in the next couple of years, with many other studies testing the same processes in politics, health, and other areas. The theoretical purpose is to explore the basis for inferences about population norms and the interaction of descriptive and injunctive normative messages. However, as the present study illustrates, there is also an important social component, which is to figure out how to prevent public health interventions and other pro-social change attempts from back-firing because people infer that unhealthy behaviour is common and approved of.

THANKS AGAIN…
So that’s a description of what we found in this study. If you have any questions, or would like a copy of the longer write-up when we get that done (in several months) please get in touch. And thank you again for your participation and interest!

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

Smith, J. R., & Louis, W. R. (in press). Do as we say and as we do: The interplay of descriptive and injunctive group norms in the attitude-behaviour relationship. Manuscript accepted for publication in the British Journal of Social Psychology and available from the authors on request. Describes some of our previous work on the interaction of descriptive and injunctive norms.