Greetings,

In the first semester, you participated ago in a study about "Opinions and beliefs about current social issues," 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. Sorry about the long delay in sending out this summary! Normally we try to write up within weeks of the data collection, but a combination of illness, overseas trips, and other work resulted in a few months’ delay.

The study was conducted under the supervision of Dr. Winnifred Louis in collaboration with 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 e-mailing 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 on political decision-making at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: INJUNCTIVE AND DESCRIPTIVE INGROUP AND OUTGROUP NORMS FOR POLITICAL ACTION
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WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR
In a previous study, we gave participants information that other UQ students approved or disapproved of a behaviour (signing petitions / form letters) and had or had not done the behaviour themselves in the past. We wanted to see whether peers’ approval (the injunctive norm) would impact on what participants thought about the behaviour and what the participants did. We also wanted to compare the impact of the injunctive norm with the impact of what other students did themselves (the descriptive norm).

Previous research says the norms of groups you belong to ('ingroups') are very important in decisions, while the norms of groups that you don't belong to ('outgroups') are unimportant (e.g., Terry & Hogg, 1996). This theory says that if people find out that there is a norm in their own group supporting an action, they are more likely to act, but if people in their ingroup oppose an action, they are less likely to act. But the research in the past had tended to lump together descriptive norms about what group members do with injunctive norms about what group members approve of. We wanted to manipulate the two independently and see what influences what.

The results of the first study are online, http://www2.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/wl_0105_1.pdf. Basically we found that both what others do and what others say both influenced people, and that when other group members both disapproved of a behaviour and didn’t do it themselves people were especially unlikely to act. In this study, we wanted to replicate this finding and also look at another variable: whether the norms were from an ingroup (UQ students) or an outgroup (Uni of Melbourne students). In the past, some researchers argued that only ingroup members can exert social influence. So, it was important to look at both types of group norms again. In this study, participants got info that was either about other UQ students (ingroup) or Uni of Melbourne (outgroup) that showed that they approved or disapproved of a behaviour (the injunctive norm for signing petitions / form letters) and had or had not done the behaviour themselves in the past (the descriptive norm). Then we looked to see what happened.

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS
During March-June 2005, 238 people completed the study. All participants were UQ students, with 138 first year psychology students who participated for course credit, and 100 students from the paid participant pool, who received compensation. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 48 (but 78% were 20 or younger), and were mostly women (69%) and White/European Australian (75%). Politically, 10% had no party preference, 29% supported the coalition and 61% one of the
opposition parties (36% ALP, 19% Green, 3% Democrat, 3% Family First or One Nation).

WHAT WE FOUND

1. PRE-MEASURES. First we took pre-measures of attitudes to comprehensive exams and political behaviour. Overall, 56% opposed full fee places, and 25% supported it, with 20% neutral or undecided. We also looked at self-reports for 20 behaviours that people could have engaged in in the past, and whether people approved or disapproved of these actions as a means of expressing political attitudes. In the past, a majority of respondents had looked for info on particular issues in the news (92%) and spoken to family (92%) and friends (95%) about them. People also reported trying to convince other people to change their views (63%), verbally joking about others with different views (67%), and resisting/arguing when someone tried to convince them (82%). Explicitly political behaviours were uncommon overall, but minorities had engaged in actions like volunteering (34%) or attending a rally (23%).

A majority of respondents however said they had signed petitions / form letters in the past (80%) and approved of this behaviour as a way of expressing political views (81%). This was the key variable in this study.

2. SOCIAL DOMINANCE ORIENTATION and AUTHORITARIANISM. People's belief in hierarchical values for social systems and their faith in authority were also measured in this study, because we expected that these variables might be linked to students' social attitudes. Most participants (85%) rejected hierarchical values and were either suspicious of authority (46%) or had mixed feelings (41%). These values didn’t influence views on comprehensive exams. But people who were less egalitarian, and more trusting of authority, were less likely to approve of signing petitions / form letters, and less likely to have acted in the past. Authoritarian/Social Dominance values were associated with disapproving of active political behaviours in general (except making jokes about your opponents, which those with hierarchical values approved of).

3. EXPOSURE TO NORM MANIPULATION. After the premeasures, participants were given graphs that were supposed to show the results of previous studies. The graphs showed students’ approval ratings for three political behaviours (signing a petition / form letter, attending a rally, and taking a flier from a campus group) and what percentage said they had done each of these behaviours in the past. In fact, the graphs were made up and manipulated the approval ratings and action percentages for signing a petition / form letter. Specifically, there were four norm conditions: the graphs showed students approved of signing and had done it in the past; that students disapproved and had not signed in the past; that students approved of signing and hadn’t done it much, and that students disapproved of signing but had done it a lot in the past. Each of the norm conditions had two versions: one where the info was about UQ students (the ingroup) and one where it was about Uni of Melbourne students (the outgroup). Manipulation checks suggested that 13% of participants could not understand or did not remember the graphs; these were left out of the analyses, along with 2% more who guessed the purpose of the study. So the final sample was 199.

4. DEPENDENT MEASURES. In the final questionnaire, we took measures of whether people personally approved of signing petitions / form letters, were willing to sign, and actually did sign (we had two measures: a ballot about comprehensive exams ostensibly to the Student Union, and a post card ostensibly to UQ Senate members). On average, post-manipulation attitudes to signing and willingness were in line with initial attitudes, and people who had stronger views about comprehensive exams were more likely to act. But behaviour was pretty inconsistent.

5. PREDICTING CHANGE IN ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR. What we were most interested in, though, was the effect of our norm manipulations (graphs) on people's post-manipulation attitudes and actions. In general, we found that participants’ attitudes to signing became more positive if they were told other students approved of signing. Willingness increased
as well, but behaviour didn’t change. Participants’ attitudes were less favourable if they were told other students had not signed in the past, but actual rate of signing tended to increase. Probably most interesting to us though were the interactions that we found. It turns out that being told that others supported your views increased the extremity of your attitude, increased the likelihood you were willing to act on those views, and tended to increase their congruent action. But this was true *only when the others were UQ students and only when their behaviour matched their attitude. When there was inconsistency or when the others were U of M students, there were no effects.

CONCLUSION

Remembering that people normally get a lot of information that consolidates their attitudes and guides their actions from sources like media coverage, friends’ views, etc., we were pleased to find such big effects of our graphed norm manipulations. These findings show the surprisingly strong influence of even subtle normative information on people’s decision-making. People were more positive about political action and more likely to act in a specific way (signing a ballot on the subject), if they looked at graphs showing other UQ students approved of the action or had done it themselves. This is a traditional social influence finding, and supports the role of groups in unconsciously guiding our attitudes and behaviour. This study (like the first one we did) shows that groups influence our behaviour in two ways: both through the injunctive norm (what other people approve of) and through the descriptive norm (what other people do), so it’s important not to lump them together. But the study’s results build on the earlier study by showing that other people’s views and actions only influence ingroup members (as you would predict based on social identity theory). One result to follow up in future research is the somewhat puzzling result of this study (not found in the last study) about descriptive norms, where if you were told that others usually don’t sign petitions / form letters, your attitudes became more negative but the rate of signing actually increased. We’re still trying to figure out what happened there; it’s a pretty interesting finding.

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!