“BUT, EVERYONE ELSE IS DOING IT!”
RESEARCH ON NORMATIVE BEHAVIORS PUBLISHED
IN PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY BULLETIN

Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, and Washington DC (July 31, 2008) —“But everyone else is
doing it!” Those words are usually met with the withering response of, “If everyone else was jumping off
a bridge, would you do that too?” Recent research published by SAGE in the July issue of Personality and
Social Psychology Bulletin suggests that indeed, most of us would be more likely to jump off a bridge if we
thought everyone else was doing it. However, we probably wouldn’t recognize that as the reason for our
behavior.

In a series of studies, the article’s researchers randomly distributed flyers throughout a neighborhood, giving
different reasons to conserve electricity, such as saving money and saving resources. Other flyers provided
“normative” information, reporting the percentage of neighbors who were conserving. When later
interviewing the residents, the researchers found that those who received the normative messages reported
that they weren’t very motivated by the message. Their meters told another story: residents who received
the normative information flyers used the least power during the month the study was conducted.

“The results demonstrate how people’s theories about how the kinds of messages that persuade them may
differ markedly from what persuades them to actually change their behavior,” write the authors. “The study
showed that people underestimate the persuasive powers of normative messages and aren't accurate at
estimating the effectiveness of other kinds of appeals either.”

The article, “Normative Social Influence is Underdetected,” written by Jessica M. Nolan (University of
Arkansas), P. Wesley Schultz (California State University, San Marcos), Robert B. Cialdini (Arizona State
University), Noah Goldstein (University of Chicago), and Vladas Griskevicius (University of Minnesota), is
available at no charge for a limited time at http://psp.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/34/7/913.

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