Presidential Address
9-11 July 2023 in Montréal, Québec, Canada

The role of social norms in shaping human behavior and social change

Roberto González, School of psychology, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Chile. ISPP-President.

Societies constantly change. Sometimes, change takes time, such as the two centuries that have passed since the first feminists claimed equality between men and women. In other cases, few hours are enough to trigger major social movements that lead to national and international conversations and policy change. Societies across the globe have seen a plethora of these examples, in which unexpected changes arise with varying degrees of spontaneity and are permanently installed, modifying the course of history.

In this address, I will review and discuss cutting-edge interdisciplinary research to understand how social change emerges, evolves, and manifests in modern societies. I seek to stimulate discussions about developing conceptual models of social change that advance our understanding of the underlying mechanisms that regulate people's behavior, set group memberships, and define what is socially desirable. Across social sciences, the study of these mechanisms has been conducted using the cross-disciplinary concept of social norms. Although social norms involve top-down mechanisms, such as legal systems or internal regulations, it has been argued that much more commonly, social norms are partly spontaneous, bottom-up, interactive processes that emerge in social life. Though many factors may influence any given process of social change, changes in social norms seem to be present in all relevant social changes.

There are reasons to focus on the potential of social norms to explain social change. First, in contrast to cultural or economic changes that require long periods to consolidate, changes in social norms can be extremely fast, requiring minimum psychological engagement to be effective. Second, the notion of a norm is a flexible concept used by all social sciences (with variations), which allows the development of a common ground of interdisciplinary understanding. Finally, norms are related to how citizens develop key capacities and motives necessary to participate meaningfully and effectively in public affairs, social life, and democratic processes that lead to social change. Conceptual and practical implications will be addressed.