

To: Transport & Health Policy Makers, & Practitioners
From: Prof Adrian Davis, TRI, Edinburgh Napier University
Date: 10th December 2019
Subject: Essential Evidence 4 Scotland
No. 20 Walking as a social behaviour

Top line: Walking, as a social behaviour, is an important but often ignored component of the motivation to walk.

Walking, whether for exercise, recreation or transport, often occurs within the bounds of the families, communities and neighbourhoods in which we live. It is a behaviour shaped by our physical and social environment, including social norms and networks. Recent advocacy work has seen great progress made in calling for changing the physical (built) environment to support physical activity and walking behaviour. However, built environments are difficult and costly to change.

Walking, as a social behaviour, is influenced by our social networks (ie, the people around us). Social norms, the standards of behaviour that are considered acceptable or appealing in a group or society, are also important for walking. Yet seldom are these networks or norms taken into account when promoting walking behaviour, and they are subsequently underutilised in our interventions. There appear to be gaps in knowledge and practice regarding how social networks and social norms can be measured, used and applied within behaviour change interventions to promote walking.¹ Progress to increase walking has, to date, been hampered by failure to adequately acknowledge the importance of the social environment, to conceptualise or measure key social influences on walking in research, and to exploit social levers in walking promotion initiatives.

The recent call for non-communicable diseases to be renamed socially transmitted conditions² provides strong acknowledgement of their largely socio-genetic background. Researchers note that this label also stresses the socially contagious nature of the conditions. The social contagion theory has been gaining support for spreading health behaviours, and physical activity including walking has previously been described as 'contagious'. This shifts attention away from a focus on individual motivation (and other cognitive processes) towards the powerful interactions between individuals, their social networks and the social structures and norms that direct how we live and make decisions.³

Socially activated interventions are those that purposefully use the social structures in which participants are embedded. Ciclovías (cycling) and Recreovía (cycling and walking) programmes are examples of socially activated intervention approaches aimed at increasing the use of streets and parks in the city and providing free recreational activities. Such interventions use social drivers within communities to support physical activity and walking behaviours, and predicate on social networks, norms, connectedness and reinforcement. The researchers also note that the large-scale expansion of these programmes is an example of practice-based evidence driving new programmes and policy faster than research-based evidence. The understanding of the social networks and norms of socially activated interventions will better guide the implementation and sustainability of new programmes.

¹ Hunter, R., Ball, K., Sarmiento, O. 2018. Socially awkward: how can we better promote walking as a social behaviour, *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 52(12) 757-758.

² Allen, L, Feigl, A. 2017. Reframing non-communicable diseases as socially transmitted conditions. *Lancet Global Health*; 5: e644–e646.

³ Hunter, R., Ball, K., Sarmiento, O. 2018.