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Review

Bottom-up influences on social norms: How observers' responses to transgressions drive norm maintenance versus change

Gerben A. van Kleef^a

Human behavior is heavily influenced by social norms. But when and how do norms persist or change? Complementing work on the role of top-down factors in the enforcement of normative behavior (e.g., sanctioning systems, organizational culture, formal leadership, corrective actions), I introduce a model of bottom-up influences on norm development. I argue that the trajectories of social norms are shaped by behavioral responses of observers to emergent norm violations. Research on such responses can be categorized in three broad clusters that have distinct implications for norm development. Oppositional responses to norm violations (punishment, confrontation, gossip, whistleblowing, derogation, social exclusion, emotional condemnation) discourage future transgressions, thereby contributing to norm maintenance. Acquiescent responses (avoidance, tolerance) leave room for future violations, thereby contributing to norm erosion. Supportive responses (emulation, endorsement) encourage future deviance and facilitate the spreading of counternormative behavior, thereby catalyzing norm change. By linking micro-level norm violations to macro-level normative systems, this approach illuminates how norms are dynamically negotiated through social interaction.

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Corresponding author: van Kleef, Gerben A. (g.a.vankleef@uva.nl)^a University of Amsterdam, Department of Social Psychology, PO Box 15900, 1001 NK Amsterdam, The Netherlands.**Keywords**

Norm violation, Transgression, Social dynamics, Opposition, Acquiescence, Support.

Introduction

Social norms play a pivotal role in the regulation of human behavior, whether in the personal sphere, at work, or in the public domain [1–3]. Social norms are context-specific principles or guidelines that are widely shared by the members of a group and that govern acceptable conduct [4]. By creating a shared understanding of what is (not) acceptable within a particular context, social norms inform and control every imaginable type of behavior, from individual decisions to interpersonal treatment, from eating manners to dress styles, and from organizational conduct to comportment in public spaces [5–7]. Given their pervasive impact on the behavior of individuals and the functioning of groups, organizations, and societies, it is important to understand when and how norms are perpetuated and when they change. Here, I consider how norms are shaped by responses to norm violations.

Common approaches to analyzing the development of social norms take a macro-level perspective that highlights the role of *top-down* forces. Primary examples of such factors include governmental punishment systems [8–11], formal leadership [12,13], organizational culture [12], and corrective actions and policies [14]. Such influences discourage or sanction transgressions and uphold normative systems.

Complementing such perspectives, the focus of the current article is on micro-level processes that shape norms in a *bottom-up* fashion. I will argue that the regulation of normative behavior occurs to an important degree between peers (e.g., in social groups, on the work floor, or in the public domain), without the involvement of official agents or formal sanctions. My core premise is that norms are shaped by responses to norm violations — behaviors that deviate from what most people in a community do and believe should be done [15]. Specifically, when one person violates a particular norm, another person who witnesses that violation may exhibit a variety of behavioral responses that influence the likelihood of future violations by the perpetrator as well as other individuals in the social setting, thereby ultimately shaping the nature and persistence of normative systems.

Understanding bottom-up responses to norm violations is critical for understanding the trajectories of social

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norms. Many norm violations occur outside the awareness of official agents. As such, formal sanctioning is often not applicable. Casual observers who do witness norm violations (e.g., friends, coworkers, passersby) also typically do not have formal punitive capability and as such cannot officially sanction norm violators. Moreover, many types of deviance are not legally punishable in the first place and as such fall outside the sphere of influence of formal punishment systems. When institutionalized top-down forces are impotent, informal bottom-up processes are particularly critical for regulating behavior and consequential in shaping the course of social norms.

Despite their clear relevance, the mechanics of the bottom-up regulation of social norms remain poorly understood. This is due to three main problems with the current state of the field. First, the strong focus on top-down influences on normative behavior among scientists and practitioners alike has gone at the expense of in-depth attention to bottom-up influences (notable exceptions are discussed below). Second, existing research on bottom-up influences is scattered across different (sub)disciplines (psychology, behavioral economics, developmental science, organizational behavior), obscuring big-picture insights. Third, extant research has primarily focused on bottom-up forces that discourage norm violations, largely ignoring forces that may (perhaps inadvertently) sustain or even exacerbate transgressive behavior. As a result, we lack a comprehensive understanding of when and how norms persist or change through bottom-up processes. Moreover, we lack direction as to how to develop such understanding. What is missing is an integrative overview of relevant bottom-up processes as well as a theoretical framework that can guide future research.

To address these issues, I provide an integrative review of research from different disciplines that speaks to the bottom-up regulation of (counter)normative behavior and concomitant norm development. I will show that such regulation occurs through three broad types of behavioral responses to norm violations, which I refer to as opposition, acquiescence, and support. These responses shape the likelihood of future violations, the spreading versus containment of counternormative behavior in social collectives, and ultimately the degree to which norms persist or change. I will use these insights to develop the contours of a new theoretical model that connects micro and macro levels of analysis by delineating how individual norm violations shape normative systems through bottom-up social dynamics, which can form a starting point for future research.

Behavioral responses to norm violations: an emerging typology

An extensive search of the scattered literature on bottom-up responses to norm violations revealed three

broad clusters of behavioral responses: oppositional, acquiescent, and supportive responses. These responses have distinct consequences for the development of social norms.

Oppositional responses

By far the most commonly studied responses of observers to norm violations are *oppositional responses*. These include various forms of direct punishment or confrontation as well more indirect reputation-based tactics [16].

Punishment and confrontation

Research across different fields has documented punishment as a common response to norm violations. Developmental studies indicate that the tendency to punish or confront norm violators emerges in early childhood [17]. Three-year-olds actively protested when a puppet destroyed a creation of another puppet [18], and 6- to 9-year olds who were faced with unfairness were more likely to punish the perpetrator than to compensate the victim when given the choice [19]. Such punishment enforces social norms [20].

Research in behavioral economics indicates that players of economic games commonly punish fellow players who violate norms of cooperation (“defectors”) by withholding money from them [21]. This can happen in the form of second-party punishment (by an observer who is negatively affected by the violation) or third-party punishment (by an observer who is not affected). Although personally-affected second parties mete out more severe punishment than unaffected third parties [22], third parties also non-selfishly punish defectors, even at a cost to themselves [21]. Such behavior develops around the age of ten [23] and serves to uphold cooperation in groups [6].

A potential problem is that various economic games create experimental demand for (third-party) punishment [24], raising questions about the prevalence of punishment outside the lab. Studies show that, compared to punishment rates in experimental games, direct confrontation of norm violators in real-life settings is much less common [25,26]. Everyday norm violations (e.g., cutting in line, littering, spraying graffiti) are more likely to prompt direct confrontation when observers are personally affected by the norm violation [25], when they value the welfare of victims [26], and when they are socially closer to the violator [27]. The relatively low base rate of direct confrontation in day-to-day life probably reflects the perceived risks involved (e.g., an aggressive response of the violator), which may lead observers to choose more subtle and indirect ways of expressing disapproval and/or mobilizing opposition against norm violators, especially when observers have less power than violators [28].

Gossip and whistleblowing

One way in which observers of norm violations can leverage indirect social punishment is through gossip. Norm violators are common targets of gossip [29–31], which plays an important role in the informal regulation of social behavior [32]. By clarifying norms [31,33] and triggering reputational concern in prospective norm violators [34–36], gossip encourages norm abidance [34,37,38]. This behavior emerges early in life. Three-year-olds who had witnessed a puppet destroy another puppet's work started gossiping after the perpetrator left [18], apparently to enforce normative conduct [39].

A more formal means of drawing attention to norm violations is via whistleblowing, the disclosure of privileged information about (organizational) wrongdoing [40]. Whistleblowing is itself sometimes seen as counternormative in that it violates expectations of loyalty, but it can serve to uphold organizational norms [41]. Although whistleblowing may seem less dangerous than direct confrontation, it clearly is not without risks. Whistleblowers often face retaliation [42], which may explain why observers of misbehavior are often reluctant to blow the whistle [43].

Derogation and social exclusion

Norm violators often invite derogatory responses from observers [44]. Some work demonstrated dehumanization of norm violators, which facilitates punitive actions against them [45,46]. Other work points to condescending responses, which can lead to social exclusion [47]. Indeed, norm violators are common targets of social exclusion [37,48–50]. Social exclusion (or threat thereof), in turn, can force deviant group members back in line [37,51]. Alternatively, proactive exclusion can prevent transgressors from joining the group in the first place [52].

Emotional condemnation

Finally, norm violations may elicit “condemning” emotions in observers, such as anger, disgust, and contempt [53–55]. Such responses are stronger among observers from culturally tight (rather than loose) cultures [56]. Condemning emotions in turn fuel oppositional behaviors. Feelings of anger have been found to drive punishment [6,57] and direct confrontation [55,58], whereas disgust has been associated with indirect aggression (e.g., gossip, social exclusion [55]). Moreover, observers' *expressions* of condemning emotions can directly influence perpetrators by providing relevant information [59]. Expressions of condemning emotions signal unacceptable behavior [51], draw attention to different types of transgressions (e.g., anger suggests autonomy violations and disgust purity violations [60]), and potentiate norm learning [61]. Furthermore, expressions of anger can function as a type of social

sanction, enforcing compliance by signaling impending rejection [51]. Indeed, research revealed an inverse relationship between anger expression and costly punishment, in that punishment became more likely when expressing anger was impossible [62].

Summary

Research has uncovered a rich repertoire of oppositional responses to norm violations. These responses contribute to the persistence of normative systems by enhancing the learning and understanding of social norms and discouraging future transgressions. The combined evidence suggests that the prevalence of direct (and risky) forms of opposition (punishment, direct confrontation) may have been overestimated in the literature due to a heavy reliance on paradigms that explicitly invite punishment or enable confrontation with minimal risk. Against this background, it is critical to consider other types of responses to norm violations that have thus far received comparatively little attention.

Acquiescent responses

Less well studied but equally important for understanding the trajectory of social norms are *acquiescent responses* to norm violations. Research on such responses falls in two main categories that capture forms of avoidance and tolerance, respectively.

Avoidance

One stream of research indicates that witnessing norm violations can lead observers to avoid contact with the violator. Infants as young as 6 months already demonstrate a preference for individuals who help others (normative behavior), and an aversion to those who hinder others (counternormative behavior [63]). Likewise, adults who witnessed norm-violating behavior of a group member demonstrated a tendency to leave the group so as to distance themselves from the violator [48,64].

One explanation for such avoidant behavior is that observers of norm violations feel intimidated [15], which leads them to turn a blind eye or distance themselves from violators out of self-protection. Indeed, individuals who exhibit counternormative behavior are perceived as dominant [65–67] and powerful [68], which can elicit submissive responses from observers and prevent them from speaking up [69]. Such perceptions are reduced when norm violators are sanctioned [70], presumably because imposed sanctions imply that violators are not immune to repercussions, thereby reducing their perceived threat.

Another explanation, which is specific to the group level, is that norm violations subvert the group's identity [48].

This may motivate members to expel the violator (as discussed previously), or alternatively, leave the group themselves.¹ In line with this explanation, group members who witnessed a norm violation were particularly inclined to leave the group when the violation was perceived as likely to change the group's norm, either because it was accepted by others or because it was exhibited by an influential person [48]. Such instances reduced identification with the group, which in turn predicted leaving. Conversely, reaffirming the group norm in the face of a violation reduced observers' inclination to leave the group [64].

Tolerance

Another stream of research indicates that norm violations are sometimes tolerated by observers. Classic work by Hollander demonstrated that individuals who perform well earn leeway to deviate from group norms ("idiosyncrasy credit" [71]). Accordingly, job applicants who violated a dress code were more likely to be excused when they had strong rather than weak qualifications [72]. A related argument is espoused by subjective group dynamics theory [44], which posits that group leaders build up "deviance credit" by acting as prototypical members of the group and advancing the group's identity, resulting in more forgiving responses when they violate norms [73]. Accordingly, group leaders who violated norms were evaluated more leniently than regular group members who violated the same norms [73,74].

Group membership appears to play an important role in such responses. A study of political corruption in Spain found that the same felony was judged more leniently when the responsible politician belonged to the respondent's political party than when they belonged to a different party [75]. Similarly, Republicans in the US who reflected on the sharing of false information, nepotism, and power abuse rated these behaviors as less unethical when the behaviors were connected with Donald Trump (a representative of their party) than when they were not [76].

Summary

A growing body of research points to the occurrence of acquiescent responses to norm violations. Although the consequences of these responses for norm development remain to be investigated, it stands to reason that avoidance and tolerance of observers sustain norm-violating behavior by allowing perpetrators to continue violating norms, thereby contributing to norm erosion. Moreover, as individuals who reject norm violations leave while those who accept violations stay, norm

deterioration is facilitated. Thus, norms can be expected to weaken over time when acquiescent responses to norm violations are more prevalent.

Supportive responses

A final cluster of behaviors consists of *supportive responses* to norm violations. Indirect forms of support include emulation of counternormative behavior; direct forms of support include various types of active endorsement.

Emulation

People often emulate the behaviors of others, even if those behaviors are counternormative [77]. Research in organizational behavior found that organization members learned transgressive behaviors from abusive leaders and subsequently copied those behaviors, for instance by harassing or abusing peers [78,79]. Such imitation of supervisors' counternormative behavior was especially likely when supervisors' were perceived to perform well [80].

Norm-violating behavior can also spread among peers. For instance, individuals who were victims of bullying were more likely to start bullying others [81]. Likewise, players who had encountered a dishonest partner in a die-rolling game were themselves more likely to cheat in a subsequent task [82]. Some work further suggests that observers more readily mimic violations of ingroup members than of outgroup members [83].

Such emulation may reflect a form of social learning [84], but other mechanisms have also been implicated. One study found that exposure to unethical conduct of a peer coach increased organizational newcomers' own unethical acts via emotional exhaustion [85]. Another study showed that seeing others engage in counternormative behavior can evoke feelings of envy that, in turn, drive moral disengagement and unethical behavior to balance the scales [86].

Endorsement

Research in developmental science, social psychology, and organizational behavior shows that norm violators sometimes enjoy advantageous social consequences. For instance, bullying behavior in children is associated with popularity [87]; stealing coffee, arriving late to meetings, putting one's feet on the table, and committing financial fraud fuel perceptions of power [56,68,70]; defying professional dress norms signals status [88]; violating artistic conventions enhances perceived impact [89]; and working around organizational rules increases prestige [65].

Such perceptions can translate into various forms of positive responses to and endorsement of norm violators (e.g., power granting, leadership endorsement), particularly when observers somehow benefit from the

¹ Note that leaving the group as an observer of a violation has very different implications than excluding the violator: Exclusion of the violator contributes to the maintenance of group norms, whereas leaving oneself while the violator stays in place enables norm erosion.

violations [90]. A content analysis of written reports of several norm violations suggested that observers are more likely to respond positively to violations when they obtain rewards from those violations [91]. Experimental work showed that actors who violated norms in ways that benefited others were granted more power than actors who followed the norms or exhibited selfish violations [92]. Similarly, leaders who violated norms in self-serving ways were derogated, whereas leaders whose violations served the group received “transgression credit”, that is, explicit behavioral leeway to violate norms [74]. Finally, protagonists who violated global community norms in order to abide by conflicting norms of their local group amassed more prestige and received greater endorsement as leaders than protagonists who violated norms without serving the group’s goals [67].

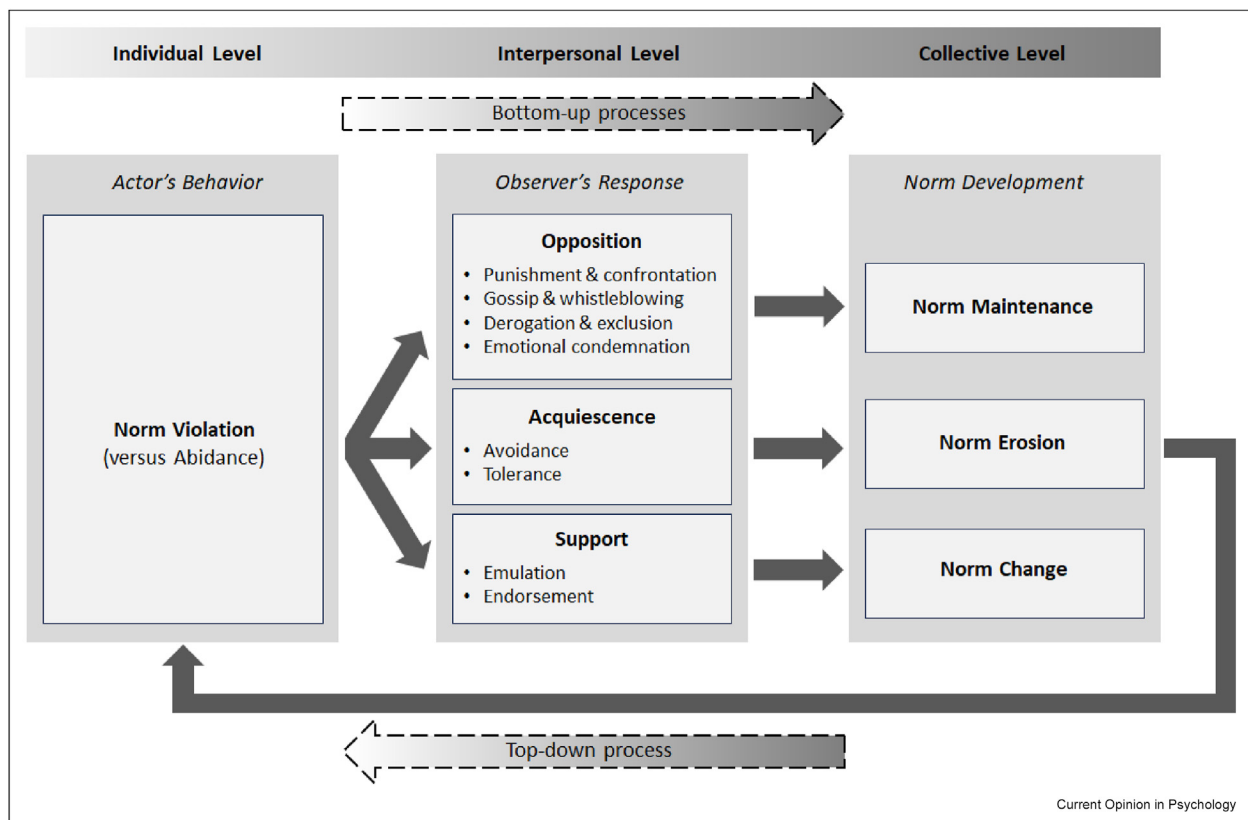
Compatible patterns have been observed at the macro level. For instance, financial misconduct in the banking industry invited positive responses from corporate customers who perceived the wrongdoing as a sign of high-quality service [93]. In a political context, norm-

violating candidates were more likely to gain support from voters who perceived the political system as flawed or illegitimate [94]. In organizational settings, norm violators’ leadership aspirations were supported more by respondents with lower rather than higher socioeconomic status, presumably because the former stood to benefit more from challenging the status quo [95].

Summary

Research from diverse disciplines has documented supportive responses to norm violators. Although the downstream consequences of such responses await explicit examination, it seems plausible that emulation of counternormative behavior and active endorsement of norm violators increase the prevalence of transgressions. When observers emulate counternormative behaviors they witness, those behaviors obviously become more prevalent. Moreover, as norm violators gain more influential positions by amassing prestige, power, and leadership, their behavior will have greater impact on social collectives, and norm change becomes increasingly probable.

Figure 1



A model of bottom-up responses to norm violations and their downstream consequences for the development of social norms. Oppositional responses contribute to norm maintenance by discouraging future violations. Acquiescent responses facilitate norm erosion by enabling future violations. Supportive responses catalyze norm change by facilitating the spreading of counternormative behavior. The evolving norms in turn inform individual behavior in a top-down fashion, setting off a cyclical process of norm development over time.

Theoretical integration: an emerging framework

The current synthesis of the literature on social responses to norm violations points to the contours of a new theoretical model that connects micro and macro levels of analysis by delineating how individual norm violations shape normative systems through bottom-up social dynamics (see [Figure 1](#)). Oppositional responses contribute to the persistence of normative systems by discouraging future violations. Acquiescent responses enable norm erosion by allowing perpetrators to continue violating norms. Supportive responses catalyze norm change by increasing the prevalence of counter-normative behavior and augmenting violators' influence on social collectives. These processes repeat themselves as evolving norms feed back into individual behaviors in a top-down manner, creating a cycle of recurring bottom-up (behavioral) and top-down (normative) influences.

This framework offers a new handle on understanding the development of normative systems. Norms may develop in different directions (maintenance, erosion, or change) depending on observers' responses to norm violations. Importantly, neither direction is inherently good or bad. Norm maintenance may facilitate coordination, order, and stability [5,6], whereas norm change may facilitate progress, innovation, and social change [96,97]. Which development is desired and functional depends on situational requirements and individual needs and motivations. The current review and model speak to both sides of the story by illuminating how social responses to norm violators can protect order and stability as well as dismantle barriers that block progress, innovation, and social change.

Future directions

The current framework provides straightforward directions for future research. First, if we are to understand bottom-up influences on social norms, we need to establish how oppositional, acquiescent, and supportive responses to norm violators shape social norms over time. Whereas the effects of oppositional responses to norm violations on the maintenance of normative systems have been reasonably well-documented, the effects of acquiescent and supportive responses on norm erosion and change remain to be investigated. Examining such effects will require a combination of controlled experiments to demonstrate causality and longitudinal designs to track temporal development.

Second, we need to uncover when one or the other process unfolds. This requires attention to moderators that shape the relative likelihood of opposition, acquiescence, and support. Evidence shows that responses to norm violations are malleable. For instance, preschoolers showed more disapproval when perpetrators violated norms because they wanted to than because they had to

due to situational pressures [98], and adults made stronger (negative) attributions of perpetrators who were aware that they were violating a norm than of those who were not [99]. Other work found that perpetrators who provided justifications for a transgression were evaluated more negatively than perpetrators who offered apologies or excuses [100]. Finally, responses to norm violations are shaped by culture, with stronger pushes toward opposition occurring in tighter societies [56,101]. Culture also shapes the desired mode of opposition, such that in countries where physical confrontation and social exclusion are deemed less appropriate, gossip is deemed more appropriate [102]. These findings suggest there is promise in investigating individual and situational variables that determine when norm violators meet with opposition, acquiescence, or support.

Conclusion

Understanding the nature and impact of social norms requires insight in when and how norms persist or change. Besides top-down forces such as sanctioning systems, culture, and leadership, norm development is shaped by bottom-up dynamics that emerge from observers' responses to norm violations. Via various types of opposition, acquiescence, and support, observers of norm violations contribute to norm maintenance, erosion, or change. By linking micro-level norm violations to macro-level normative systems via actor-observer dynamics, the current framework illuminates how norms are jointly negotiated and constituted via social interaction.

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Author contribution

Gerben A. van Kleef: Conceptualization; Funding acquisition; Investigation; Visualization; Roles/Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

I have nothing to declare.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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- * of special interest
- ** of outstanding interest

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28. * This longitudinal study examined when observers of norm violations in daily life respond with confrontation versus gossip. Confrontation turned out to be more likely when punishers were personally victimized, had higher power, and valued offenders more. Conversely, gossip was more likely when violations were severe, punishers had less power, valued offenders less, and experienced disgust. The authors suggested that observers weigh the potential benefits of punishment (enforcing desired behavior) against its potential costs (risk of retaliation).
48. * In two studies, the authors examined whether and when group members exclude norm violators from the group or leave the group themselves. The results showed that participants perceived norm violations as subverting the group's identity, which in turn motivated them to exclude the violator as well as to leave the group themselves. Group leaving was particularly likely when the violation was perceived to affect the group's norm, either because the behavior appeared to be accepted by others or because it was exhibited by a group leader.
49. * The authors of this study investigated why people ostracize others. They tested two theoretical predictors: perceived norm violations and perceived expendability of a target for attaining group goals. Two survey studies and five experiments yielded support for both predictors. Speaking to the motivated and possibly group-serving nature of ostracism, the findings further revealed that participants were more likely to ostracize norm violators in cooperative settings, and unskilled individuals in performance settings.
56. * In a cross-cultural study in 19 different countries, the authors investigated how responses to norm violations are shaped by individualism-collectivism and tightness-looseness. In line with the idea that collectivistic cultures value group harmony, norm violators were considered less powerful and evoked more moral outrage than norm abiders in collectivistic as compared with individualistic cultures. Moreover, in line with the idea that tight cultures value social order, respondents in tighter cultures expressed a stronger preference for norm abiders (rather than norm violators) as leaders compared to those in looser cultures.
65. ** This paper introduces the concept of “rule bending,” behavior that circumvents a rule without technically breaking it. The authors hypothesized and found that rule benders are supported as leaders because they are perceived as relatively high on both dominance and prestige, whereas rule breakers are perceived as high on dominance but low on prestige and rule abiders are perceived as high on prestige but low on dominance. They further demonstrated that rule breakers and rule benders are more attractive as leaders in competitive (as opposed to cooperative) situations, where their apparent dominance can be an asset.
67. * This research examined when and how norm violators gain or lose influence in groups. Across five experiments, the authors demonstrate that norm violators are generally perceived as high on dominance and low on prestige, which impedes voluntary influence granting. However, when actors violate global community norms in order to abide by local group norms, they amass prestige and receive support as leaders.
73. * The authors tested the idea that group members are more accepting of norm violations of ingroup leaders than of regular ingroup members or outgroup members. Four studies provide support for the idea that individuals grant “deviance credit” to ingroup leaders because they perceive them as prototypical of the group and because they believe their leadership position entails a legitimate right to be supported.
78. * The authors examined whether and how abusive behavior spills over from supervisors to other organization members. They hypothesized that third parties learn mistreatment behaviors from abusive leaders and subsequently inflict harassment and ostracism on others themselves. Two longitudinal field studies provide support for this idea as well as for negative downstream consequences for performance. This study demonstrates that norm violations can spread between people through social learning.
82. * This study examined the diffusion of dishonesty between people. Using a sequential dyadic die-rolling paradigm, the authors found that interacting with a dishonest partner led to higher cheating rates than did interacting with an honest partner. This indicates that norm violations can spread in social collectives via emulation.

Further information on references of particular interest

19. ** The authors investigated costly third-party intervention in 6- to 9-year-olds. In a first experiment, children learned about a selfish actor who refused to share sweets with another child. Children could then choose to punish the selfish actor, compensate the victim, or do nothing. Children tended to prefer punishment over compensation. A second experiment revealed that children did not punish actors who created inequality through generosity, suggesting that retributive punishment is specifically targeted at selfish behavior.
26. ** This study provides evidence that the prevalence of third-party punishment in real-life settings is notably lower than in laboratory settings. Across samples from the United States and Japan, punishment of wrongdoing in real-life interactions was particularly infrequent (1–2% of instances) when third parties did not value the welfare of the victim. This suggests that the relatively high prevalence of punishment observed in economic games represents an overestimation of actual punishment rates in daily life.