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# The social dynamics of breaking the rules: antecedents and consequences of norm-violating behavior<sup>☆</sup>

Gerben A van Kleef, Florian Wanders, Eftychia Stamkou and Astrid C Homan

Norms uphold the social order by guiding behavior without the force of laws. Accordingly, behaviors that violate norms pose a potential threat to societies. We review research on the antecedents and consequences of norm-violating behavior. Regarding antecedents, we distinguish between individual-level factors such as power and (lack of) respect for norms, and social factors such as the behavior of relevant others. Regarding consequences, we identify intrapersonal effects of norm violations on the transgressor, including feelings of guilt and shame, and interpersonal effects of norm violations on others, including neurophysiological responses, affective reactions, social judgments, and behavioral tendencies (e.g., sanctioning, status conferral). We discuss the possibility of self-perpetuating versus self-defeating norm-violation cycles and outline a theoretical framework to guide future research.

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Social norms are the pillars that sustain civilized societies. They may be defined as implicit or explicit rules or principles that are understood by members of a group and that guide and/or constrain behavior without the force of laws to engender proper conduct [1]. Although the disposition to comply with social norms is adaptive [2,3], norm violations are omnipresent. People interrupt each other during conversations, show up late for appointments, ignore dress codes, talk aloud in the movie theater, put their feet up in the train, and leave their dirty lunch

trays on the tables of self-service restaurants. In light of the crucial regulatory function of social norms, it is important to understand the antecedents and consequences of norm-violating behavior. What brings people to transgress prevailing norms? And what happens when they do so?

Norm violations come in many shapes and occur across levels of social and organizational life. Given the polymorphous nature of norm violations, a working definition that clarifies the scope of the phenomenon is useful. Building on the aforementioned definition of norms, we define norm violations as behaviors that infringe one or more rules or principles of proper conduct [4\*\*]. This definition also demarcates the scope of the present review. First, our main focus is on *behavioral* norm violations as opposed to attitudinal nonconformity. Second, our discussion is limited to non-legal transgressions. Research on legal transgressions primarily belongs in the domains of law and criminology and thus falls outside the scope of this paper. Third, we do not cover research on non-cooperation in economic games. Even though non-cooperation in such settings is sometimes conceptualized as violating expectations of fairness or reciprocity, common paradigms in this literature explicitly allow for selfish choices, and it is well established that a substantial proportion of the population is predisposed toward selfish behavior [5]. In that sense non-cooperation in economic games does not constitute a typical norm violation. Given that this literature is relatively small and has (to the best of our knowledge) not been systematically reviewed previously, we do not restrict our coverage to a particular time-span, although the main focus is on recent work.

The paper unfolds as follows. We first address research on the antecedents of norm-violating behavior. Next we consider the consequences of norm-violating behavior for the transgressor and for his or her social environment, and we consider how these consequences may increase or decrease the likelihood of future transgressions. Finally, we offer the beginnings of an integrative theoretical framework that captures the current state of the art, and we outline avenues for future research.

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## Antecedents of norm violations

When and why do people violate norms? In addressing this question, we distinguish between individual-level and social antecedents.

### Individual-level antecedents

Individual-level antecedents are variables that reside within the norm violator. Early research suggested several such predictors, including the desire to obtain resources, the pursuit of a social cause, unfulfilled emotional needs, and poor academic achievement [6]. More recent work speaks to the effects of the perceived meaningfulness of a given norm. Survey studies into driving violations indicate that drivers who habitually violate traffic rules, who perceive the rules as inadequate, and/or who experience low subjective risk are more inclined to violate traffic rules [7,8].

Another stream of research points to the role of power, suggesting that the behavioral disinhibition associated with power [9,10] predisposes powerful people to violate norms. For instance, powerful individuals are more likely than their lower-power counterparts to eat with their mouths open [10], to interrupt conversation partners and invade their personal space [11], to ignore other people's hardship [12], to patronize others [13], to cheat [14], to claim credit for others' efforts [15], to sexualize and harass low-power women [16], and to behave aggressively [17].

Recent research has similarly found that upper-class individuals are more likely than lower-class individuals to commit driving violations, make dubious or unethical decisions (e.g., take candy that would otherwise go to children), lie in negotiations, cheat at a game, and endorse unethical behavior at work (e.g., receiving bribes, overcharging customers [18\*\*]). In another series of studies social class predicted selfish norm violations, and this effect was mediated by power [19]. In short, power tears down barriers that otherwise discourage inappropriate behavior, thus increasing the likelihood of norm violations [20].

### Social antecedents

The occurrence of norm violations is also influenced by the social context. Studies have shown that drivers are more inclined to violate traffic rules when they believe that others also break the rules [7]; soccer players are more likely to aggress against opponents when they believe that their team members support cheating or injuring an opponent [21]; and blue-collar workers more often violate occupational safety rules when the perceived safety climate creates room for attitudinal ambivalence regarding safety procedures [22]. These studies suggest that societal-level norms about how one *ought* to behave ('injunctive norms') may be overruled by local norms that are

constructed based on the perceived behavior of others in one's social environment ('descriptive norms' [2]).

## Consequences of norm violations

What happens when people violate norms? In tackling this question, we distinguish between intrapersonal effects (how a norm violation influences the transgressor) and interpersonal effects (how a norm violation influences other people). Both types of effects may influence the likelihood of future transgressions, albeit in different ways.

### Intrapersonal effects

Research on how norm violations influence the transgressor has mostly focused on emotional consequences. Although some qualitative evidence suggests that violating particular types of norms can make the transgressor feel good [23], the majority of (quantitative) studies point to a variety of negative emotional consequences, including feelings of guilt, shame, and disappointment in the self [24–26]. For instance, individuals who learned that they had consumed more alcohol than a reference group experienced negative emotions such as guilt and shame, but only when the reference group was normatively relevant (e.g., students from the same rather than a different university [26\*\*]). Given that feelings of guilt and related emotions foster compliance [27,28], these emotional responses may serve to uphold social norms by discouraging future transgressions.

Other research has documented compatible effects on feelings of belonging. Strongly identified political partisans who violated party norms by endorsing a candidate from a different party reported heightened threats to belonging, unless they were given a chance to affirm their political affiliation by wearing a T-shirt of their own party [29\*]. Given that belongingness threats foster adherence to group norms [30,31], this may be another psychological mechanism that helps to preserve social norms.

### Interpersonal effects

In light of the importance of norms for societies, it stands to reason that individuals are sensitive to norm violations and quickly process them. Indeed, research has found that people spontaneously categorize others as norm violators or abiders [32\*\*]. An early fMRI study indicated that the processing of norm violations engages medial prefrontal and temporal regions of the brain that play a role in representing others' mental states [33]. More recent studies have implicated the insula [34–36], anterior cingulate cortex, and right temporoparietal junction areas [35\*], which are also involved in unfairness judgments.

Norm violations often trigger negative affective reactions in observers that are consistent with these neurophysiological responses. The most commonly reported reactions

are anger and blame [37–39] and, to a lesser extent, anxiety and fear [40]. One study showed that violations of queueing rules were experienced as upsetting, even when respondents were not personally disadvantaged by the norm violation (i.e., when a line intrusion happened behind them [37]). This suggests that norm violations are perceived as disruptive even when no personal harm is incurred, which points to the deep-rooted nature of the aversion. Indeed, cross-cultural research indicates that norm violations evoke feelings of anger and blame across various Western and Eastern cultures [39].

Even though norm violations consistently trigger negative emotions in observers, judgments of and behavioral responses to norm violators are subject to various moderating influences. Regarding judgments, the fundamental motive to maintain a positive group identity may lead individuals to regard ingroup deviants more negatively than outgroup deviants — the so-called ‘black-sheep effect’ [41]. Recent studies indicate that ingroup deviance is processed more systematically than outgroup deviance [42<sup>\*</sup>], and that ingroup alcoholics are judged more harshly than outgroup alcoholics [43].

Another type of group-serving effect has been observed in studies on gossip. People generally judge gossipers negatively, because gossip is considered immoral. However, this effect is attenuated when the gossip is intended to warn and protect the group against norm violators [44]. Indeed, the expectation that others may gossip about one’s behavior has been found to foster norm compliance [45], suggesting that gossip constrains norm violations. Apparently, people endorse the violation of certain norms to defend other norms that are seen as more important — an interesting case of the end justifying the means.

Regarding behavioral responses, norm violations may invite various types of sanctions and interventions, depending on the circumstances. In one study, three-year olds watched a puppet violate the rules of a game. The children protested more strongly to rule violations by puppets that supposedly belonged to the ingroup rather than the outgroup [46], suggesting that the motive to maintain order in one’s primary groups is already present at an early age. Nevertheless, cultural differences exist in the degree to which individuals espouse such motives. So-called ‘tight’ cultures support severe sanctioning of norm violations, whereas ‘loose’ cultures are more lenient [47].

Behavioral responses to norm violations further depend on the observer’s personal involvement [37]. In one study, participants were more likely to express their disapproval to a deviant confederate to the degree that the deviant behavior affected them personally [48]. Another study showed that participants were less inclined to confront a norm-violating confederate (who drew graffiti in an elevator or littered in a park) when

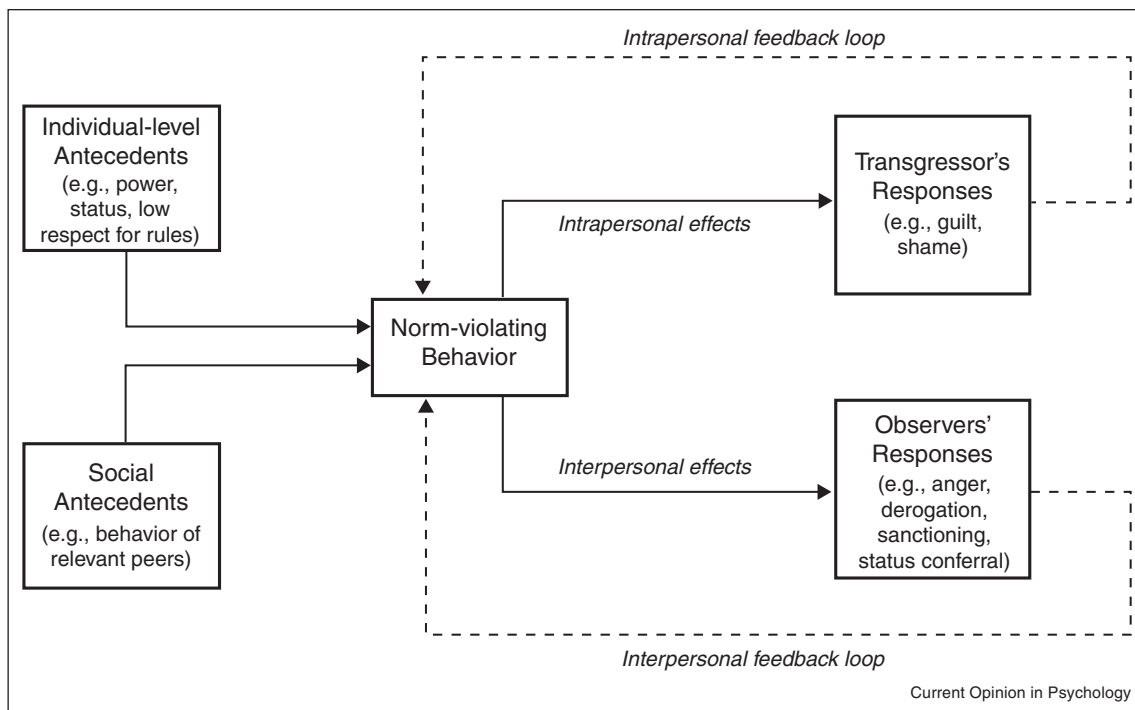
other observers were present (an instance of the famous ‘bystander effect’ [49]), except when the participant’s personal involvement was high [50]. Such personal involvement can also drive punishment of norm violators. Qualitative and quantitative data obtained from growers of Champagne grapes revealed that growers charged higher prices to buyers from Champagne houses that violated consensual norms (e.g., they supplied supermarket brands) than to houses that adhered to the norms [51].

Besides these various negative responses, norm violations may also bring about positive consequences for the transgressor, especially when the norm is not perceived as critically important by observers [52<sup>\*</sup>]. In particular, positive consequences have been documented with regard to the transgressor’s (perceived) hierarchical position. In one series of experiments, individuals who took coffee from another person’s thermos, violated rules of bookkeeping, dropped cigarette ashes on the floor, or put their feet on the table were perceived as more powerful than individuals who behaved appropriately [4<sup>\*\*</sup>]. The authors suggested that violating norms signals that one has the leeway to act as one pleases — a freedom that is associated with power [20]. Consistent with this idea, the norm-violation-to-power effect was mediated by observers’ inferences of the transgressor’s volitional capacity [4<sup>\*\*</sup>].

Participants in another set of studies ascribed higher status to individuals who entered a boutique wearing gym clothes rather than appropriate attire or who attended a black tie event wearing a red rather than a black tie [53<sup>\*\*</sup>]. This effect was mediated by observers’ inferences of the transgressor’s autonomy. Interestingly, the effects were attenuated when the norm violations were portrayed as unintentional [53<sup>\*\*</sup>], which reinforces the conclusion that inferences of power and status hinge on the perception that the norm violator has high volitional capacity [4<sup>\*\*</sup>].

Finally, a recent series of experiments revealed that norm violations can also lead to actual power *granting*, but only when the violations are somehow beneficial for others [54<sup>\*\*</sup>]. Individuals who deliberately ignored a prohibition to tilt a bus chair or to close a window were afforded more power than individuals who obeyed the rules, but only when the norm violation benefited others (i.e., by giving them more leg space or fresh air). This ‘Robin-Hood effect’ was replicated in a face-to-face interaction experiment: a confederate who stole coffee from the experimenter’s desk was afforded more power than a confederate who took coffee upon invitation, but only when he also offered coffee to the participant [54<sup>\*\*</sup>]. Qualitative evidence similarly suggests that observers respond more favorably to norm violations when they somehow benefit from them [52<sup>\*</sup>].

Figure 1



An integrative theoretical framework of the antecedents and consequences of norm-violating behavior. The incidence of norm-violating behavior is predicted by individual-level antecedents that reside in the transgressor (e.g., high power or status, low respect for rules) and social antecedents (e.g., the norm-violating versus norm-abiding behavior of relevant others in the environment). Once they occur, norm violations can exert intrapersonal effects on the transgressor (e.g., eliciting feelings of guilt or shame) and/or interpersonal effects on observers (e.g., evoking negative emotions such as anger, derogatory social judgments, and sanctioning, but also power perceptions and status conferral). Feelings of guilt and shame may discourage future norm violations via an intrapersonal feedback loop, whereas power perceptions and status conferral may encourage future transgressions.

## Conclusions

### Toward an integrative theoretical framework

It is clear from our review that research on norm-violating behavior cuts across various literatures. Although this attests to the broad interest in the topic, it also implies that the current empirical record is rather scattered. Individual researchers have each worked from their own idiosyncratic backgrounds. What is lacking is an overarching theoretical framework that can guide research on the antecedents and consequences of norm violations. We outline the beginnings of such a framework in Figure 1.

The figure illustrates that norm violations have both individual and social antecedents as well as consequences. Many antecedents influence the importance that is attached to higher-level (e.g., societal) norms. Power, status, and disrespect for rules undermine the individual's motivation to adhere to societal norms, and the norm-violating behavior of relevant others may create a local climate that overrules such norms. Norm violations often evoke negative responses in the transgressor as well as in observers, both of which may discourage future

transgressions. However, norm violations can also fuel perceptions of power and status in observers, which may create leeway for future transgressions. Thus, the social dynamics identified here may play a role in the emergence of self-perpetuating or self-defeating cycles of norm-violating behavior. The big question that remains to be addressed is when one or the other type of process is more likely to occur.

### Caveats and future directions

A conceptual complication surrounding research in this area is that norms can be defined at different levels of analysis. The definition by Cialdini and Trost [1] adopted here captures the widely shared norms that are situated at the societal level, whereas more idiosyncratic — yet powerful — norms also exist at the level of a person's immediate social environment (e.g., parents, friends, colleagues [2]). In that sense, research on the impact of the behavior of one's peers on the inclination to break certain rules speaks to a tension between higher-level and lower-level normative systems. Theoretical work is needed to delineate the conceptual boundaries between the impact of macro-level and micro/meso-level norms.



Besides a few experiments on the effects of power on norm-violating behavior, research on the *antecedents* of norm violations is largely correlational in nature. Many findings were obtained in field studies across a variety of contexts. Although this supports the external validity of the findings, the internal validity remains unclear. For instance, does the perceived irrelevance of a norm predict violation of that norm, or does the act of violating the norm lead the transgressor to construe the norm as trivial so as to maintain a moral self-image? Future research should employ experimental designs to test the causal influence of the various antecedents reviewed here.

With regard to the *consequences* of norm violations, several questions remain to be addressed. First, whereas research on the interpersonal effects of norm violations has documented positive consequences (e.g., heightened perceptions of power and status) as well as negative consequences (e.g., negative judgments, sanctioning), research on intrapersonal effects has so far mainly revealed negative consequences (i.e., negative emotions). It would be interesting to investigate whether engaging in norm-violating behaviors can instill a sense of empowerment in the transgressor, which might in turn encourage future norm violations.

Second, given that norm violations may be sanctioned, the question arises what types of sanctions are effective in discouraging future transgressions. Some evidence suggests that polite and pleasant interventions are more likely to be successful than impolite and unpleasant interventions [55,56]. Other research indicates, however, that expressions of anger may be more successful in enforcing conformity than expressions of happiness or disappointment [57], although this effect was limited by several boundary conditions. More research is needed to clarify the contingencies of sanctioning effectiveness.

Third, it is currently unclear whether and how the consequences of norm violations differ as a function of the severity or frequency of the infraction. On the one hand, one could argue that minor or sporadic violations have less adverse consequences than more serious or frequent violations. On the other hand, more severe violations could signal greater volitional capacity to the self as well as to others, which may enhance the transgressor's self-esteem and (perceived) power. It is also possible that the effects of severity and/or frequency follow a curvilinear pattern, such that moderate transgressions produce most favorable outcomes.

Besides features of the norm violation itself, social-contextual moderators of norm violations' consequences remain to be addressed. For instance, how are the effects of norm violations shaped by the transgressor's status, by his or her group membership and/or position within the group, by the perceiver's hierarchical standing, and by

the cultural context? Addressing these and other issues will further illuminate the contingencies that govern the crucial social-regulatory functions of norms.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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