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# Climbing the ladder or falling from grace? A threat-opportunity framework of the effects of norm violations on social rank

Eftychia Stamkou<sup>1</sup>, Astrid C Homan<sup>2</sup> and Gerben A van Kleef<sup>1</sup>

'Social norms keep anarchy at bay, yet norm violations are omnipresent. Although norm violators are generally rejected from higher-ranking positions, they sometimes rise up the ranks. We advance a threat-opportunity framework to understand how contextual factors shape norm violators' downward or upward mobility in social hierarchies. The contextual factors we identify pertain to attributes of the actor (violation), the observer, and the cultural context, which influence whether norm violations are construed as threats or opportunities. Norm violators rise up when their actions promote group goals, but they fall from grace when their actions obstruct observers' own interests or culturally reinforced goals. We offer a review of the literature, which supports the threat-opportunity framework. We close by suggesting future research directions.

## Addresses

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## Introduction

Social norms are guiding principles that constrain behavior without the force of laws to generate appropriate conduct [1]. Norms thus create a sense of common ground that makes societies run smoothly and helps preserve the social order [2,3]. Despite the instrumental value of social norms, norm violations—behaviors that infringe principles of proper conduct—are ubiquitous. People interrupt their conversation partners, arrive late for meetings, make phone calls in quiet carriages, and ignore the dress code of their organization.

Although some studies demonstrate that norm violators are denied higher-ranking positions in the hierarchy due to the negative consequences of their actions, other studies point to violators' potential to rise up the ranks [4\*,5]. Here we review these divergent findings and offer a new theoretical framework to understand them through the lens of social-contextual factors that influence the degree to which norm violations are construed as potential threats or opportunities, depending on whether they obstruct or facilitate a relevant goal. In what follows, we first describe state-of-the-art research on the controversial relationship between norm violation and social rank, and then delineate how the proposed threat-opportunity framework explains this relationship by considering key moderators at the actor, observer, and cultural level. Finally, we employ the threat-opportunity framework to integrate past findings and to outline future research avenues.

Before reviewing the literature, we clarify the working definitions of norm violation and social rank to demarcate the scope of the review. First, we focus on norm violations that are behavioral, non-legal, and occur in non-economic settings, because behavioral violations are more discernible than opinion (non-behavioral) deviance; non-legal violations are based on general consensus and leave more space for different interpretations than legal violations that are based on criminal justice; and defection in economic games can be considered a selfish choice that is often afforded by the rules of the game [4\*]. Second, social rank refers to an ordering of individuals with regard to a valued social dimension (e.g. power, status, leadership, influence), with higher-ranking individuals possessing more of the valued dimension than lower-ranking individuals [6]. We address both passive and active forms of social rank, with the former referring to *perceptions* of higher rank and the latter to voluntary *granting* of a higher-ranking position.

## The contradictory effects of norm violation on social rank

Given that norms regulate group processes and ensure group survival [7], it stands to reason that norm followers should gain higher rank because of their instrumental social value, that is, their ability to facilitate the smooth functioning of groups [8\*,9]. Indeed, laboratory research indicates that members who conformed to group norms by showing prototypical behavior were preferentially endorsed as leaders [10]. Similarly, organizational studies showed that leaders who behaved unethically were degraded [11]. The

demotion of norm violators is compatible with research showing various negative reactions in observers, ranging from anger and blame [12,13] to gossip and rumors [14,15] as well as pillory and derision [16], which are all powerful means to enforce social norms.

Despite the intuitive plausibility of negative reactions to norm violators, several strands of research point to positive consequences for the violator's social rank. Experimental studies showed that individuals who dropped cigarette ashes on the floor in a café, put their feet on their colleague's table, and ignored the rules of book-keeping were perceived as more powerful than individuals who followed the various types of norms [17\*\*]. Field studies also showed that individuals who entered a posh boutique in their gym clothes and gave a lecture at the university wearing red sneakers were ascribed higher status [18]. Other studies have similarly shown that individuals who expressed negativity (e.g. anger) and naysaying—behaviors that are considered counter-normative—were considered more powerful and more effective as leaders [19,20]. Moreover, a large-scale genetic study demonstrated that the dopamine transporter gene, DAT1, was positively related to rule breaking and leadership role occupancy [21\*], which suggests that the expression of rule-breaking inclinations is associated with leadership emergence. In the domain of art, too, research in the lab and in museums showed that artists who deviated from a norm they established earlier in their career or a norm that their contemporaries established in a given era were considered more influential, and observers would pay more money for their work [22\*]. Across many of these studies, inferences of higher rank hinge on the perception that the violator was free to act at will [17\*\*,18,22\*], which explains why perceptions of rank were attenuated when the norm violation was unintentional (e.g. the violator was unaware of the norm) [18,22\*].

Taken together, evidence shows that norm violators may fall from grace but may also climb the ladder. We propose that these divergent findings become plausible if we consider that norms are socially constructed [23]—hence the effects of norm violations are interwoven with social-contextual factors that determine whether transgressions will be perceived as threats or opportunities depending on their implications in a given context. To examine this possibility, we review research that examines how the effects of norm violation on social rank are moderated by attributes of the *actor* who committed the violation, the *observer* who witnessed it, and the *cultural* setting, in which it took place.

## Moderators of the relationship between norm violation and social rank

### Actor

Research on actors' attributes has mostly focused on their group membership and the implications of the violation

for the group. A study in India showed that individuals were more likely to devalue the status of a violator who belonged to the same, rather than a different, caste as themselves [24]. In another study, young children protested more strongly when an ingroup puppet violated the rules of a game than when an outgroup puppet did [25]. Although individuals generally regard ingroup violators more negatively than outgroup violators [26], this 'black-sheep' effect depends on the violator's rank and their ultimate goal: Ingroup violators of higher rank (e.g. a captain of a soccer team) were evaluated less negatively than outgroup captains or ingroup team players who violated rules, but only when the ingroup captain violated rules in the group's interest [27]. Additionally, recent research shows that ingroup members (i.e. someone of the same sex, ethnicity, or university) who violated norms that did not harm the ingroup were perceived to be more powerful than outgroup violators [28].

These findings suggest that violations committed by ingroup members make salient a fundamental motivation to uphold a positive group identity and promote group goals [29]. Indeed, a series of experiments revealed that individuals who broke the rules to benefit others were granted power, a so-called 'Robin-Hood' effect. For instance, individuals who ignored a prohibition to tilt a bus chair or to close a window in a waiting room were afforded more power than individuals who obeyed the rules, but only when the violation benefited others by giving them more leg space in the bus or by letting cool air in a heated room [30]. Converging evidence comes from research on gossip and whistle-blowing, which are both considered counter-normative and are evaluated negatively [15]. The negative judgments, however, significantly diminish when the gossipers intend to warn and protect the group against other wrongdoers [31], and when the whistle-blower acts out of collective concern [32].

In sum, when (ingroup) violators act in a group-serving manner and facilitate group goal accomplishment, they are seen as providing opportunities for the group and may be afforded higher rank.

### Observer

Literature on observers' attributes examined the conditions that make observers feel personally affected by the violation. A series of studies revealed that the tendency to reject norm violators for a leadership role was moderated by the observers' rank: higher-ranking observers favored norm followers over norm violators, whereas lower-ranking observers did not [33]. Field studies similarly found that observers who witness workplace incivility are more likely to confront the violator when they have high rank in the company because they perceive a status challenge [34]. Another study showed that observers who scored high on Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), a personality trait that is associated with

a desire for privileged positions in society, were more likely to reject norm violators as leaders than low-SDO observers [33]. Furthermore, higher-ranking observers who espouse hierarchy-enhancing beliefs punish workplace misbehavior more when it is committed by lower-ranking rather than higher-ranking deviants [35].

These studies suggest that, compared to lower-ranking observers, higher-ranking observers are more sensitive to the potential status loss involved in having a norm violator move up the hierarchy, and that they are motivated to defend their own relative rank by preserving the extant hierarchy. The notion that higher-ranking observers' motivation to preserve the existing hierarchy may underpin negative reactions to norm violators dovetails with recent evidence that observers who experience higher feelings of entitlement, a personality trait that correlates with status aspirations, tend to reject a violator's claims to higher rank out of status threat [36\*].

In sum, when a norm violator threatens observers' (aspirations for) higher rank, observers are more likely to block the violator's way up. Therefore, individuals may react to norm violators in a self-serving manner. This account is consistent with evidence that people are more likely to express their disapproval of deviant behavior to the degree that the deviant behavior affects them personally and hurts their self-interest [37]. In fact, when participants' personal involvement was high, they disapproved of norm-violating confederates (e.g. who littered in a park) even in the presence of others [38], a situation that would have otherwise elicited the famous 'bystander effect' [39]. Higher social rank thus motivates bystanders to reprove a norm violator to counteract the perceived threat to their own rank.

### Culture

Research on the role of culture has mostly focused on the values that shape the meaning of a norm violation in a given culture. A scenario study across 19 countries described an actor violating or following organizational norms [40\*\*]. The results showed that the norm violator was considered more powerful than the norm follower in individualistic cultures but less powerful in collectivistic cultures. Another scenario study in India, a typically collectivistic country, showed that wearing casual clothes in a formal ceremony reduced the actor's perceived status [41]. Similarly, exhibitors who dressed casually in a formal trade show were approached less by people with an interdependent self-construal [42]—a view of the self that is sustained by collectivistic cultural practices emphasizing group memberships [43]. These findings suggest that, in collectivistic cultures, norm violations are interpreted as defying the actor's duty to preserve group harmony, which reduces their rank. In contrast, in individualistic cultures, the freewheeling behavior of

norm violators adheres to the ideal of autonomy [44], thereby enhancing their rank.

Besides collectivism, there is evidence that cultural tightness influences violators' rank. Compared to loose cultures, tight cultures have lower tolerance of and impose stricter punishment to norm violators to maintain social order [45]. Accordingly, individuals who followed organizational norms were more strongly supported as leaders in tight compared to loose countries [40\*\*]. This finding suggests that norm violations in tight cultures may be seen as a threat to the social order [46]. On the contrary, situations that require a status quo change and the creation of new opportunities, such as an economic crisis, may call for deviant leaders. For instance, women, whose relationship-oriented behavior does not conform to gender stereotypes about leadership, and Asian Americans, whose self-sacrificing behavior does not conform to stereotypes about autonomous leadership in the US, were more likely to emerge as leaders in organizations that decline [47,48].

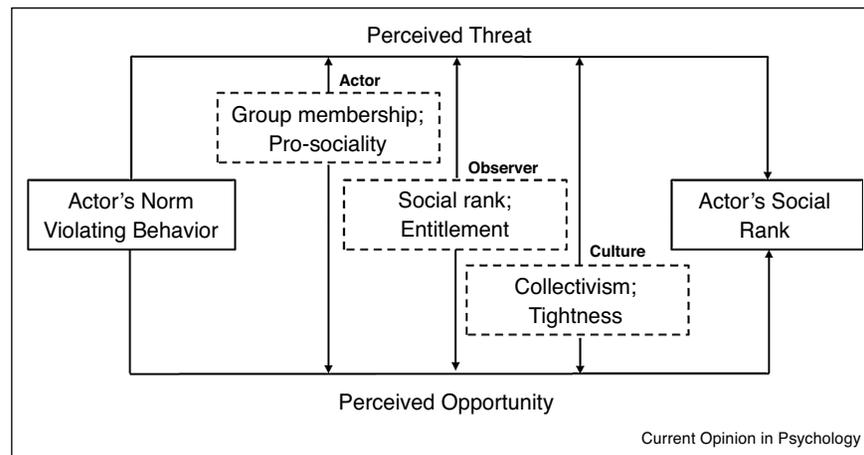
In sum, when prevalent cultural values promote autonomy and openness to change or there is a greater need for reform, norm violators are more likely to rise up the ranks. Thus, norm violators' social rank depends on the congruence of their behavior with prevalent cultural values.

### Conclusion

#### Integrating past findings: the threat-opportunity framework

Norm violations do not happen in a vacuum. They are embedded in a social context that regulates their social consequences and thus their impact on the violator's rank. Our review revealed that norm violators' potential to rise up depends on social-contextual moderators that pertain to features of the actor (violator), the observer, and the culture (see Figure 1). These moderators influence the degree to which norm violations are considered potential threats or opportunities. Norm violations are considered threatening when they are committed by ingroup members who harm the group's image, challenge observers' vested interests in maintaining a higher-ranking position, and take place in a culture that endorses group harmony (collectivism) and the maintenance of social order (tightness). Conversely, norm violations are perceived as opportunities when they are prosocial acts that serve group interests or are enacted in a culture that prescribes autonomy (individualism) and openness to change (looseness). Depending on features of the actor, observer, and culture, these threats and opportunities are more or less salient and consequential for the violators' rank. That is, if observers feel that the opportunities outweigh the threats, they are more likely to respond positively and promote norm violators' rank. However, if threats outweigh the opportunities, observers are more likely to respond negatively and derogate norm violators' rank.

Figure 1



A threat-opportunity framework of the effects of norm violations on social rank. The extent to which norm violators lose or gain social rank (solid boxes) depends on contextual factors that pertain to features of the actor, the observer, and the culture (dashed boxes), which shape the degree to which observers construe norm violations as threats versus opportunities. Norm violations are more likely to have negative consequences for an actor's social rank to the degree that they are perceived as posing a threat, and positive consequences to the degree that they are perceived as offering an opportunity.

### Future directions and limitations

Our theoretical framework postulates the construal of norm violations as threats or opportunities as an overarching principle that regulates violators' rank. This framework can integrate past findings and inform directions for future research. For instance, the current review suggests that the domain where norm violations occur affects people's responses to them. Rule breaking generally resulted in denial of leadership in the domains of business and politics, but fueled perceptions of influence in the domain of art. Anthropological theories suggest that, like cultures, domains of social life vary in their strength of norms and tolerance to deviance. Certain domains feature more rigid norms and impose harsher punishment for norm violations than other domains that feature looser norms and leave more room for experimentation [49]. The prevalence of transgressions in domains that feature vague norms may render observers more tolerant to norm violators, which may lead them to perceive relatively more opportunities than threats. Future research could examine how people react to the same norm violation that is enacted in domains that differ in their strength of norms and salience of threats.

Besides features of the actor, observer, and culture, factors relating to the violation per se remain to be addressed. For instance, norms often operate at different levels. Apart from the widely shared norms that are situated at the community level, there exist more idiosyncratic norms at the level of a person's primary groups (e.g. parents, friends, colleagues) [4\*]. Recent studies demonstrate that individuals who abide by group norms while violating community norms rise to positions of

higher rank in their groups [50], perhaps because threats are less salient when people violate community rather than group norms. Future research can build upon this multilevel framework of norms, which allows testing novel hypotheses about situations where there is a tension between higher-level and lower-level normative systems.

Although the scope of the review was limited to behavioral and non-legal violations, the studies we reviewed included different types of norm violations. Existing theoretical frameworks do not capture the polymorphous nature of norm violations [1], which limits the possibility to directly compare results from different studies. Future work could therefore create a comprehensive theoretical taxonomy that categorizes norm violations along various dimensions, such as severity, content, and domain where they most frequently occur. Addressing the aforementioned issues will further advance our understanding of the intricate relationship between norm violation and social rank, and the role of perceived threats and opportunities in this relationship.

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### Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

- of special interest
- of outstanding interest

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This review article examines what brings people to violate norms and what are the consequences of norm violations. It shows that norm violations have both negative consequences (e.g. the violator feels guilty and may be sanctioned) and positive consequences (e.g. the violator is perceived as more powerful). The proposed theoretical framework suggests that the negative consequences discourage future norm violations, thereby creating a self-defeating norm violation cycle, whereas the positive consequences encourage future transgressions, thereby creating a self-reinforcing norm violation cycle.
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An experimental study across 19 countries presented participants with a vignette of an organizational meeting where the focal actor either violated

or adhered to typical organizational norms. Although the actor received little support as leader across the board, the perception of his power varied widely across cultures: In individualistic cultures, norm violators were considered more powerful than norm abiders, whereas in collectivistic cultures, norm violators were considered less powerful. Thus, this study shows that the positive relationship between norm violation and power perception that has been consistently found in Western cultures, is reversed in collectivistic cultures.

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