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### The spreading of disorder

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# **Chapter 1**

## **General Introduction**

## Chapter 1

Maybe the best introduction for this dissertation is a simple trip to your local supermarket. What seems like an uninteresting everyday task is in the light of this dissertation a journey in the field of social norms. We namely live in a world of rules, standards and regulations, and on this trip you will encounter dozens. For example, you are not allowed to park your car in front of the store. You have to use the right door to enter the store. You have to use a shopping cart. You are not allowed to smoke, drink or start eating that delicious looking croissant, you just picked up from the shelf. It is not appropriate to jump the queue or litter the plastic bag of the croissant on the pavement. Whereas it is the appropriate behavior to help the man who just dropped all his groceries. You have to walk on the pavement. You are not allowed to jaywalk. When you finally reach your car and loaded the groceries, you have to make the whole trip again because you have to return the shopping cart. All these norms, i.e. rules of behavior tell us which behavior is commonly approved or disapproved in a certain setting. Norms are inseparable to life in social contexts. They are in a sense the glue of our society, as they regulate people's pursuit of personal needs and desires and in doing so prevent conflicts and chaos (Sherif 1936/ 1965). Social norms in the strict sense are defined as: "rules and standards that are understood by members of a group, and that guide and/or constrain human behavior without the force of laws" (Cialdini & Trost, 1998, p. 152). In this dissertation I use a broader definition of (social) norms namely the behavior generally considered (in)appropriate, this refers to all legitimate rules, including laws, rules by

private companies and also pro-social norms such as helping someone in need. These norms can be as general as “thou shalt not steal” or as specific as “no reading while eating at the kitchen table” (a norm in the household where I grew up). Norms can be transsituational (Reno, Cialdini, & Kallgren, 1993) and extend to all or many settings, like being polite to others, but they can also be limited to a certain setting (Aarts, & Dijksterhuis, 2003). For example, talking out loud is a norm violation in a library but very appropriate while having a party.

Although norm-conforming behavior is in the best interest of others and the community as a whole, it is often not in the best interest of the individual it self. It is much easier to litter a soda can than carry the can with you to the next trashcan 4 blocks away. Although it varies greatly across settings and situations whether people conform to norms, there is no question that people’s behavior is often guided by social norms (e.g. Cialdini & Trost, 1998). So why do we conform to social norms? Violating social norms is often associated with sanctions, whereas norm-conforming behavior is associated with approval and reward. There is no denying that the forecast of a sanction for transgressions can induce norm conforming behavior. In Singapore the police officer on every street corner and the prospect of a fine up to \$2000 will probably scare you into not littering. These sanctions and rewards can also be informal, the classical work on conformity points to the human desire to be liked (or not to be disliked) by others, as one of the mechanisms that drives conformity to group norms (Deutch and Gerard, 1955). It is clear this mechanism can be influential, it influences men into wearing a tie and woman into waxing there legs. Asch (1956) for example showed that people when seated in a group are likely to follow the answer given by the rest of the group even when it is clear (to them) that this answer is

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false. Although considerations of costs and benefits can spark norm-conforming behavior, they are neither able to solely explain the influence of norms on behavior nor the variance in this influence. For many norms the costs of transgression are low or even absent, nevertheless people tend to conform to them. Littering or not returning your shopping cart is not likely to get fined or be met by open disapproval by other people, so their costs are low (if we don't take Singapore into account). But the majority of people does not litter anyway, even when other people are absent and there is no chance of getting fined. Apparently, it is not (merely) anticipated sanctions that determine norm conformity. What is going on? We know from prior research (Cialdini, Kallgren & Reno, 1990) that social norms need to be activated to influence behavior. This even applies to personal norms, i.e. rules or standards for one's own behavior (Kallgren, Reno, & Cialdini, 2000). As norm conformity differs across settings, the environment seems to play an important role in the activation and deactivation of norms. How exactly does this work? What does it depend on? This dissertation explores these issues, using a theory that specifically focuses on the environmental influences on the (de)activation of norms: goal-framing theory.

The goal-framing theory (Lindenberg & Steg, 2007) states that the influence of norms on people's behavior is determined by the goal they pursue. Goals influence how one perceives, evaluates and behaves (in) a setting and what one is sensitive to in that situation. The theory distinguishes three overarching goals: hedonic, gain and normative goals. People, pursuing a gain goal focus on guarding and improving their resources. People pursuing a hedonic goal are mainly focused on guarding and improving the way

they feel right now (short-term perspective). A normative goal on the other hand focuses people at what is generally considered appropriate. All three goals may be influential at a given time but the relative weight of their influence differs across situations. One of the three overarching goals is focal at a given moment, with the other two goals in the cognitive background. With regard to the focal goal, one is particularly attentive and sensitive to information that pertains to this goal. Thus, people for whom the normative goal is focal, will be especially attending and sensitive to information concerning norms in a situation. Changes in the degree of activation of a goal can make a goal from the background become focal and vice-versa. Thus, as goals can conflict, the weakening of one goal will make another goal (or both other goals) relatively more influential.

Therefore the weakening of the normative goal makes hedonic and/ or gain goals more influential, thereby inhibiting the influence of norms in general. Conversely, strengthening the normative goal enhances the influence of norms on behavior.

The normative goal is a priori the weakest of the three; therefore its strength relies (more than the other goals) on (external) support, especially on the behavior of other people. So what happens when a setting reveals lack of support for a norm? In the public realm, there are often cues that others violated a certain norm, such as litter on the streets, graffiti on the walls, bicycles and cars parked where this is not allowed. According to the theory such negative “norm-support cues” should weaken the general normative goal to act appropriately and thus inhibit the influence of norms. This effect should hold for the weakening of a norm that corresponds to the observed norm violation. For example, seeing others throw trash on the ground, should make it more likely that one does not keep to the anti-littering norm oneself. However, there should be an even more interesting

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phenomenon to be observed: if others show disrespect for one norm, one's general goal to keep to norms becomes weaker (less activated) and thus one should also be less likely to follow another, quite unrelated, norm: a cross-norm inhibition effect. If this is correct, then norm violations will have a tendency to spread from one norm to other norms. This is only a prediction from goal-framing theory. Is there empirical support for this effect? Are we for example more likely to litter, ignore prohibition signs or even steal in a setting sprayed with graffiti? These and related questions will be pursued in this dissertation with the help of experiments, many of which are field experiments with a high ecological validity: experiments in the public realm.

The logic that links the different experiments and explains their sequence is the following. First, we<sup>1</sup> address norms that pertain to the maintenance of public order, such as the anti-littering norm. In a series of studies (chapter 2), we focus on the cross-norm inhibition effect in the public realm. Would this effect hold for various kinds of rules, as the theory predicted? We vary the kinds of rules that one observed being transgressed from social norms to police ordinances, to private rules and federal laws. We also vary the rules one is willing to violate from anti-littering to trespassing to stealing.

Since one might be sanctioned financially or socially for littering or stealing, the question is whether the activation of norms is due to the idea that where norms are violated by others, norms are not enforced and therefore one can violate them with impunity. This would not be an effect of norm (de)activation, as described earlier. To rule out a guess on

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term "we" and not "I" throughout the remainder of the dissertation, when I refer to the authors, as the research described being the product of a collaboration with my promoters: Siegwart Lindenberg and Linda Steg.

law enforcement as the mechanism behind an increase in norm violating behavior in these settings, we look in chapter 3 at norms that are not associated with sanctions when violated: pro-social norms. Although helping a stranger who dropped something or return an item that somebody lost is considered appropriate behavior, you will not get sanctioned for not acting accordingly. Are these pro-social helping norms also inhibited in settings with negative norm support cues? Are we less likely to help someone in a littered setting? If this is true it could explain why in public places helpfulness towards strangers in public places varies so much across settings (Levine, Martinez, Sorenson, 1994).

In public places we are not only confronted with cues that signal disrespect for norms, fortunately there are also cues clearly signaling respect or care for norms or disapproval of norm violating behavior (i.e. positive-norm support cues). There is that shop owner who sweeps the pavement of the street his shop is situated on. The person walking in front of you who almost took the left door in the supermarket but turns around to take the appropriate entrance. If negative norm-support cues like litter inhibit the influence of norms, will positive norm-support cues than induce norm conforming behavior, by strengthening the normative goal? Will observing a positive norm-support cue like someone sweeping the streets reinforce the influence of norms (like being helpful to strangers). We address the inhibition and the reinforcement of pro-social norm influence in chapter 3.

The presence of people in general can make social norms more salient, but some people can be expected to be especially influential in this respect: significant others. Significant others are people whose normative expectations matter for the individual (see Ajzen

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1991). The (psychological) presence of these significant others can be expected to activate the norms that are perceived to be endorsed by these significant others (Stapel, Joly & Lindenberg, 2010). Thinking about a significant other will activate the norms they are associated with (Chaiken, 1980; Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003). In doing so the normative expectations of significant others influence how people evaluate or behave (in) certain settings. For example, merely thinking about your parents might make you sit up straight or eat with knife and fork. In this dissertation we reason that higher-ups (in e.g. companies) are also likely to make certain norms (e.g. company norms) more salient. Thinking of your boss might induce you to clean your workspace as company rules command. So what happens when a higher up violates the norm he or she makes salient? What if the managers steal company money? The higher-ups are than the negative-norm support cue for the norm they themselves make salient. Does this enhanced norm salience also make the corresponding negative-norm support cue more salient and therefore more influential? Does the norm-violating behavior of higher-ups inhibit the influence of norms to a greater extent than when the norm violators are people with less status in the company? These questions are addressed in chapter 4.

Significant others make norms (and their violation) particularly salient. Another way of making them salient is by means of prohibition signs. Such signs are often placed in a setting where a particular norm is frequently violated. Is this a wise approach or will placing a prohibition sign also make the negative norm-support cues more salient and thereby more influential? We address this possible reversal effect of prohibition signs in chapter 5.

In sum, in this dissertation I study the inhibition effects of negative norm support cues on norm-conformity and the norm reinforcement effects of positive norm-support cues. I also investigate whether the influence of norm-support cues is enhanced when the corresponding norm is made salient. The main focus lies on the cross-norm inhibition effect. The general framework through out the dissertation is the goal framing theory. The four empirical chapters take the form of four separate papers. Chapter 2 is already published (Keizer, Lindenberg & Steg, 2008) chapters 3 and 5 are both under review and chapter 4 will be submitted in the near future. As the chapters are separate papers there will be some overlap in the theoretical reasoning.

