

University of Groningen

The spreading of disorder

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

2010

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Keizer, K. E. (2010). *The spreading of disorder*. [s.n.].

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Chapter 4

**Higher-ups make especially influential
norm violators**

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In recent times, many employees learned that their CEO's gave themselves huge bonuses while company rules prescribed all employees to be absolutely frugal with company money. In firms like Enron and Merrill Lynch executives were even involved in fraud. Will this kind of behavior of higher-ups have negative effects on the behavior of lower echelons? It is often said that "higher-ups" should give a good example, implying that if they deviate from the norms, the negative effect on norm conformity for the rest may be even particularly strong. Is this true?

Surely, there is an effect of the norm deviation of one on the norm deviation of others. For example, observing that others have littered makes people more likely to litter (Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1990). However, it is even more dramatic. Recent research (Keizer, Lindenberg, & Steg, 2008) revealed that people do not just imitate what others are doing. Upon observing others' norm transgressions, people are likely not to follow other norms as well. We call this a "cross-norm inhibition" effect, which is based on a shift in the relative weight of the goal to act appropriately (Lindenberg and Steg, 2007). Cues of lacking support for one norm (so-called negative norm-support cues) thus decrease the influence of other norms.

This effect has been proven to be quite robust for every-day situations with norm violators who were not particularly distinguished (i.e. others in general: GO). In this research, we however were interested in a specific group of violators: higher-ups. Are

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higher ups indeed the influential norm violators they are thought to be? Will a norm violation by a higher-up result in a stronger cross-norm inhibition effect than the same violation by groups with less status? We know that there is a status effect on opinions (Asch, et al, 1938; Asch, 1940). But will there also be a status effect on the cross-norm inhibition effect? We believe there is such an effect that runs via the effect significant others have on the activation (and inhibition) of norms.

Context specific significant others

Based on goal framing theory we predict that making a norm salient will also make information regarding that norm more salient, including negative norm-support cues concerning this norm. The more salient these negative norm-support cues are the more influential they are and as a result the stronger the cross-norm inhibition effect is.

Significant others (SO) are people (such as parents and friends) whose opinion (and normative expectations) matter more to the individual than those of generalized others (GO) (Ajzen, 1991). SO are an important source of support for the goal to conform to a particular norm or even to norms in general (see Lindenberg 2008; Lindenberg, Joly, and Stapel in press). Significant others are special. Andersen and Cole (1990) even found out that representations of significant others in the mind are richer and better connected, and these features are more quickly retrieved than features of non-significant others. A norm violation by a SO is therefore expected to be more noticeable and to weigh more heavily than the same violation by GO. As a result a norm violation by SO are expected to result in a stronger cross-norm inhibition effect than the same violation by GO. Based on goal framing theory we assume that making a norm salient will also make information

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regarding that norm more salient, including negative norm-support cues concerning this norm. The more salient these negative norm-support cues are the more influential they are and as a result the stronger the cross-norm inhibition effect is. The disrespect for a norm by SO (i.e. a negative norm support cue) is therefore more salient and as a result more influential than the disrespect displayed by GO. In short the combined effects of the greater salience of the norm violating behavior and the greater reduction in norm support make that a norm violation by SO are assumed to result in a stronger cross-norm inhibition effect than the same violation by GO.

For employees, managers and supervisors are also likely to be SO. However, in contrast to such SO as parents, they are likely to be SO only with regard to a restricted set of norms: the company norms. For example the normative expectations of one's manager are highly relevant for one's actions within the company setting, but not for one's choices and behavior outside that context. We shall therefore refer to this group of SO as *context-specific significant others (CSO)*. These CSO embody the norms that are relevant for the company they stand for, and the higher up they are, the more they are seen as standing for the norms of the whole (Homans, 1951; Ullrich, Christ, & Van Dick, 2009). Therefore the higher the status of the CSO, the more important the CSO are as a source of norm support (for norms concerning that specific context). Besides CSO being a source of support for relevant context norms their (psychological) presence is also likely to make these norms more salient, as is the case with SO (Chaiken, 1980; Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003), which makes these norms more influential. Also the higher up the CSO the stronger this salience effect is expected to be. Thus, executives are high status CSO, colleagues are lower status CSO, and GO are "people" in general, unrelated to the

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specific context. However while the (psychological) presence of some SO can strengthen the goal to conform to norms in general (see Stapel et al. 2010), CSO are likely to make only context specific norms more salient. Thinking or seeing one's boss is likely to make workplace norms more salient and strengthen the influence of these norms on one's behavior. At the office, thinking about one's boss is likely to make the companies clean desk policy more salient, but not likely to activate norms about, say, how to treat one's children. So what if the boss violated a context specific company norm as was the case with Enron and Merrill Lynch? As CSO are a more important source of norm support for the relevant context norms than GO, their transgression will diminish the support for these norms more than the same violation by a GO, resulting in a stronger cross-norm inhibition effect. The cross-norm inhibition effect is further enhanced by the salience effect of the CSO, which makes the norm violating behavior more influential. As reasoned, we further expect that the higher up the transgressing CSO, the stronger the cross-norm inhibition effect on the context specific norms is.

To summarize our expectations: First norm violations by SO will result in a stronger cross-norm inhibition effect than the same violation by GO (regardless of the context) (Hypothesis 1). Secondly, in the specific context, learning about a violation of a context-specific norm by CSO will result in a stronger cross-norm inhibition effect in that context than the same violation by GO (Hypothesis 2). Thirdly, a violation of a context-specific norm by a high status CSO will result in a stronger cross-norm inhibition effect in that context than the same violation by a lower status CSO (Hypothesis 3).

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The Studies

We conducted 4 studies to test our hypotheses. In the first study we test hypotheses 1 and 2. In studies 2, 3 and 4 we investigate the status effect on cross-norm inhibition and test hypothesis 3. In all the studies, participants learned a certain group of people had violated a norm (our context norm). The composition of this group was manipulated. Subsequently, we measured or observed whether participants were more likely to violate another norm (our target norm), which reveals the strength of the cross-norm inhibition effect.

Study 1

In this study, we distinguish between CSO, SO (good friends) and GO. The goal of Study 1 was to test our hypothesis that violations of CSO would result in a strongest cross-norm inhibition effect because they are significant others for the observers in a setting of the observers. Friends are SO, but violating rules of their company (of which the observer of the violation is not a member) is predicted to result in a lower cross-norm inhibition effect. Finally, violations by GO in an unrelated company is predicted to create the lowest cross-norm inhibition effect.

Procedure and Materials. Participants (N=86) were first year students who received course credits for their participation. They read a scenario describing an organizational setting. Participants were instructed to imagine they were working for a company that produced pre-peeled potatoes. Their job was to peel the potatoes, and they were paid for the number of potatoes peeled. They read that a new company rule (the target norm) instructs them to peel the potatoes thinner than before (leaving a thinner skin as residue).

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The scenario made clear that peeling thin will take more time than peeling thick. Thus, conforming to this new rule would result in a decrease in income for the employee, whereas violating the new rule would be profitable for the employee. The subjects were then told that a group of people had violated another norm (the context norm). This group had paid a expensive private dinner with company money. We examined to what extent this information would influence subjects' willingness to conform to the new target norm. Participants were asked to report how likely it would be that they would violate the peeling (target) norm in that context and peel the potatoes thicker than the rule required (the dependent variable). They reported their answer on a 7-point scale (1 - not likely to 7 - likely). A within subject design was followed, that is, participants answered this question for 3 different groups of (observed) norm violators (the independent variable): general others (*GO*), good friends (*SO*), and executives of the company (*CSO*). In the case of *GO*, they read that they overheard people on the street saying that they paid a private dinner with money from the company they were working for. In the case of *SO*, they read that good friends had paid a private dinner with money from the company they were working for. In case of *CSO*, participants learned that executives of their (potato) company had paid a private dinner with money of the company. To rule out a possible fear of sanctions effect, we indicated in the scenario that the company was not able to check whether an employee did or did not conform to the new peeling rule.

Results and discussion.

An one-way-repeated-measures ANOVA showed that whether the participants violated the target norm was influenced by the composition of the group violating the context

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norm: $F(1, 170) = 50.82$ $p < .01$. The results of a post hoc comparison supports our hypothesis: participants were more likely to violate the target norm when executives (CSO) ($M = 5.4$, $SD = 1.57$) or good friends (SO) ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 1.67$) violated the dinner (context) norm than when the group consisted of people in general (RO) ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 1.62$): $F(1,85) = 53.18$, $p < .01$. Also norm violating CSO were more influential in inducing a cross-norm inhibition effect than SO $F(1,85) = 49.02$, $p < .01$. This result supports our second hypothesis that within the relevant context a violation by CSO will induce a stronger cross-norm inhibition effect than the same violation by SO.

This result is an indication that the strengthening effect of status on cross-norm inhibition indeed runs via the effect significant others have on the activation of norms. The higher-ups in this experiment were executives, high status CSO. GO, the low status group (or in this case no status group) were not CSO. Would our conclusion of the strengthening effect of status on cross-norm inhibition still hold when the low status group were low status CSO? Would lower status colleagues also create a weaker cross-norm inhibition effect than the higher-up executives? Studies 2, 3 and 4 were designed to test the hypothesis that an observed norm violation by high status CSO will induce a stronger cross-norm inhibition effect than the same violation by lower status CSO or GO.

Study 2

Procedure and Materials. A between subject design was followed. Participants ($N = 57$) were again first year students who received course credits for their participation. They were randomly assigned to two conditions. Participants in both conditions were instructed to imagine they were part of the scenario they were asked to read. The scenario used was

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the same scenario as used in Study 1. This time the status of the CSO that violated the 'dinner' norm was systematically varied. In condition 1 (N= 29), participants learned that other employees, representing low status CSO, had violated the 'dinner' norm (context norm). The participants in condition 2 (N= 28) learned that their executives, the high status CSO, had violated the 'dinner' norm (context norm). Participants in both conditions were asked to report how likely it would be that they would violate the target (peeling) norm after learning of the context (dinner) norm violation by the relevant CSO, on a 7-point scale (1 - not likely, to 7 - likely).

Results. The results support our hypothesis. Participants in the high status CSO condition (executives violating the dinner norm) were significantly more likely to violate the peeling rule (target norm) (M = 4.9, SD = 1.49) than the participants in low status CSO condition (employees violating the dinner norm) (M = 4.1, SD = 2.0): $t(55) = 1.68, p < .05$.

Study 3

In Study 3, we examined whether the conclusion of Study 2 would still hold if we used a within subject design, since that would show a more robust effect. Again, we tested the hypothesis that a norm violation by a high status CSO will induce a stronger cross-norm inhibition effect than the same violation by a lower status CSO.

Procedure and Materials. We used the same materials and adopted the same procedure as used in Study 2. Participants (N = 93) were again first year students who received course credits for their participation. They were asked to report on a 7-point scale (1 - not likely, to 7 - likely) how likely it would be that they would violate the target norm (peeling rule)

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in that context after learning of the violation of the context ('dinner') norm by a group of executives (high status CSO) and by fellow colleagues (low status CSO).

Results and discussion. Again, the data support our hypothesis and replicates the results of study 2. Participants were significantly more likely to violate the target norm when the contextual norm was violated by the high status CSO (executives) group ($M = 5.0$, $SD = 1.79$) compared to the low status (employees) group ($M = 4.4$, $SD = 1.60$): $t(92) = 2.64$, $p = .01$.

Study 4

Study 4 aimed to replicate the results found in Studies 2 and 3 in a field experiment using a different context and target norm. Participants ($N = 161$) were students that parked a bicycle in a bicycle store adjacent the University sport complex. Again, we tested the hypothesis that an observed norm violation by a high status CSO will induce a stronger cross-norm inhibition effect than the same violation by a lower status CSO.

Procedure and Materials. A flyer was attached to the handlebar of the bicycles that were parked in the bicycle store by the participants. The flyer advertised for a new issue of the (fictitious) KNOW MAGAZINE by stating the headline of this issue. Participants read that the majority (80%) of a certain group of people committed plagiarism (context norm) when writing an article and that they could read more about it in the KNOW MAGAZINE. We followed a between subject design. In the high status CSO condition the flyer read that 80% of the professors committed plagiarism (Fig.2.; on page 64). Participants in the low status CSO condition read that 80% of the students committed plagiarism (Fig. 1; on page 64). To further focus attention on the specified group of norm

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violators, the flyer showed (besides the text) in the high status CSO condition a photograph of a professor dressed in toga, and in the low status CSO condition a student studying. In both photographs, a black bar was printed across the eyes of the CSO. This to make the person unrecognisable and to underline the fact that plagiarism is a (norm) violation. In small print the flyer read the text : “read all about it in KNOW” (“Weet” in Dutch). The magazine name was chosen because it is easy to remember, to avoid that participants would take the flyer to remember the magazine’s name. Assignment of the participants to one of the two conditions depended on where they parked their bicycle. We attached a flyer with the low status CSO text to the bicycles in one parking aisle while we attached the high status CSO flyer to the bicycles in another, identical aisle. We observed the percentage of participants that violated the “do not litter” norm, our target norm. The flyer had to be removed by the subjects to easily use the handlebar. As there were no trashcans in the alley, ‘not littering’ meant taking the flyer with them. We counted throwing the flyer on the ground or hanging it on another bicycle as littering. The experiment took place on three different weekdays from 1600-1900 hour under the same weather conditions.

Results and discussion. Again, the results support our hypothesis. 52% of the participants violated the target (litter) norm when the contextual (plagiarism) norm was violated by the high status CSO (professor) group, compared to 39% when the violators were a low status CSO (fellow students) : $\chi^2(1,160)= 2.822, p < .05$.



Fig. 1. (Left) Low status CSO. Flyer reads “Did you know that 80% of all students committes plagiarism when writing an article. “read all about it in KNOW” (“Weet” in Dutch)

Fig.2. (Right) Low status CSO. Flyer reads “Did you know that 80% of all professors committes plagiarism when writing an article. “read all about it in KNOW” (“Weet” in Dutch)

General discussion

Our four studies show that the cross-norm inhibition effect strengthens when the status of an norm violator increases. The results support our hypothesis that a higher-up (a high status CSO) will induce a stronger cross-norm effect when violating a relevant context norm than the same violation by (low status) GO (study 1) or low status CSO (study 2, 3 and 4). Similar to the higher-up CSO, the cross-norm inhibition effect was larger in comparison to that of GO when good friends, a group that is typically seen as significant

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others were the norm violators but in an unrelated context (study 1). This indicates that the increased effect of status on the cross-norm inhibition runs via the effect that significant others have on norm activation. The different studies reveal that that the enhancing effect of status on cross-norm inhibition is quite robust. The effect is apparently not merely limited to a lab setting but can influence behavior in an every day setting (study 4). This conclusion conveys a clear message for policymakers: Enforcing norm conformity of people in high status positions is essential, as they make the most influential violators.

