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### The spreading of disorder

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## **Chapter 6**

### **General discussion**

We started this dissertation with a trip to the supermarket. The example illustrated the sheer quantity of norms, rules and laws that target our behavior every day. Simple observation teaches us that people are not consistent in following the rules. This inconsistency occurs also for rules that people have internalized and for rules where sanctions play a negligible role, if any. Intrigued by this variance in norm conformity we asked ourselves the question: what can explain this variation? Based on goal-framing theory we argued that the influence of norms and rules on behavior is affected by the observed respect or disrespect for norms by others. This implies that observing cues of disrespect for a norm (i.e. negative norm-support cue) will inhibit the influence of norms in general by weakening the goal to act appropriately (i.e. the normative goal). On the other hand observing cues of clear respect or care for a norm (i.e. positive norm-support cue) reinforces the influence of norms in general by strengthening the normative goal. Based on this suggested goal mechanism behind the influence of norms we had a series of hypotheses. The first important hypothesis was that observing a negative norm-support cue concerning one norm will (also) inhibit the influence of other norms (i.e. cross-norm inhibition effect), including pro-social norms. Second, we hypothesized that observing a positive norm-support cue regarding one norm will reinforce the influence of other norms (i.e. cross-norm reinforcement effect). These positive and negative cross-norm effects have to our knowledge never been studied or demonstrated before. Our third hypothesis was that the influence of norm support cues affects social norms, but also legitimate

rules, police ordinances, laws, company norms and even pro-social norms like helpfulness towards strangers. The fourth hypothesis that we studied addressed the effect of the salience of norms on the cross-norm (inhibition) effect. We expected that making a norm salient not only makes this norm more salient, but also the corresponding norm-support cues, thereby enhancing the influence of norm-support cues from others in the environment. We tested our hypotheses in a total of 23 experiments, most of which were field experiments situated in the public realm. The results support our expectations and show robust effects. Let us briefly review each block of experiments and demonstrate the support for our hypotheses.

## **Chapter 2: The spreading of disorder**

In this chapter we tested the cross-norm inhibition effect (hypothesis 1) and whether it indeed applied to social norms as well as to other rules such as police ordinances, private company rules, and federal laws (hypothesis 3). We argued that the cross-norm inhibition effect is the mechanism behind the claim made by the broken windows theory of Kelling and Wilson (1982) that disorder spreads. In a series of six field experiments situated in the public realm, we showed that observing disrespect for one legitimate norm indeed makes other norm violations more likely, no matter whether it is a social norm, police ordinance, private company rule, or federal law. Signs of norm violating behavior like litter, graffiti or unauthorized parking induced violations like littering, trespassing and even stealing. These findings provide clear support for our first and third hypotheses.

**Chapter 3: Helpfulness in public places: Why does it vary and how can it be increased?**

In chapter 3 we further investigated the reach of the cross-norm inhibition effect. We studied whether signs of disrespect for norms (i.e. negative norm-support cues) would also, as predicted reduce pro-social behavior like helpfulness and kindness towards strangers (hypothesis 1). This question was extra important, because if the cross-norm inhibition effect occurs also for pro-social behavior, we can be pretty sure that it is not produced by the effect of disorder on the subjective probability of being caught by the police. Negative norm support cues might signal the message that violations are not sanctioned and therefore one can violate them with impunity. The results of three field experiments in the public realm show that the effect indeed also holds for pro-social behavior. This implies that the cross norm inhibition effect is not driven by the evasion of sanctions.

Another pressing question was whether norm-support cues only work in the negative direction or whether there is also a cross-norm reinforcement effect, as goal-framing theory would predict (hypothesis 2). For this reason, we tested in the second part of chapter 3 whether clear signs of respect for a norm (i.e. positive norm-support cues) indeed strengthen the influence of (pro-social) norms on behavior, by strengthening the normative goal. The results of two field experiments show that this is indeed the case. The found support for the cross-norm inhibition and reinforcement mechanism makes it a plausible basis for the variability of pro-social behavior in the public realm (Levine, Martinez, Sorenson, 1994).

#### **Chapter 4: Higher-ups make especially influential norm violators**

In chapter 4 we focused on a factor that is expected to influence the strength of the cross-norm inhibition effect: the salience of the norm that is observed as being violated by others (hypothesis 4). Based on goal-framing theory we argue that making a norm salient will also focus attention on corresponding negative norm-support cues, thereby increasing their influence, which in turn strengthens the cross-norm inhibition effect. We argue that negative norm-support cues become more salient when important others violated the particular norm. We looked in this chapter at a special kind of norm violators, namely higher-ups in organizations. Significant others have been known to make norms they stand for more salient than generalized others (“people”), and higher-ups are a special kind of significant others, because they make norms salient that are restricted to a certain context (in this case the company context). Violations of company norms by this group are expected to result in a stronger cross-norm inhibition effect than the same violations by lower status people within the organization because higher ups make the company norms more salient. Violations by higher ups are therefore more salient and more influential. The results of 4 experiments (of which one was a field experiment) indeed show that a violation of a norm by higher-ups induces a stronger cross-norm inhibition effect than the same violation by people lower in status or by people in general.

#### **Chapter 5: The reversal effect of prohibition signs**

The research in chapter 4 supported our fourth hypothesis that norm salience influences the strength of the cross-norm inhibition effect. Having a high status makes the norms

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people stand for more salient in others. Another way in which norms can be made salient is by placing prohibition signs in contexts in which people don't know the rule or have to be reminded of the rule. In chapter 5 we therefore again studied the norm salience effect on cross-norm inhibition but now the violators were unspecified (no status) people. This time the violated norm wasn't made salient by the violators but by a prohibition sign. We hypothesized that placing a prohibition sign in a setting with corresponding negative norm-support cues strengthens the norm inhibition effect (hypothesis 4). Thus, we predicted that prohibition signs in a context that shows disrespect for the corresponding norm have a perverse reversal effect. We indeed found this effect in our experiments. It did not only apply to the norm made salient but also to other norms in that setting (i.e. a cross-norm reversal effect): placing an anti-graffiti sign in a setting with graffiti increased the number of people littering in that setting.

### **General conclusion and practical implications**

The research described in this dissertation shows the impact of negative and positive norm-support cues on people's goal to act appropriately. The robust and sizable results reveal that whether people conform to a norm is greatly influenced by whether they observe care and respect of others for this and other norms. The variety of norms studied in this dissertation reveal the reach of the cross-norm effect. Negative norm-support cues inhibited not only social norms (in the strict sense) but also rules, police ordinances, federal laws, rules by companies, rules by and in organizations and even pro-social norms like helpfulness and kindness towards strangers. Besides the theoretical support for goal-framing theory, there are also important practical implications.

Behavior in the public realm is targeted by numerous norms, rules and laws, as our trip to the supermarket illustrated. The quality of our lives is entangled with (other) people conforming to these rules of behavior. But as numerous as these rules are, so are the cues revealing disrespect for them. Litter in the streets, graffiti on the walls, unauthorized parked cars and bicycles, we encounter them every day. This dissertation reveals the importance of removing negative norm-support cues. A common way to target norm-violating behavior is placing prohibition signs exactly where people often violate a rule, but, as our last chapter shows, this can have perverse effects. Placing such a sign can only be an effective tool if it goes hand in hand with removing negative norm-support cues. In most places in the world litter is already being removed, however the way this is done can be improved. In the Netherlands, for example, litter is removed in the early morning when there are not that many people around. From the efficiency perspective of the cleaner this may be sensible, however from a normative perspective this is not a wise approach. Not only does the litter cumulate during the day with all the negative consequences, but you also miss out on the chance to induce norm conforming behavior by being observed.

Should we be pessimistic about the chances of the present knowledge finding it's way into public policies? No, there is room for optimism; the findings of several of our studies attracted the attention of policy makers nationally and internationally. It resulted in various talks with municipalities, the government, police management and even street cleaners. Based on our findings, several projects have started that for example have the goal to alter the schedules of street cleaners and the immediate removal of graffiti. Every talk I gave on inducing norm-conforming behavior (especially the talks to people in high

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status positions), I tried to end with the same message. It is with this message, I will also end this dissertation: Give the good example, because you are more influential than you think.