

DESCRIPTIVE SOCIAL NORMS AS UNDERAPPRECIATED SOURCES OF SOCIAL CONTROL

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Böckenholt and van der Heijden's results regarding compliance with insurance regulations—that the enforcement activities of a regulatory agency were relatively unresponsive of compliance—are consistent with findings from other domains (e.g., tax adherence), where personal factors and informal social controls have been shown to play a more significant role. However, the specific form of informal social control investigated in Böckenholt and van der Heijden's study (the perceived approval/disapproval of friends and family) is not the only kind of informal social control that has proven effective in spurring compliance. Descriptive social norms, which involve perceptions not of what others approve but of what others actually do, also influence compliance decisions powerfully. Yet, the role of descriptive social norms in rule adherence is often underappreciated by governed and governors alike. The consequences of this relative lack of recognition are discussed within the arena of compliance with pro-environmental regulations and requests.

Key words: social norms, social control, noncompliance.

Although I am not expert on the topic, I found myself persuaded by Böckenholt and van der Heijden's (DOI: 10.1007/s11336-005-1495-y) conclusions regarding the advantages of mixture-IRR approaches to the analysis of randomized response data. On a topic about which I do have some expertise (compliance), I also found myself persuaded—this time because their compliance-related results fit well with a longstanding literature on factors that spur people to act in concert with requests, recommendations, and regulations (Cialdini, 2001).

Böckenholt and van der Heijden's findings indicate that adherence to insurance regulations was much better predicted by features of: (1) the belief systems of the affected individuals; and (2) the perceived belief systems of these individuals' friends and family than by the enforcement activities of a regulatory agency. This relative lack of impact of governing regulatory agency controls (compared to that of personal or social considerations) is consistent with findings in other areas of compliance/noncompliance, such as tax evasion (Roth & Scholz, 1989). That is, although regulatory enforcement efforts can make a difference in compliance with the rules, the difference is often dwarfed by the influence of personal and social network factors. This is the case for a pair of reasons. First, strong formal control efforts tend to produce feelings of resentment and reactance (Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Burgoon, Alvaro, Grandpre, & Voulodakis, 2002), leading to attempts to evade the agency's strictures. Second, when formal regulatory controls are strong, individuals come to believe that, if it is necessary to invoke stringent regulations, those regulations must exist in opposition to the preferences that "people like me" hold. These psychological mechanisms may account for the finding that, after government officials publicly increase the penalties for tax cheating, tax fraud goes up not down (Kahan, 1997).

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The Role of Social Norms in Social Control

The Böckenholt and van der Heijden study clearly shows that, besides the influence of one's personal beliefs about complying with the law (what they termed "Law Abidance"), the decision to comply was also significantly influenced by the expected evaluative reactions of friends and family (what they termed "Social Control"). This anticipated approval/disapproval factor has a more specific label in the social influence literature; it is called the injunctive social norm (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). Injunctive social norms refer, not to one's own view of what constitutes appropriate conduct but to one's perception of what others believe to be appropriate conduct. The norms are said to direct action by promising informal sanctions (mostly in the form of interpersonal approval/disapproval) for what is deemed by these others to be morally relevant behavior. Considerable research indicates that such moral evaluation strongly influences compliance decisions, even when the imagined others are not friends and family but are generalized society members; consequently, expectations regarding what most others approve/disapprove can be quite impactful (Larimer & Neighbors, 2003; Van Empelen, Schaalma, Kok, & Jansen, 2001).

In addition to perceptions of what most others approve (the injunctive social norm), there is a second social normative type (the descriptive social norm) that also directs behavior forcefully. Descriptive social norms refer to one's perception of what most others actually do. Although one's perception of what most others approve and of what most others actually do in any given situation are often related, they are conceptually and motivationally separate. Whereas injunctive social norms mobilize people into action via social evaluation, descriptive social norms move them to act via social information—in particular, social information about what is likely to be adaptive and effective conduct in the setting. Descriptive social norms send the message "If a lot of people are doing this, it's probably a wise thing to do," which serves to initiate norm-congruent behavior.

Although Böckenholt and van der Heijden's paper is mute on the topic, scholars of various kinds, including some renowned psychologists, have long documented the powerful influence that descriptive social norms have on subsequent social behavior (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Le Bon, 1895/1960; MacKay, 1841/1932; Milgram, Bickman, & Berkowitz, 1969). What's surprising, given the ubiquity and strength of the evidence, is how little note people take of this potent form of influence at two crucial compliance-relevant decision points: (1) when, as observers, they decide how to interpret the causes of their own actions; and (2) when, as tacticians, they decide how to influence the actions of others. We can examine each as a way of broadening the understanding of social control provided by Böckenholt and van der Heijden's data.

People Frequently Ignore or Severely Underestimate the Extent to Which Their Actions in a Situation are Determined by the Similar Actions of Others

A while ago I was asked, by the producers of a TV news magazine show, to assist with a segment on why people help in everyday (nonemergency) settings. I agreed, which involved collaborating on the filming of some opportunities for everyday aid such as helping a woman who had locked herself out of her car or stopping to compensate a street performer. Regarding the second of these helping opportunities, I had suggested a conceptual replication of social psychological research on modeled giving (e.g., Bryan & Test, 1967): Set up a street musician in a heavily trafficked spot and count the number of passers-by who put money in his hat after a confederate had done so versus after no such contribution had been modeled.

Although the consequent donation results can hardly be described as unimpressive—the modeled help condition produced eight contributions compared to just one in the control

condition—that was not the most noteworthy outcome of the demonstration. It was that, when interviewed afterward, not one of the eight givers in the modeled help condition attributed his or her donation decision to the confederate's donation decision. Instead, they claimed that some other factor had been the cause—"I liked the song he was playing," or "I felt sorry for the guy" or "I had some extra change in my pocket." Because we know what happened in the control condition, we also know that it wasn't any of these factors that made the difference. It was the similar action of another. But in the absence of those control data, when participants searched their respective phenomenologies, they never once located the true cause of their own behavior.

This illustrates a more specific psychological point than the one articulated masterfully by Nisbett and Wilson (1977) that, in general, people are poor at recognizing why they behave as they do. It asserts that they will be particularly clueless when identifying the similar actions of others as causal antecedents. More systematic evidence in this regard comes from a study of perceived motivations for energy conservation that Wesley Schultz and I conducted recently along with our students Noah Goldstein, Vidas Griskevicius, and Jessica Nolan (Schultz et al., in press).

As part of a large scale survey of residential energy users, we inquired into respondents' views of their reasons for conserving energy at home as well as reports of their actual residential energy saving activities such as installing energy efficient appliances and light bulbs, adjusting thermostats, and turning off lights. When respondents were asked to rate the importance to them of several reasons for energy conservation—because it will help save the environments, because it will benefit society, because it will save me money, or because other people are doing it—they rated these motivations in the order just listed, with the actions of others (the descriptive social norm, Cialdini et al., 1990) clearly in last place. However, when we examined the relationship between participants' beliefs in these reasons and their stated attempts to save energy, we found the reverse: The belief that others were conserving correlated twice as highly with reported energy saving efforts than did any of the reasons that had been rated as more important personal motivators.

To assure that our findings weren't the result of the correlational nature of the survey methodology, a follow-up study employed an experimental design. Residents of a mid-size California community received persuasive appeals on door-hangers placed on their doorknobs once a week for four consecutive weeks. The appeals emphasized to residents that energy conservation efforts: (1) would help the environment; or (2) would benefit society; or (3) would save them money; or (4) were common (normative) in their neighborhood. Interviews with participants revealed that those who received the normative appeals rated them as least likely to motivate their conservation behavior. Yet, when we examined actual energy usage (by recording participants' electricity meter readings), the normative appeal proved most helpful, resulting in significantly more conservation than any of the other appeals (Schultz et al., in press).

The upshot of these studies is plain. When it comes to estimating the causes of their conduct, people seem especially blind to the large relative role of descriptive norms. They don't just fail to get this relative role right; they tend to get it precisely wrong.

People Frequently Ignore or Severely Underestimate the Persuasive Impact That Descriptive Norms Can Have on the Choices of a Target Audience

Although marketers and advertisers have learned through experience to avoid this error, it often shows itself in the persuasion choices of policy-makers and program developers. Take, for instance, the case of an antivandalism program in Arizona's Petrified Forest National Park, which is regularly in crisis because of the estimated theft of more than a ton of wood per month by visitors. As part of the program, new arrivals quickly learn of the past thievery from prominently placed signage: "Your heritage is being vandalized every day by theft losses of petrified wood of

14 tons a year, mostly a small piece at a time.” Although it is understandable that park officials would want to instigate corrective action by describing the dismaying size of the problem, such a message ought to be far from optimal. Indeed, by normalizing the unwanted activity, the message stands a good chance of backfiring (Cialdini, 2003).¹

Because they don’t give sufficient weight to the power of descriptive normative information, there is an understandable tendency of social program developers to try to mobilize action against a problem by depicting it as regrettably frequent. And, this is certainly not unique to environmental programs: Information campaigns stress that alcohol and drug use is intolerably high, that adolescent suicide rates are alarming, and that rampant polluters are spoiling the environment. Although these claims may be both true and well-intentioned, the campaigns’ creators have missed something critically important: Within the statement “Look at all the people who are doing this *undesirable* thing” lurks the powerful and undercutting normative message “Look at all the people who *are* doing it.” It is conceivable, then, that in trying to alert the public to the widespread nature of a problem, public service communicators can make it worse.

To explore this possibility as it applied to individuals’ decisions to despoil the environment, my colleagues and I at Arizona State University conducted an experimental test (described in Cialdini, 2003). At the Petrified Forest, we alternated a pair of signs in high-theft areas of the park. The first urged visitors not to take wood, and it depicted a scene showing three thieves in action. Our other sign also urged visitors not to take wood, but it depicted a lone thief. Visitors who passed the first type of sign became significantly more likely to steal than those who passed the second type of sign (7.92% versus 1.67%).² Thus, because they underappreciate the power of descriptive normative information, program developers can engage in tactics that are counterproductive.

In addition, via the same judgment error, they may fail to implement tactics that can be highly productive. For example, instead of focusing on evidence that many people act to harm the environment, public service communicators would be well advised to focus on evidence that many people act to preserve it.

To investigate this idea, we examined resource conservation choices in hotel rooms, where guests often encounter a card asking them to reuse their towels. As anyone who travels frequently knows, this card may urge the action in various ways. Sometimes it requests compliance for the sake of the environment; sometimes it does so for the sake of future generations; and sometimes it exhorts guests to cooperate with the hotel in order to save resources. What the card *never* says, however, is that the majority of guests do reuse their towels when given the opportunity.³ We suspected that this omission was costing the hotels—and the environment—plenty.

Here’s how we tested our suspicion. With the collaboration of the management of a hotel in the Phoenix, Arizona, area, we put one of four different cards in its guestrooms. One of the cards stated “HELP SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT,” which was followed by information stressing respect for nature. A different card stated “HELP SAVE RESOURCES FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS,” which was followed by information stressing the importance of saving energy for the future. A third type of card stated “PARTNER WITH US TO HELP SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT,” which was followed by information urging guests to cooperate with the hotel in preserving the environment. A final type of card stated “JOIN YOUR FELLOW CITIZENS IN HELPING TO SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT,” which was followed by information that the

¹As a case in point, not long ago a graduate student of mine visited the Petrified Forest National Park with his fiancée—a woman he described as the most honest person he’d ever known, someone who had never taken a paperclip or rubber band without returning it. They quickly encountered the park sign warning visitors against stealing petrified wood and decrying the 14 tons of pilfered wood each year. While still reading the sign, he was shocked to hear this otherwise wholly law-abiding woman whisper, “We’d better get ours now.”

²These data are best understood in the context of previous research indicating that the ratio of thefts to park visitors falls just under 3%.

³According to data from the Project Planet Corporation that manufactures these types of cards, nearly three-quarters of guests who are informed about a hotel’s reuse program comply at least once during their stay.

majority of hotel guests do reuse their towels when asked. The outcome? Compared to the first three messages, which didn't differ in their effectiveness, the final (descriptive normative) message significantly increased towel reuse—by an average of 28.4% (Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, submitted).

Two things are noteworthy about the results of the hotel study. First, the message that generated the most participation in the hotel's towel recycling program was the one that no hotel (to our knowledge) has ever used. Apparently, this simple but effective appeal didn't emerge from a history of trial and error to become a hotel "best practice." Instead, it emerged from a scientifically based understanding of human psychology. This points out the need to call on scientific research to help advance sound policy. The second notable aspect of the hotel study was that the significant increase in program participation was nearly costless. In most cases, for an organization to boost effectiveness by 28%, some expensive steps have to be taken; typically, organizational structure, focus, or personnel must be changed. In this instance, however, none of that was necessary. All that was required was to convey the facts about the preferred behavior of the majority.

What would be the implications of the Petrified Forest and hotel recycling studies for government officials with the responsibility of reducing insurance regulation noncompliance in the situation examined by Böckenholt and van der Heijden? The first would be to avoid sending the message that such noncompliance is rampant. A second would be to determine, perhaps by using a mixture-IRR approach, the true percentage of noncompliance with insurance regulations. If that percentage proved to be significantly less than 50% (as appears to be the case in the Böckenholt and van der Heijden data wherein only 29% of the sample reported any compliance violations), the officials could honestly send the message in communication campaigns that the majority of the insured population adheres to the rules; moreover, they could add the injunctive message that "If even a few persons violate the trust between the agency and the insured, this dishonesty can lead to greater surveillance and regulatory costs that will fall unfairly on the entire group." However, if among some other population sample the noncompliance percentage proved to be above 50%, then only the injunctive portion of the message should be sent to that population.

In sum, when communicating with the public regarding rule violation, it is important for public service communicators to avoid trying to reduce the incidence of the problem by describing it as regrettably frequent. Often, the violation is not widespread at all. It only comes to seem that way by virtue of a vivid and impassioned presentation of the problem. Instead, it would be better to honestly inform the audience of the harm resulting from even a small amount of the undesirable conduct. Furthermore, when most people are behaving responsibly, public service communicators would be remiss if they failed to publicize that fact, as the information should both validate and stimulate the desired action.

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