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Lindenberg, Siegwart; Six, Frédérique; Keizer, Kees

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Social Contagion and Goal Framing: The Sustainability of Rule Compliance

Siegwart Lindenberg, Frédérique Six and Kees Keizer

Abstract: Rule compliance (in organizations or society at large) may be strengthened or weakened by social contagion processes. Observing others' (non-)compliance with rules influences one's own likelihood of compliance. Extant literature shows two social contagion theories that can explain this phenomenon. First, the theory of normative conduct (TNC) (Cialdini et al. 1990) suggests that people interpret the observed behaviour of others (i.e. the descriptive norm) as adaptive for that context, resulting in rational imitation. Second, Goal Framing Theory (GFT) (Lindenberg and Steg 2007) suggests that we should look not just at the contagion of concrete behaviour but at the process that governs the contagion of the very goal to comply with norms and legitimate rules. This is particularly important because it predicts that observed (non-)compliance regarding one rule also affects (non-)compliance with other rules ('cross-norm effects'). Because the goal to comply tends to decay, it needs continuous support from the observation of other people's respect for norms and legitimate rules. Compliance and non-compliance are thus both self-reinforcing mechanisms. This has clear implications for policy which are discussed in this chapter, most notably the importance of a focus on legitimizing rules, so that they are interpreted as norms by the general public.

29.1 INTRODUCTION

Compliance requires that people are both willing and able to act in line with the organizational or state regulatory rules. Whether people comply with rules may be influenced by many different factors such as deterrence and sanctions, monitoring, rewards and bonuses, peer pressure and shaming, and technical and legal knowledge (see Chapters 12–15, 17, 23, 35, 39, 40 in this volume). In this chapter we focus on the social contagion of rule compliance. By social contagion of rule compliance, we mean that the level of rule compliance of a person is influenced by the level of rule compliance of one or more others. This kind of contagion is a particular kind of social influence process.

Two main theories of social contagion processes related to rule compliance may be distinguished: the theory of normative conduct (TNC; see Cialdini et al. 1990) and Goal Framing Theory (GFT; see Lindenberg and Steg 2007). Both are based on so-called shifting 'salience' effects: observing or surmising other people's behaviour or beliefs influences the activation (i.e. the 'salience') of a norm (TNC) or the goal to comply with a norm (GFT). There are two kinds of social contagion. First, there is what may be called 'imitative

contagion' where people are more likely to do X if they see others do X. TNC is mainly concerned with this type of social contagion. In economics, this phenomenon is often called 'conditional cooperation' (Gächter 2007). Second, GFT deals with what may be called 'compliance contagion', where people are more (less) likely to comply with rule X if they see others (not) complying with rule Y. We argue that, when dealing with the contagion of compliance with rules, GFT is especially interesting compared to TNC because GFT's processes for social contagion in rule compliance predict that (non-)compliance itself is contagious and that it can thus spread across different rules. The major theoretical difference between the theories is that, contrary to TNC, GFT deals explicitly with the goal to comply with norms and legitimate rules. In this way, GFT is able to consider the influence of other goals that weaken or strengthen the goal to comply with norms and rules (Etienne 2011), and it is able to specify the conditions under which social contagion of compliance with rules is likely to take place or not to take place. Most importantly, because of the tendency of the goal to comply with norms and legitimate rules to decay, its sustainability depends on an ongoing process of contagion. As we will argue, people's compliance signals respect for norms and legitimate rules and thus 'infects' other people's goal to comply. In turn, one's own goal to comply needs to be infected by exposure to signals of others' respect for norms and legitimate rules. The central message of this chapter is thus that the sustainability of compliance depends to a large extent on the ongoing contagion of the goal to comply.

This chapter focuses mainly on these GFT-based social contagion processes and how they may influence rule compliance. We start by briefly introducing the foundations of both theories and then elaborate on GFT's perspective on social contagion processes of rule compliance. We conclude with some outstanding research questions and implications for policy (be that for organizations or governments).

29.2 THE THEORY OF NORMATIVE CONDUCT (TNC)

The theory by Cialdini and colleagues explains how social norms affect behaviour. The main propositions of the theory are (a) that there is a distinction between the two types of social norms (injunctive and descriptive; see also Chapter 32 in this volume), that it is their salience that determines their impact, and (b) that their salience can be influenced by the situation (Cialdini et al. 1990). *Injunctive social norms* are the behaviours (perceived as) commonly (dis)approved of. The violation of rules prohibiting behaviour will generally be disapproved of, and as such these rules typically serve as injunctive norms. Not littering, speeding, embezzling money or scratching the car of your manager after not getting a raise are all injunctive norms in our kind of society. There is in TNC no particular difference between norms (informal) and rules (formal). Not serving alcohol to minors is a formal rule, and not coming late for work is an informal norm by a company, and not stealing is both a formal rule and a norm. Injunctive norms can also describe the approved-of behaviour in a certain situation. It is an injunctive norm to help someone in need, hold the door or greet your colleagues in the morning. Injunctive norms regulate behaviour by the social sanctions and appraisal we associate with (not) complying with them. Holding the door will probably result in a 'thank you' while *not* holding the door will likely result in a less pleasant remark. In TNC, injunctive norms have no direct effect on the social contagion of rule compliance; rather, it is descriptive norms that affect contagion.

Descriptive norms refer to the behaviour perceived to be common in a specific situation, and they are the major vehicle of social contagion. They indicate what the majority of people

are doing. Descriptive norms influence behaviour by telling us that ‘if a lot of people are doing this, it’s probably a wise thing to do’ (Cialdini 2007). Examples are the most bought book, the very crowded restaurant next to an empty one, and the behaviour of others in traffic. People copy this behaviour because if so many others are doing it, it will most likely result in the best outcome. This leads to an imitative contagion of compliance with a norm that is defined by ‘what others are seen as doing’. A littered environment suggests that many have littered here, which, in the light of Cialdini’s work, signals littering as adaptive behaviour for that context, thereby making the behaviour more likely (Cialdini et al. 1990). Conversely, seeing a person litter in a litter-free environment focuses attention on a descriptive norm that signals ‘almost nobody litters here’ and which therefore reduces littering, as shown by Reno et al. (1993). In this approach, rules exert their contagious influence on compliance indirectly via behavioural regularities that are perceived and imitated.

TNC does consider that descriptive norms should also be seen in the context of injunctive norms, because the two can be in conflict. However, TNC does not specify exactly how descriptive and injunctive norms interact, other than that the most salient of the two will influence behaviour. Would it matter if people’s behaviour were seen as disrespect for an injunctive norm, or as a norm contradicting an injunctive norm? Would it matter whether it were one or the other? There is no room in TNC to consider such questions.

29.3 GOAL FRAMING THEORY (GFT)

The second theory of social contagion processes is Goal Framing Theory (GFT) (Lindenberg and Steg 2007). It provides explanations for the motivational dynamics of behaviour and how compliant behaviour may be stimulated or thwarted, including processes of contagion. GFT posits that the likelihood of a behaviour is determined by the goals that people pursue. In turn, the salience of these goals is influenced by the observed or surmised behaviour of others. Thus, rule compliance depends on the salience of an overarching goal, and this salience depends to a large extent on what others do, creating contagion effects. GFT distinguishes three overarching goals: hedonic, gain and normative. Overarching goals determine the playing field of what is considered relevant (including what are the relevant alternatives to choose from). When people pursue a hedonic goal, they focus on immediate gratification, aiming ‘to feel good right now’ and avoid unpleasurable effort or discomfort. It is strongly linked to people’s fundamental needs and automatic decision-making. When people pursue a gain goal, they are more future-oriented, aiming ‘to preserve and improve their resources’. In a gain goal, decision-making is more deliberate and calculative. People pursuing a normative goal focus on ‘acting appropriately’, on what they believe they ought to do. They are then highly sensitive to social norms; social norms specify what behaviour is appropriate in a given situation (e.g. Keizer et al. 2011; Lindenberg 2006).

For a goal to influence behaviour, it must be activated (‘salient’) to some degree. All three overarching goals are activated to some degree at the same time, but their relative salience varies. At any one moment, one goal is the most salient and thus frames the decision-making, while the other goals are present in the background. The most salient overarching goal determines what information is attended to and how that information is used in decision-making processes, thus making people focus on certain alternatives, neglecting others (Steg et al. 2015). Goals in the cognitive background may either support or weaken the salient goal. When a background goal points decision-making in the same direction as the salient goal, the salient goal is strengthened and the likelihood that people choose options that realize this

focal goal is increased (Steg et al. 2015). Think, for example, of a warm glow (a hedonic goal effect in the background) when complying with the norm to help somebody in need. When, on the other hand, the background goal conflicts with the salient goal and points decision-making in the opposite direction, the salient goal is weakened. Think, for example, of having to spend quite a bit of money (a gain goal effect in the background) to help somebody in need.

Rule compliance can be motivated by any of the overarching goals. When rule compliance is pleasurable and does not require much effort, compliance is possible even with a salient hedonic goal. This does not offer a stable basis for rule compliance. When the gain goal is salient and compliance is profitable, people are likely to comply because it is prudent to do so (which is often called ‘instrumental’ compliance (Tyler 2006)). This type of compliance is likely to lead to a strategic use of compliance (or what McBarnet (2002) has called ‘creative’ compliance aimed at bending rules to one’s own advantage). Rules, however, are usually introduced to create a stable basis for compliance and to make people behave in ways that are deemed desirable by society. Rule-compliant behaviour is usually beneficial for others but not pleasurable, effortless or profitable for the individual. For this very reason, we see in the literature a heavy emphasis on the importance of ‘normative compliance’ (Tyler 2006; McBarnet 2002). However, in the literature, normative compliance is, by and large, seen as an attitude rather than a dynamic process of contagion. Paying attention to the shifting salience of overarching goals, the precariousness of the normative goal, and the concomitant importance that a rule is clearly seen as a social norm, that is, that it safeguards the values and needs of the collective (Lindenberg 2017; Steg et al. 2015), allows us to put the searchlight on the dynamic nature of compliance which is rooted in the contagion of the very goal to comply.

In GFT, an activated normative goal creates feelings of obligation to act appropriately, that is, to comply with norms and legitimate rules in general. By contrast, in TNC what is activated is not a goal but a particular norm, and people comply with this norm because it seems wise (descriptive norm) or prudent (injunctive norm) to do so. Feelings of obligation don’t play a role in TNC. We contend that to understand the dynamics of rule compliance and its contagion necessitates understanding not just the activation of norms but also the activation of the very goal to comply with norms, and when and how rules are taken to be norms.

The a priori likelihood of being salient is not the same for each of the three overarching goals. The hedonic goal is a priori most likely to be salient as it focuses on fundamental needs; the gain goal is a priori *less likely to be salient* than the hedonic goal, because it deals only with secondary needs (resources); finally, the normative goal is a priori the most precarious. It is least likely to be salient because it deals only with the tertiary needs of collectivity (Lindenberg and Steg 2007). This implies that for the normative goal to be more salient than the hedonic or gain goals requires much support from the context within which people act. This support may help develop habits and thus foster a self-identity as a moral and/or law-abiding person (Verplanken and Sui 2019), which can stabilize the normative goal and make it less susceptible to the contrary influences of the hedonic and gain goals. But when this support wanes, even a salient normative goal and a moral self-identity will become less salient over time and give way to increasing salience of gain and hedonic goals (Aquino et al. 2009). It is these kinds of context effects on the salience of normative goals that create social contagion of rule compliance, and, at the same time, make the sustainability of compliance dependent on an ongoing process of positive contagion. How this works will be explained in the following sections.

29.4 GFT-BASED SOCIAL CONTAGION PROCESSES OF COMPLIANCE

For social contagion processes concerning rule compliance, two aspects are most important (from the point of view of GFT). First, the salience of the normative goal is particularly strongly influenced by the signal that relevant others respect or disrespect shared norms. Thus (non-)compliance is relevant not only because a norm is followed or not followed but also because, for others, it is a signal of (dis)respect for norms in general. Thus, for social contagion of *norm* compliance, we must look closer at these influences.

Second, rules are covered by the normative goal only if they are seen as norms. For this to happen, rules must be seen as legitimate. Thus, in order to transfer what we know about the contagion of norm compliance to the contagion of rule compliance, we must deal with processes of legitimation (of rules and of authority). In the following, we will first deal with processes of legitimation and then discuss the contagion of rule compliance (i.e. compliance with norms or with rules that are legitimate and thus are treated like norms).

29.4.1 *From Rules to Social Norms: Legitimacy of Rules*

The normative goal focuses on serving a particular collective by acting appropriately and having a sense of obligation to do so. However: what is ‘acting appropriately’? One answer is: doing whatever helps the achievement of the goals of the collective, such as helping one’s team to win. Yet, collectives also develop directives that indicate what would be good for the collective: norms. There are some basic norms that are virtually universal because they are adaptive for any collective. These are norms that have to do with the achievement of solidarity with the collective: cooperation, sharing, helping, efforts to understand and be understood, trustworthiness and considerateness (see Lindenberg 2006, 2014a). In addition, there are norms that are specific to a collective by defining and protecting the identity of the collective (such as honouring the flag and the core values of the collective). Both kinds of norms are shared and generally highly internalized in participants of a collective. We assume that they form the ‘hard core’ of the normative goal. Additional norms (such as ‘be honest’, ‘be silent in the library’) can become part of the normative goal by becoming ways in which core norms are ‘operationalized’.

Formal rules, be they from the organization people work in or the country they live in, are not necessarily congruent with these norms. Thus, many collectives impose rules that are not intuitively linked to norms that are covered by the normative goal. For example, a hotel may have a rule for room service personnel that loose-hanging curtains may be repaired only by using a ladder rather than a chair. For such a rule to acquire a sense of obligation in the hotel personnel, it must be ‘legitimized’. If it is not legitimized in this sense, the rule may be linked to a gain goal (for example ‘it is advantageous to comply with the rule when one is monitored’) or to a hedonic goal (for example ‘I follow it only if it is little effort’).

Legitimacy is the major link between institutional systems (with their formal rules) and the normative goal (Lindenberg 2017; Tyler 2006). How do rules become legitimized, that is, become social norms that are part of the normative goal of those who have to comply with them (the regulated actors)? We propose three conditions that need to be met so that organizational and regulatory rules may become part of the normative goal. First, the regulating actor who imposes the rule needs to be seen as a legitimate authority; and the regulating actor should not be seen to be violating their own rule. Second, regulated actors need to perceive that the rule has widespread support among those who have to comply with

the rule. Third, the rule must ‘make sense’ for those who are supposed to comply with it. Given that these conditions are fulfilled, the regulated actors are likely to see the rule as a norm that is part of the normative goal. We return to legitimation processes when discussing ways to increase contagion of rule compliance.

29.4.2 *Respect or Disrespect for a Norm and Cross-Norm Effects*

As the normative goal, being a priori the weakest, needs much support to become and remain salient, the behaviour of others showing respect (active support) or disrespect (lack of active support) of a norm (or a legitimate rule) has a large effect on the salience of the normative goal. This is not a ‘descriptive norm’ effect. From the perspective of TNC, littering in a setting tells us that littering is an adaptive behaviour in that setting, and therefore I will do it too. Littering thus creates an imitative contagion. From the perspective of GFT, in our society people know that littering is transgressing a norm, so that seeing litter is a cue indicating that many pursued the hedonic goal and therefore showed disrespect not just for the anti-litter norm itself but also for the need to interpret the situation as relevant for the normative goal itself. We argue that this cue will therefore lower the salience of one’s own normative goal. In the literature, it has been found that when a descriptive norm contradicts an injunctive norm, it lowers the degree of compliance to the injunctive norm (cf. Smith et al. 2012). A less salient normative goal, however, will not only make it more likely that one litters (rather than making the effort of carrying that empty soda can to a trashcan); it will also make it more likely that one will transgress other norms. This ‘cross-norm effect’ makes social contagion of rule compliance particularly relevant because it spreads across contexts, as a variety of field experiments shows (Keizer et al. 2008). This creates, for example, a curious effect of prohibition signs. Graffiti in Dutch cities is forbidden by presumably legitimate rules. A study on littering (Keizer et al. 2011) showed not only a cross-norm effect (that when there was graffiti on a wall, people were more likely to litter) but also that this effect was even stronger when there was also a sign that explicitly prohibited graffiti. Thus, disrespect for norm A (graffiti) created a contagion effect across behavioural domains to disrespect for norm B (littering). The sign against graffiti activates the anti-litter norm, so that perceived disrespect for this norm is even more obvious and the salience of the normative goal is lowered even more.¹ For legitimate rules, the implication is that they have to be seen as being enforced (or, if not, abandoned), because unenforced rules will make disrespect highly visible and thus create negative cross-norm effects on compliance. In the informal sphere, enforcement depends on people’s negative reactions to others’ disrespect for a social norm. However, even the very willingness to sanction others is caught up in the dynamics of cross-norm effects: people are less willing to sanction others if they believe that many others disrespect the norm or legitimate rule (Traxler and Winter 2012). In this way, non-compliance is likely to occur in cascades. For example, in organizations this is observed in studies of problematic ‘climates’ (Peterson 2002).

If this mechanism is indeed operative, then it should also be the case that observed respect for norm A increases the likelihood that the observer complies with norm B (assuming there is no ceiling effect). This was indeed found in field experiments. For example, people are more likely to adhere to the pro-social norm of helping others in need (by picking up dropped

¹ Notice that for TNC, a sign prohibiting graffiti should increase the strength of the injunctive norm and thereby weaken the influence of the conflicting descriptive norm, leading to exactly the opposite prediction from what is expected on the basis of GFT.

groceries) after observing someone sweeping the pavement in front of his or her house (Keizer et al. 2013). It is important to note that, in these experiments, the ‘behaviour of others’ is only the behaviour of one person. This also holds for compliance cascades (see Appelbaum et al. 2007). The most important effect of other people on the contagion of compliance with norms and legitimate rules thus comes not from imitation of what most people do, but from the effects of observed respect or disrespect for norms, even if only one person is observed. These mechanisms affect not just concrete behaviour but the very goal to comply with a norm or legitimate rule.

29.4.3 *The Effect of Outgroups*

In a recent meta-analysis of experiments using social norms to promote pro-environmental behaviours, Bergquist et al. (2019) found that the strongest effect on activating norms came from direct or indirect cues of the behaviour of others. However, there is also another important mechanism that may block or even reverse social contagion based on perceived or surmised (dis)respect for norms. GFT assumes that it matters who shows (dis)respect. If I observe or surmise disrespect for a norm that I endorse by people like you and me (my ‘in-group’), the salience of my normative goal will be lowered. However, if I observe or surmise disrespect for a norm that I endorse by people who represent a ‘dissociative’ out-group (a group I don’t want to be identified with, see White and Dahl 2007), the salience of my normative goal will increase, and I will even more likely comply with the norm. An out-group is also dissociative if it is known that its members don’t disrespect my norms. For example, an experiment in the main train station of Berlin (see Lindenberg & Keizer in press) showed that people who pass other ‘normal’ Berliners who smoke where it is not allowed are more likely to smoke as well where it is not allowed, compared to a control group. However, people who pass Punk-Goths (in black robes with a mohawk hairdo, taken to be dissociative) smoking where it is not allowed, are less likely to smoke where it is not allowed than people in a control group. Thus, disrespect for my norms by a dissociative out-group makes the norms of my in-group and my obligation to comply with them (i.e. the normative goal) more salient. The irony is that dissociative out-groups thereby help contagion of norm compliance within the in-group. Another illustration of this effect is provided by research done on car sharing (Schaefer et al. 2016). Cars in such sharing groups are supposed to be returned in a clean state. If a car is returned in a messy state by an anonymous previous user, the new user is more inclined to leave the car messy for the next user, a clear sign of compliance contagion. However, when the car brand is ‘high-brow’ (versus ‘low-brow’), this contagious effect almost vanishes. Presumably, the highbrow brand is taken as an indication that ‘good’ people would not leave the car messy, so that customers who do leave it messy are seen as belonging to a dissociative out-group.

All these effects on the social contagion of compliance with norms and legitimate rules are summarized in Figure 29.1. This figure also suggests that social contagion of compliance is a self-reinforcing mechanism if the goal to comply with norms is salient, and, for the same reason, that non-compliance is also a self-reinforcing mechanism.

The cross-norm effect is crucial here. For example, Ariely and Garcia-Rada (2019: 64) conclude that their contagion of dishonesty experiments ‘suggest that receiving a bribe request erodes individuals’ moral character, prompting them to behave more dishonestly in subsequent ethical decisions’. Thus, the dishonesty can spread to many other kinds of ethical decision. Yet,

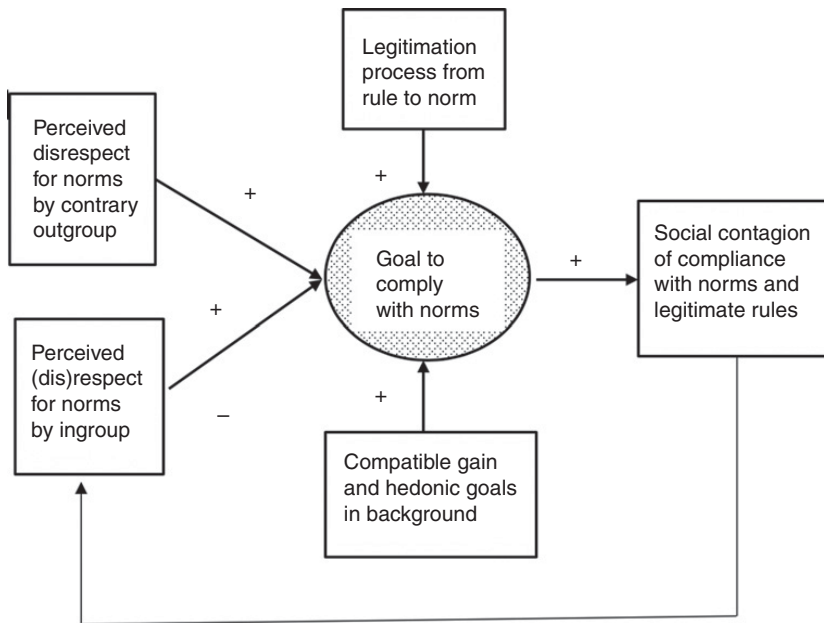


FIGURE 29.1 Social contagion of compliance with norms and legitimate rules

the authors have no real explanation for the cross-norm effect itself. For this effect, we need to pay attention to the dynamics of the overarching goals, as shown in Figure 29.1.

29.4.4 *The Influence of Others When the Goal to Comply with Norms Is Already Salient*

Behaviour that Informs about a Norm: The Injunctive Norm Search Effect. Given that the goal to comply with norms is already salient, other people may still have an effect on the social contagion process. Attention to this possibility also helps to clarify the possible interaction between injunctive and descriptive norms in TNC. When people are motivated to comply with norms, they often seem to actively look to what others are doing in order to find out what the concrete injunctive norms in a particular situation are. Imagine you come to a foreign country for the first time. Then you might want to comply with their norms (say about greeting, about driving, about voice level, about waiting at traffic lights for pedestrians, etc.) but you are not sure what the norms are. In that case, you do have a salient normative goal which makes you search for information on what the local injunctive norms are. You infer the injunctive norms from the behaviour you observe. The behaviour of others is then highly relevant as a cue to what the injunctive norms are, but its relevance comes from the link with the activated goal to comply with norms (see Panel A in Figure 29.2). This effect can be called ‘injunctive norm search effect’, which can be distinguished from a ‘descriptive norm search effect’ that comes about when people search for rational alternatives ways to act (see Panel B in Figure 29.2). In the literature, these two effects are often confused.

Behaviour that Fine-Tunes or Operationalizes a Norm. Another kind of injunctive norm search effect is looking to others for fine-tuning one’s injunctive norm. Imagine that there is a rule

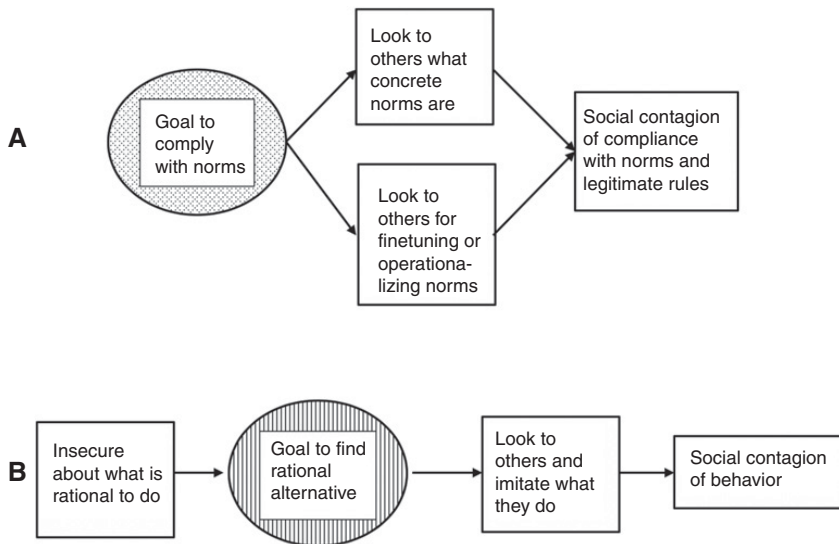


FIGURE 29.2 Norm search effects: Panel A: injunctive; Panel B: descriptive

in an organization that every employee should come on time and that this rule is legitimate for the employees. There is no time stamp clock. Then, for a newcomer who also finds this norm legitimate, there is still the question: what is ‘on time’? Is it on the dot, or may I be a few minutes late? How many minutes? In short, for the newcomer, the norm ‘to be on time’ needs to be fine-tuned, and the easiest way to do it is to see what experienced colleagues are doing. In this way, the fine-tuned norm will spread. A sense-making narrative for the particular fine-tuning is likely to increase compliance. Observe that even though people seemingly imitate others, it is not an imitative descriptive norm effect.

Given that close monitoring without a time stamp clock is unlikely, having a salient normative goal is important for compliance. Employees who have a chronically salient hedonic goal may still often fail to conform. And people who have a chronically salient gain goal and time constraints will be ‘on time’ only when they expect some advantage from doing so. The fine-tuning effect of others’ behaviour on norm compliance thus requires a salient normative goal for contagion effects. Another example concerns electricity use. A study showed that information on the electricity use of others had an effect on one’s own electricity use. But the same study also showed that this effect worked especially for people who have environmentally conscious social networks and who are already concerned about the environment through their political identification (Costa and Kahn 2013). For those with a salient normative goal regarding the environment, information on others’ use fine-tuned their own norms about electricity use. Similar effects have been found in many other studies, for example for so-called productivity spillover and peer effects (Mas and Moretti 2009; Thöni and Gächter 2015), even though the explanations for the effects vary widely in the literature.

The same can be said about ‘operationalizing’ a norm by information on how one can best comply with a somewhat abstract norm.² For example, given that I want to comply with the norm to protect the environment, should I recycle household waste? To answer this question,

² Scientific research and education are highly important for the basis that ultimately leads to the operationalization of abstract norms via contagion effects (Lindenberg 2008). Thus, given a widespread abstract norm, its operationalization emerges from the flow of scientific arguments and education to early adaptors, and from there to the

one may get informed about what science says about it, but very likely the strongest influence comes from looking at what significant others and what neighbours do (Fornara et al. 2011). Because doing is a stronger indicator of respect for a norm than expecting others to comply, Fornara et al. (2011) and many other studies find a stronger effect of injunctive norm search information on compliance compared to messages about other people's expectations. Similarly, if we want to protect the environment and get the message in a hotel room 'You can join your fellow guests in this programme to help save the environment by reusing your towels during your stay', we are more apt to comply with the norm to save the environment by also reusing our hotel towel (Goldstein, Cialdini and Griskevicius 2008). Note that the information on what others do is linked to the normative appeal 'help save the environment'. With the normative goal being salient, the information on how others help to save the environment is much more influential than the information that other people expect us to reuse our towels. Operationalization of norms can even be achieved by injunctive norm search information about what only a few people do, if the information contains a trend, that is, information suggesting that the number of people who show respect for this operationalization is growing (Mortensen et al. 2019).

Behaviour That Is Taken to Indicate What Is Most Adaptive to Do in a Particular Situation: The 'Imitative' Descriptive Norm Search Effect. Remember, according to Cialdini (2007), a descriptive norm tells us that 'if a lot of people are doing this, it's probably a wise thing to do'. When looking for a restaurant in a foreign city, not knowing which one is good and which one is not, one searches for a descriptive norm, and one will go to the restaurant that is well populated with seemingly local people, who supposedly know the restaurants around here. This is rational imitation, which is not linked to signals of respect or disrespect for an injunctive norm and thus does not presuppose a salient normative goal. This 'pure' descriptive norm effect is important in its own right (for example for fads), but it is not really relevant for the contagion of compliance to rules. For the latter to happen, the normative goal needs to be involved.

29.5 STRENGTHENING SOCIAL CONTAGION OF RULE COMPLIANCE

GFT's perspective on social contagion processes provides policy guidance on how to strengthen the social contagion of rule compliance. Figure 29.1 outlines the major components of possible interventions: strengthening legitimacy; increasing visibility of respect for norms and the invisibility of disrespect for norms; and aligning gain and hedonic goals in the background with the normative goal.

29.5.1 *Strengthening Legitimacy*

Maybe the most important step to increase the contagion of rule compliance is to increase the legitimacy of the rule as addressed in Section 29.4.1. Because this process is so vital for the contagion of rule compliance, we discuss it in more detail than the other components.

broader processes of operationalization in daily interactions, a mechanism described long ago as the 'two step flow of communication' (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955)

29.5.1.1 Rule-Legitimizing Authority

Much has been written about the bases of legitimacy for authority, mostly based on Weber's (1978) classification of types of authority: charismatic, traditional, and rational-legal. Important for our purposes is that in charismatic and traditional legitimacy, the authority is legitimate and thereby also the rules issued by the authority. Yet in the rational-legal type of present-day society, an authority may have the right to make rules and claim conformity, but that does not make every rule automatically legitimate in the sense of making it a norm that is covered by a sense of obligation. For example, the police have the right to set a speed limit, but for many people such a limit is kept only in order to avoid sanctions, without any sense of obligation. This implies that for the legitimacy of rules in our sense, the regulating actors (authority) must be legitimate, but, in addition, they need to be seen as treating their own rule as a norm by not showing disrespect for it. The literature on ethical leadership provides ample support for the strong negative effect of violating one's own rules (e.g. Brown and Treviño 2006; Sims and Brinkmann 2002). Leaders violating their own rules also don't consistently enforce their rules and, thus, create rule ambiguity among their followers, both of which lower the legitimacy of rules (Singh and Twalo 2015). Yet, for legitimizing rules, it is not enough that the regulating actors comply with their own rules. Because people are so sensitive to what other people are doing, rules also need widespread support in order to be seen as norms with a sense of obligation to comply.

29.5.1.2 Rule-Legitimizing Widespread Support

The more that other people for whom a particular rule applies are seen (or are believed) to respect a particular rule, the more this rule is seen as a norm that should be complied with. To return to our example of the rule to use a ladder to fix a curtain, getting a ladder to fix a curtain takes effort. It is much easier to use a chair. If an employee sees (or hears) that other employees take the trouble to use a ladder for fixing a curtain even though there is nobody in authority monitoring it at that moment, the 'ladder rule' is seemingly a rule to respect. Respecting a rule also implies that not complying with it would meet with disapproval from others like me. Once a rule is seen to be respected by others like me, it is likely that it functions like a norm. This also means that seeing others respect a particular rule not only legitimizes that rule but also increases the salience of the goal to comply with it. Note that purely verbal messages about the mutual expectations of peers, such as 'we expect of each other that this rule will be complied with', are no signal of respect. In fact, such a message conveys that the rule might not be really serious and that compliance is not expected by the legitimizing authorities. Recent research (Kouchaki, Gino and Feldman 2019) showed that such messages convey 'warmth' rather than legitimacy and are likely to even increase non-compliance.

29.5.1.3 Legitimizing Instrumentality of Rules

In contrast to traditional and charismatic bases of legitimacy, rational-legal legitimacy implies that in order to be get widespread support as being legitimate, rules must also make sense, that is, be rational in the sense of being instrumental for achieving a collectively valued result. Rules need to have a 'sense-making narrative' in which they are embedded. Take the example of the 'ladder rule'. Why should anybody take the trouble to use a ladder for fixing a curtain in a hotel? A sense-making narrative may include that there is the safety issue, since employees in the past have injured themselves using a chair for this purpose. In addition, the insurance

may not pay in case of an accident, if no ladder was used, meaning that the hotel will also not cover injuries that arise from not having used a ladder. The more convincing the narrative, the greater the legitimizing effect. Non-compliance by an authority with its own rules or clearly manipulative intentions in the use of rules render any sense-making narrative unconvincing. Controversial scientific results can also undermine the narrative by allowing political issues to play a role in which side to believe (Stryker 1994).

Sanctions can also be crucial for establishing instrumentality. If the sense-making narrative is about protecting a collective value, then failure to comply with a rule threatens a collective value. It creates negative externalities and the collective value needs to be protected also by sanctions. Take the example of smoking. As long as smoking was seen as affecting only the smoker's own health, it was difficult to make an anti-smoking rule legitimate in the sense of becoming a norm. However, when it became widely known that smoking is bad for bystanders, a sense-making narrative for anti-smoking rules could be established. The health of bystanders needs to be protected by sanctioning violations of the anti-smoking rule. Sanctions that are seen as protecting the collective value contained in the narrative of a rule thus become a signal that authorities take the narrative seriously which, in turn, increases the legitimacy of the rule.

In sum, in order to be covered by the normative goal, a rule needs to be seen as a norm, that is, be legitimate. The likelihood that it is legitimate for a person increases if (a) the authority that issued the rule does not show disrespect for the rule; and (b) people who are expected by the authority to follow the rule show respect for it. Respect for a rule becomes more likely if it is embedded in a sense-making narrative, and if this narrative is accompanied by sanctions for failure to comply.

29.5.2 *Other Measures to Increase Social Contagion of Rule Compliance*

Contagion of rule compliance, as discussed in this chapter, relies on influences on the salience of the normative goal (which in turn creates cross-norm effects). There are many ways to achieve this (Lindenberg and Papies 2019). But there is one influence that may be most important for the salience of the very goal to comply with norms: *perceiving* other people's respect or disrespect for norms. Social contagion thus depends heavily on the visibility of respect for norms and the invisibility of disrespect for norms. For example, Brunner and Ostermaier (2019) showed that if respect for norms in organizations is not transparent, managers and employees will interpret what they see and hear in favour of their own interest ('others probably also don't stick to the rules'). But the authors warn that transparency will backfire if compliance is low. Thus, interventions can target visibility of compliance, for example by information campaigns about rule-compliant behaviour (avoiding publicizing complaints about people showing disrespect for norms). Importantly, rules should either be enforced or dropped, because if they are made salient, say by a non-parking sign, but not enforced, then people's non-compliance with them will be even more obvious a sign of disrespect, leading to a self-reinforcing social contagion of non-compliance (Keizer et al. 2011). The exception to this strategy, as illustrated in Section 29.4.3 with the study by Lindenberg & Keizer (in press), is information about the disrespect for in-group norms by 'dissociative' out-groups (i.e. by out-groups that are seen as being contrary to the norms and legitimate rules of the in-group). In this case, information of disrespect for in-group norms would actually increase the salience of the goal to conform among people of the in-group. Of course, there may be good reasons *not* to

make use of this latter strategy because it may create other problems, such as discrimination against minorities, and possibly even an increase in violations by out-groups.

Social contagion of compliance may be hampered by gain and hedonic goals that lower the salience of the normative goal and bar cross-norm effects. For this reason, an important component of an intervention for the contagion of rule compliance is aligning gain and hedonic goals in the background with the normative goal. Sanctions that are embedded in a sense-making narrative can have this effect for the gain goal. When cues about respect for norms come from others with whom one is in face-to-face interaction, the personal character of the interaction adds a positive hedonic aspect to observed respect for norms, making the contagion more likely (Rogers et al. 2018). Public approval (including awards; see Frey and Gallus 2017) for behaviour that is targeted for encouragement aligns the hedonic goal (creating a warm glow for compliance) with the normative goal³ (for other practical examples within organizations, see Lindenberg and Foss 2011).

29.6 CONCLUSION

Why is it important to deal with the contagion of compliance with rules? Our answer, based on GFT, is that the very goal to comply tends to decay in favour of personal concerns, unless it is subject to an ongoing process of social contagion in which observed respect for norms and legitimate rules by others increases the salience of one's own goal to comply. Thus, when it comes to social contagion of compliance, we need to look not just at the contagion of concrete behaviour (such as littering) by imitation but at the dynamics of overarching goals that affect contagion of the very goal to comply. The importance of dealing with such a goal is not just that it tends to decay if not supported but also its ability to create cross-norm effects, so that observed (non-)compliance regarding one rule also affects (non-)compliance with other rules. Here, a caveat is in order. It is at present not known how far the cross-norm effect stretches. Because behaviour is not just influenced by norms, there may be gain or hedonic reasons why the contagion of (non-)compliance may not happen even if a rule is legitimate. For example, Van Wijk and Six (2014) found Dutch pub owners who followed others by complying with food safety and hygiene rules, to consciously violate the smoking ban. Presumably, the goal to keep the loyalty of customers (a gain goal) prevented the normative goal from covering enforcing the no-smoking rule. Future research might particularly focus on the conditions that influence the range of cross-norm effects.

Other people's behaviour is the basis for contagion effects. However, it is useful to pay attention to the interpretation of other people's behaviour: does it indicate respect/disrespect for norms? Is it performed by members of the in-group or members of a 'dissociative' out-group? Is it taken to be a cue for injunctive norms or is it something that tells us what is rational to do and to imitate? These different interpretations can be distinguished on the basis of GFT and they inform us about different mechanisms of social contagion of compliance with norms and legitimate rules.⁴ Neglecting these dynamics of overarching goals by naïve use of the concepts 'descriptive norm' and 'conditional cooperation' leads to highly incomplete policy advice about compliance.

³ Awards for conformity to rules, however, can backfire when they convey the message that others are doing less (and thus don't support the rule), as was recently shown in a large field study (Robinson et al. 2019).

⁴ Paying close attention to the role of overarching goals also seems important for interventions that are aimed at spreading certain kinds of behaviour (see Lindenberg and Papies 2019).

This approach has very practical consequences for making compliance with rules sustainable. The GFT of compliance contagion makes it clear that one cannot rely on a ‘compliance culture’ as a steady state (Burdon and Sorour 2018). The dynamics of sustainable compliance are at the same time the dynamics of an ongoing compliance contagion in the face of contrary influence from gain and hedonic goals and limited positive cross-norm effects (Lindenberg 2014b). Yet, there can be a number of measures that support an ongoing contagion of compliance. First, because the voluntary compliance mechanism is driven by a goal to comply with norms, rules must be legitimized so that they are psychologically interpreted as norms. Second, because the contagion of compliance runs via observed (dis)respect for norms and legitimate rules, tailoring the manner in which the public is informed about how others comply should be an important part of policy. Third, personal concerns (related to money, status and feeling good) should be moulded to support the goal of compliance, without becoming explicit goals themselves. Finally, for any situation, policy should aim at making it relatively easy to find out what the relevant legitimate rules that apply to this situation are. In short, policy directed at sustainable compliance should not just focus on incentives and persuasion but pay close attention to the dynamics of overarching goals.

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