Norm Violations Across Tight and Loose Countries

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Norms guide and constrain people's behaviour without the force of laws. If norms keep anarchy at bay, then violating the norms should have negative consequences for the norm violator. Paradoxically, recent evidence indicates that individuals who violate prevailing norms are perceived as more powerful than those who stick to the rules (Van Kleef, Homan, Finkenauer, Gundemir, & Stamkou, 2011; Van Kleef, Homan, Finkenauer, Blakker, & Heerdink, 2012).

There is preliminary evidence however that the link from norm violation to power may be moderated by the perceiver's culture. The way cultures differ regarding the treatment of norm violations is captured by the Tightness-Looseness dimension (Gelfand et al., 2011); tightness (looseness) is associated with strong (weak) norms and low (high) tolerance of deviant behaviour.

To investigate whether the potential of norm violators to gain power depends on cultural tightness we run a scenario study in a typically tight and a typically loose culture (Germany vs. the Netherlands). The scenario described an employee who would either break and verbally challenge organizational rules (e.g., be late for a meeting) or follow and verbally support them (e.g., be well on time for a meeting). We then asked participants (93 German and 105 Dutch) to what extent they would support the target being described in the scenario as a leader (subjective leader support). We also asked to what extend participants think that most people in their country would support the target as a leader (inter-subjective leader support). We finally measured participants' perception of their country's tightness and self-reported dutifulness (to capture personal tightness).

We found that there is indeed cross-cultural variation in the perception of norm violators, which is accounted for by the culture's tightness but also the person's dutifulness (i.e., personal "tightness"). The effects of cultural and personal tightness, however, unfold on different levels of power perception. Specifically, the tighter individuals perceive their country to be, the less they think their compatriots would support a norm violator as a leader (inter-subjective leader support); the more dutiful individuals are, the less they would support a norm violator (subjective leader support).