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Social norms and dishonesty across societies

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Social norms have long been recognized as an important factor in curtailing antisocial behavior, and stricter prosocial norms are commonly associated with increased prosocial behavior. In this study, we provide evidence that very strict prosocial norms can have a perverse negative relationship with prosocial behavior. In laboratory experiments conducted in 10 countries across 5 continents, we measured the level of honest behavior and elicited injunctive norms of honesty. We find that individuals who hold very strict norms (i.e., those who perceive a small lie to be as socially unacceptable as a large lie) are more likely to lie to the maximal extent possible. This finding is consistent with a simple behavioral rationale. If the perceived norm does not differentiate between the severity of a lie, lying to the full extent is optimal for a norm violator since it maximizes the financial gain, while the perceived costs of the norm violation are unchanged. We show that the relation between very strict prosocial norms and high levels of rule violations generalizes to civic norms related to common moral dilemmas, such as tax evasion, cheating on government benefits, and fare dodging on public transportation. Those with very strict attitudes toward civic norms are more likely to lie to the maximal extent possible. A similar relation holds across countries. Countries with a larger fraction of people with very strict attitudes toward civic norms have a higher society-level prevalence of rule violations.

social norms | honesty | societal variation

Significance

Much of the research in the experimental and behavioral sciences finds that stronger prosocial norms lead to higher levels of prosocial behavior. Here, we show that very strict prosocial norms are negatively correlated with prosocial behavior. Using laboratory experiments on honesty, we demonstrate that individuals who hold very strict norms of honesty are more likely to lie to the maximal extent. Further, countries with a larger fraction of people with very strict civic norms have proportionally more societal-level rule violations. We show that our findings are consistent with a simple behavioral rationale. If perceived norms are so strict that they do not differentiate between small and large violations, then, conditional on a violation occurring, a large violation is individually optimal.

Social life is profoundly shaped by social norms. Norms structure societies by creating a shared understanding of socially acceptable behavior and are essential to fostering fair-minded behavior, honesty, and large-scale cooperation (1–8).

Across the world, the strength of such norms vary widely, ranging from tight societies with a low tolerance for deviant behavior to loose societies with a high tolerance (9). Yet, there is not a straightforward positive relationship between the strength of norms and the functioning of society as measured by life expectancy, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, or political stability (10).

In this paper, we provide evidence that very strict prosocial norms are robustly associated with higher levels of antisocial behavior. In the highly controlled environment of the laboratory, we elicited behavioral measures for both injunctive norms of honesty and honesty itself among a sample of 1,098 students from 10 societies. The sampled societies are among the most culturally diverse, according to quantifiable measures of cultural distance (11), thus avoiding the sole reliance on western, educated, industrial, rich, and democratic samples (12). We show that those participants who perceive norms against dishonesty to be very strict—i.e., those who perceive any lie independent of its severity to be very socially unacceptable—are more likely to lie to the maximal possible extent. In contrast, those who perceive norms against dishonesty such that the social acceptability (SA) of dishonesty is decreasing in the severity of the lie are, on average, less likely to lie maximally.

This result goes against the conventional wisdom that stricter prosocial norms increase prosocial behavior. We therefore carefully checked whether this finding extrapolates to additional settings. We show that it is not tied to the specific laboratory procedure used to elicit injunctive norms. It holds for personal normative beliefs, which, in contrast to injunctive norms, do not rest on higher-order beliefs about socially appropriate behavior. It also holds employing the widely used civic-norms questions from the World Values Survey (WVS) (5, 13, 14) in a substantially enlarged and more diverse sample. The WVS civic-norms questions capture respondents' attitudes toward norms of honesty in ordinary situations, such as the justifiableness of tax evasion, claiming government benefits to which one is not entitled, or dodging public transportation fares. In a sample of 3,326 participants across 26 countries, we find that individuals who hold very strict attitudes toward civic norms are more likely to lie to the fullest extent.

Furthermore, we show that a similar relation exists across countries. This cross-country evidence rests on the representative samples of the WVS and the European

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