The Dynamic Nature of Social Hierarchies: The Role of Norm Violations and Hierarchical Concerns.
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Short Abstract – English

Social hierarchy is a fundamental feature of social relations. Hierarchies are appealing psychologically because they clarify roles and facilitate group functioning, which explains why they tend to be reinforced and perpetuated. Hierarchies, however, can also become unstable and eventually undergo change because people are motivated to compete for a higher rank and the benefits that come with it. This begs the question of how one ascends the hierarchy. One may demonstrate skills to gain prestige, but one may also attempt to climb the ladder through the demonstration of dominance displays, such as norm-violating behavior. Norm violations, however, create irregularities and may instigate a status quo change depending on how people respond to them.

So how do people’s responses to norm violations influence the transgressor’s potential to climb the ladder? In the current dissertation I propose that people’s responses to norm violators depend on the context. More specifically, I investigate the cultural context where a particular norm violation occurs, the leeway of the domain in which a norm violation is evaluated, and the involvement of the observer’s self-interest. The studies reported suggest that people’s concerns about their own position in the hierarchy (i.e., hierarchical concerns) are crucial in understanding their responses to a norm violator, since the violator’s behavior threatens the established status quo and may subsequently alter their position. Further studies also show that hierarchical concerns shape people’s attention to other information that signals a threat to their position, such as emotions that have informative value in the context of a hierarchical struggle.

Long Abstract – English

Social hierarchy is a fundamental feature of social relations (Fiske, 1992; Sapolsky, 2005). Hierarchies are appealing psychologically because they clarify roles and facilitate group functioning, which explains why they tend to be reinforced and perpetuated (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Hierarchies, however, can also become unstable and eventually undergo change because people are motivated to compete for a higher rank and the benefits that come with it (Anderson et al., 2012, 2015; Brief et al., 2001; Leavitt, 2005; Tannenbaum et al., 1974). This begs the question of how one ascends the hierarchy. One may demonstrate skills to gain prestige, but one may also attempt to climb the ladder through the demonstration of dominance displays, such as norm-violating behavior (Cheng et al., 2013; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Van Kleef, Homan, Finkenauer, Gündemir, & Stamkou, 2011). Norm violations, however, create irregularities and may instigate a status quo change depending on how people respond to them (Friesen et al., 2014).

So how do people’s responses to norm violations influence the transgressor’s potential to climb the ladder? Previous research is inconclusive: Norm violators obstruct group functioning, which decreases their possibility to be supported in higher ranks of the hierarchy, but they also seem powerful in the eyes of others, which enhances their chances to be supported (Van Kleef et al., 2015). To shed more light on these contradictory findings, we proposed that people’s responses to norm violators depend on the context. More specifically, we studied the cultural context where a particular norm violation occurs (Chapter 2), the leeway of the domain in which a norm violation is evaluated
(Chapter 3), and the involvement of the observer’s self-interest (Chapter 4). Our studies suggested that people’s concerns about their own position in the hierarchy (i.e., hierarchical concerns) are crucial in understanding their responses to a norm violator, since the violator’s behavior threatens the established status quo and may subsequently alter their position. We therefore expected that hierarchical concerns may also shape people’s attention to other information that signals a threat to their position, such as emotions that have informative value in the context of a hierarchical struggle (Chapter 5). In each of the four empirical chapters of the current dissertation, we tested different parts of the aforementioned theory.

In Chapter 2 we examined the role of culture in people’s tendency to support norm violators as leaders in a workplace setting. Norm violations threaten group harmony and social order, values that are endorsed in collectivistic and tight cultures, respectively (Gelfand et al., 2011; Kiesler & Kiesler, 1970; Miller et al., 1990). We thus predicted that individuals in more collectivistic and tighter cultures would support norm violators as leaders to a lesser extent than individuals in more individualistic and looser cultures. We further predicted that norm violations would induce both positive cognitive reactions (power perceptions) and negative affective reactions (moral outrage), which would subsequently influence people’s behavioral tendencies to support the violator as leader. To test these predictions we presented participants in 19 countries with a norm-violation or a norm-adherence scenario and we asked them to report on their perceptions of the focal actor’s power, their feelings of moral outrage, and the extent to which they would support the focal actor as leader. The results showed that the more collectivistic and tight the culture was, the more moral outrage individuals experienced in reaction to norm violations. These feelings in turn were related to people’s reluctance to support violators as leaders. Furthermore, resistance to norm violators was stronger in more collectivistic countries where people considered norm violators less powerful than norm followers and, importantly, weaker in rather individualistic countries where people considered norm violators more powerful. These findings suggest that cultural values influence people’s perceptions of the violator’s power, their emotional reactions in response to the violator’s behavior, and their tendency to reject a norm violator as leader.

Chapter 3 focused on people’s responses to norm violations in the art domain, which features greater leeway than the workplace domain employed in the previous chapter. Specifically, in Chapter 3 we investigated whether deviating from prevalent artistic norms enhances an artist’s potential to rise to fame. In art, perceptions of what constitutes valuable work are less rigidly shared and deviation from default thinking styles is associated with creativity (Forster et al., 2005; Maddux & Galinsky, 2009). We thus predicted that artists whose work deviates from the realistic representation of objects (realism deviance), their own previous style (intrapersonal deviance), and/or other artists’ styles (interpersonal deviance) would gain greater impact than non-deviant artists. We tested predictions for each type of deviance in 6 studies that focused on several aspects of artistic impact. The results demonstrated that artists who made non-realistic artworks were perceived as having greater impact than artists who made realistic works (Studies 3.1 and 3.2); artists who deviated from their previous artistic style were considered more impactful than artists who consistently followed a single style throughout their career, especially when the deviant artists’ career featured a transition from a realistic to a non-realistic style rather than vice versa (Studies 3.3 and 3.4); and artists who deviated from their contemporaries’ style gained greater impact than artists who followed their contemporaries’
style, in particular when artists deviated from a predominant realistic style by adopting non-realistic means of expression rather than the other way around (Studies 3.5 and 3.6). Mediation analyses further showed that artists who did not follow prevailing norms were considered more impactful because the public considered their actions more willful (Studies 3.4 and 3.6). These findings jointly suggest that artists who deviate from normative standards are more likely to reach a high ground in an artistic hierarchy, as reflected in perceptions of artistic impact.

Besides characteristics of the cultural context and the domain where norm violations occur, attributes of the perceivers are also important in understanding their responses to norm violations, which often have direct implications for the perceivers' interest. In Chapter 4 we therefore studied the role of the perceiver's self-interest by investigating whether their support for a norm violator depends on their own position in the hierarchy, that is, their verticality. High-verticality individuals are keener to maintain social hierarchies, the stability of which is threatened by norm violations (Anderson et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2003, 2012; Keltner et al., 2008). Accordingly, we hypothesized that high-verticality individuals may reject a norm violator's claim to rise up the ladder to a greater extent than low-verticality individuals. Across 14 studies we asked participants to indicate their support for a norm violating or norm adhering target as a leader. In the first thirteen studies, we also measured participants' trait verticality (sense of power, socioeconomic-status, testosterone) and/or manipulated state verticality (power position, status, dominance). In the last study, we explored whether ideological beliefs about social inequality (i.e., social dominance orientation) would produce similar effects to verticality, as this would suggest that negative reactions to deviants are driven by hierarchical concerns. Meta-analytic results showed that high-verticality individuals granted less power to norm violators than low-verticality individuals. Notably, these effects occurred for trait but not state verticality, arguably because temporary verticality states do not influence one's concerns about hierarchy. Supporting this reasoning, the final study's results showed that the preference for social dominance, which is associated with the desire for privileged positions in society, was related to lower support for norm violators. Overall, these findings support the idea that a norm violator is less likely to be supported by individuals who stand high on the hierarchy, as they are more concerned about their own position in the hierarchy.

Chapter 5 built forth on this idea and examined whether hierarchical concerns influence individuals' attention to emotions that have informative value for the maintenance of hierarchies. We expected that attention to others' emotions depends on one's hierarchical concerns and the social signal conveyed by the emotion. When hierarchy is at stake, high-ranking individuals may be more alert to signals of attack to preempt threats to their status and low-ranking individuals may be more alert to signals of vulnerability to gain control (Davis et al., 2011; Fischer & Manstead, 2008; Hess et al., 2009). We thus predicted that high-ranking individuals with high hierarchical concerns would be more attentive to anger expressions (i.e., attack signals), whereas low-ranking individuals with high hierarchical concerns would be more attentive to fear expressions (i.e., vulnerability signals). We tested this prediction in three studies where hierarchical concerns were manipulated either as an illegitimate power role assignment or as a mismatch between one's power role and trait power. The results showed that when power roles were illegitimally assigned or mismatched with one's trait power, leaders were faster at detecting the appearance of anger (Studies 5.1 & 5.2), slower at judging the disappearance of anger (Study 5.2), and more accurate in recognizing subordinates' anger, whereas
subordinates were more accurate in recognizing leaders' fear (Study 5.3). To conclude, social conditions that engender concerns about one's position in the hierarchy influence fundamental perceptual processes, such as attention to emotions that have strategic value for understanding how one's position within the hierarchy might develop.

Taken together, the results of this dissertation suggest that solving the puzzle concerning the potential of norm violators to ascend to higher hierarchical ranks requires incorporating the context within norm violations occur. People's responses to a violator's quest for influence depend on the prevalent cultural values, the leeway of the domain where the violation happens, and the perceivers' own position in the hierarchy. On the one hand, collectivistic and tight cultural values as well as a perceiver's elevated position in the hierarchy diminish a violator's potential to climb up in political and organizational hierarchies. On the other hand, breaking the rules in art elevates deviant artists' impact and their position in an artistic hierarchy. In sum, social conditions that engender hierarchical concerns shape overt responses to deviant targets as well as covert attention to emotional expressions that are relevant to hierarchy development. We hope that future research will build upon these findings by further investigating the motivational underpinnings of hierarchy development, the cultural variation in the concept of power, further moderating influences of norm violation outcomes, and the role of domain in people's responses to norm violators.