



The focusing and informational effects of norms on pro-social behavior

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports an experiment examining the effect of social norms on pro-social behavior. We test two predictions derived from work in psychology regarding the influence of norms. The first is a “focusing” influence, whereby norms only impact behavior when an individual’s attention is drawn to them; and the second is an “informational” influence, whereby a norm exerts a stronger impact on an individual’s behavior the more others he observes behaving consistently with that norm. We find support for both effects. Either thinking about or observing the behavior of others produces increased pro-social behavior – even when one expects or observes little pro-social behavior on the part of others – and the degree of pro-social behavior is increasing in the actual and expected pro-social behavior of others. This experiment eliminates strategic influences and thus demonstrates a direct effect of norms on behavior.

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This paper addresses the influence of social norms on behavior. Social norms can be thought of as jointly-recognized agreements regarding appropriate or inappropriate behavior (Bettenhausen & Murnighan, 1991; Elster, 1989; Fehr & Schmidt, 1999; Lindbeck, Nyberg, & Weibull, 1999). Social scientists in economics, psychology, and sociology all recognize the importance of social norms in decision making,¹ and this importance is also recognized by policymakers in many important social and economic domains.²

A deeper examination of how and when social norms affect behavior can add to our understanding of a number of important phenomena. It can shed light on when people are likely to punish the behavior of others (Fehr & Gaechter, 2000) and on when conformity and reciprocity might play a strong role in determining behavior (Bardsley & Sausgruber, 2005; Fehr,

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¹ See, for instance, Arrow (1971), Yaari and Bar-Hillel (1984), Fehr and Schmidt (1999), Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler (1986), Andreoni (1990), Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren (1990), Sunstein (1996), Kallgren, Reno, and Cialdini (2000), Chekroun and Brauer (2002), Conlin, Lynn, and O’Donoghue (2003), Camerer and Fehr (2004), Bicchieri (2005) and Kreps (1997).

² For instance, in 2004 the Chicago Port Authority instituted a loudspeaker system on its buses prompting patrons to be courteous (Chicago Tribune, January 27, 2004). Also, throughout the 1990’s police forces shifted from squad car to foot patrols because it was thought that increased contact between civilians and officers would enhance norm-compliant behavior (Wilson & Kelling 1982). This intervention was, in part, informed by a study by Zimbardo (1969) arguing that cues in the environment could increase the prevalence of certain norm-compliant behaviors. See also Akerlof (1982), Levine (1993), Fehr, Gaechter, and Kirchsteiger (1997), Fehr, Kirchler, Weichbold, and Gächter (1998), and Maxwell, Nye, and Maxwell (1999).

Kirchler, Weichbold, & Gächter, 1998). It may also provide a basis for endogenous social interaction effects (Falk, Fischbacher, & Gächter, 2003; Manski, 1993; Manski, 2000; Moffitt, 2001).

In the current investigation we explore how cues in the environment concerning pro-social norms affect behavior. As communities, and the individuals and leaders within them, seek ways to enforce and promote pro-social behavior, social scientists have worked to determine how precisely norms affect behavior. This paper attempts to bring new insights from psychology into how economists think about and understand social norms. In particular, we manipulate the influence and strength of norms and test whether the resulting behavior changes in the directions predicted by this previous psychological research. Unlike similar previous work in economics, we eliminate strategic considerations or extrinsic financial incentives as motives for behaving consistently with a norm, and thus explore how social norms directly influence behavior.

Recent work in psychology suggests that drawing attention to a norm, or “focusing,” is a crucial component of producing norm-compliant behavior. A norm’s influence is critically related to the degree to which individuals’ attention is focused on the norm.³ Individuals do not always have norms in mind, and when they don’t have them in mind norms exert no effect on behavior. As one set of experiments in psychology demonstrates, this means that the influence of environmental cues on norm-compliant behavior can sometimes produce counter-intuitive patterns (Cialdini et al., 1990). For instance, observing anti-social behavior might actually produce *less* anti-social behavior (if it draws an individual’s attention to the pro-social norm).

This paper describes an experiment that manipulates the influence of a norm by focusing subjects on pro-social behavior in an economic context. We find that thinking about what others will do or observing others’ behavior both have a direct and positive effect on pro-social behavior even when most subjects don’t think others are generous or when they observe most others behaving selfishly. We present these somewhat counter-intuitive findings as evidence of the focusing influence of norms.⁴

We also explore the more intuitive “informational” influence of norms, whereby the appropriate or norm-compliant behavior is learned by observing the actions of others. This influence predicts a positive relationship between one’s action and what one observes others doing (see, for instance, Bardsley & Sausgruber, 2005; Cialdini et al., 1990; Jones, 1984). We find support for this influence: subjects generally behave more pro-socially when they observe more pro-social behavior on the part of others.

While previous economics experiments examine similar treatment variables as ours (see Section 2), all of this previous work explores behavior in multi-player games in which the direct effect of norms on behavior cannot be separated from indirect effects due to strategic considerations. We eliminate these kinds of strategic considerations by using a one-shot decision in which only one subject in each pair makes a payoff-relevant choice. This removes the possibility that our manipulations indirectly influence behavior by affecting expectations of what other players are likely to do or by leading subjects to think more strategically. In addition, unlike previous laboratory research exploring the effect of punishment or rewards on norm compliant behavior,⁵ we examine factors that produce norm compliance absent concerns of reprisal or desire for extrinsic reward.

The following section reviews work on norms and, in particular, the theoretical and experimental work in psychology on focusing and spreading activation. Section 2 describes the experiment and presents the results. Section 3 discusses implications of our work and concludes.

1. Related work on norms and focusing

This section provides background on related research on norms. We focus our attention on work in psychology that directly motivates our experiment in particular, that of Cialdini et al. (1990) and Harvey and Enzle (1981).

Numerous studies in psychology demonstrate an influence of norms on behavior and that thinking about what others are going to do or observing others’ actions can evoke norm-compliance.⁶ Based on this body of research, Harvey and Enzle (1981), and later Cialdini and colleagues (e.g. Cialdini et al., 1990; Kallgren et al., 2000), developed a theory in which norms are influential only when an individual’s attention is drawn to the norm. This theory draws on the concepts of focus and spreading activation.

In psychology, “focus” is defined as a state of heightened awareness, in which an individual finds himself after observing cues relevant to a particular concept or behavior. When someone is focused by cues he is more likely and/or faster to recall ideas, words or behaviors related to those cues even if he is consciously unaware that he has been focused. “Spreading activation theory” describes how cues in the environment can produce focusing and how focusing on one set of concepts or ideas can produce focusing on others that are closely-related (Collins & Loftus, 1975; Collins & Quillian, 1972).

Harvey and Enzle (1981) applied spreading activation to norms as a way to understand helping behavior. They posited that representations of norms are stored in memory as nodes in a network (and linked to other nodes). Access to those representations is triggered by environmental cues to which the norm applies, such as thinking about or seeing what others do.

³ Frohlich et al. (2004) and Conlin et al. (2003) explore how contextual features of an environment influence norm-compliant behavior. However, they do not discuss this influence in the same way as when psychologists refer to focusing (or priming), and as we do here.

⁴ Moreover, our results are inconsistent with models that assert a direct and unconditional preference for pro-social outcomes (Bolton & Ockenfels, 2000; Fehr & Schmidt, 1999; Engelmann and Stobel, 2004), as opposed to a conditional preference for norm compliance or for doing as others do (Becker & Murphy, 2000; Lindbeck et al., 1999).

⁵ For example, see Fehr et al. (1998), Fehr and Gächter (2000) and Gneezy (2004).

⁶ See Sherif (1935), Asch (1956), Milgram, Bickman, and Berkowitz (1969), Zimbardo (1969), Berkowitz (1972), Krauss, Freedman, and Whitcup (1978), and LaTour and Manrai (1989).

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