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Norm theory and the action-effect: The role of social norms in regret following action and inaction

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Four experiments investigated the impact of social norms over the action-effect.
- Social norms affected perceived regret following action versus inaction.
- Action was regretted more than inaction when social norms were for inaction.
- The effect was significantly weakened or completely reversed for inaction norms.
- Findings support norm theory arguments for role of normality in the action-effect.

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ABSTRACT

The action-effect (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982) is one of the most widely cited and replicated effects in the regret literature, showing that negative outcomes are regretted more when they are a result of action compared to inaction. Building on theoretical arguments by norm theory (Kahneman & Miller, 1986) and the concept of normality, we examine the role of social norms for action and inaction in affecting regret. In four experiments we manipulated social norms and action-effect scenarios and found that social norms matter. For decisions resulting in negative outcomes, action is regretted more than inaction when social norms are for inaction, but when social norms are for action the effect is significantly weakened (Experiments 1 and 4) or reversed (Experiments 2 and 3).

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1. Introduction

Life is filled with regrets, negative emotions associated with the perception that a choice should have been made differently. Some of the regrets are about actions taken, like “I should not have chosen this line of work”, whereas other regrets are about actions that were not taken (inaction), such as “I should have continued to do a masters' degree”. However, actions and inaction are not regretted equally, even if they lead to exactly the same outcome. There are fundamental biases associated with regrets of actions and inactions that have been shown to impact many aspects of life, including but not limited to decision-making (Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002; Inman, Dyer, & Jia, 1997; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007), self-regulation, well-being, and health (Mandel, Hilton, & Catellani, 2007; Roese, 1997, 2005; Zeelenberg, 1999).

The action-effect (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982) describes a phenomenon in which people regret actions leading to negative outcomes more

than they do inactions leading to the same negative outcomes. It is considered one of the most well-known replicable findings in the regret literature (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995) and has been shown to generalize across domains and cultures (Baron & Ritov, 1994; Connolly, Ordóñez, & Coughlan, 1997; Gilovich & Medvec, 1994, 1995; Gilovich, Medvec, & Chen, 1995; Landman, 1987; N'gbala & Branscombe, 1997; Ritov & Baron, 1995; Zeelenberg, Van Dijk, & Manstead, 1998).

Over the last two decades, researchers have begun revealing factors that moderate and even reverse the action-effect. One of these factors, for example, is temporal distance, and studies have shown that the action-effect happens for current or recent decisions (“hot” strong emotions), but when contemplating temporally distant events in the past the action-effect is reversed and inactions are regretted more than actions (“wistful” nostalgia) (Bonnenfon & Zhang, 2008; Gilovich & Medvec, 1994, 1995; Gilovich, Medvec, & Kahneman, 1998; Kahneman, 1995). Other examples are individual differences (e.g., regulatory focus; Roese, Hur, & Pennington, 1999), cognitive accessibility (Rajagopal, Raju, & Unnava, 2006), and controllability (N'gbala & Branscombe, 1995). Meaning, that there are various factors which affect how actions

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and inactions are perceived and processed, and these in turn lead to a weaker action-effect or even a reversal to an inaction-effect.

The present investigation extends previous literature by incorporating a social perspective to highlight social norms as an important factor that moderates the action-effect. Studies of norms (norm theory, [Kahneman & Miller, 1986](#)) in the context of the action-effect have mainly focused on past behavior ([Baron & Ritov, 1994](#); [Ritov & Baron, 1992](#)) and expected contextual behavior ([Zeelenberg, Van den Bos, Van Dijk, & Pieters, 2002](#)). However, the role of broad social norms remains unclear with inconsistent findings regarding the impact of cultural social norms for the action-effect and related action-inaction biases. For example, some scholars found no cross-cultural differences in regrets for action and inaction ([Gilovich, Wang, Regan, & Nishina, 2003](#)) whereas others found cultural differences in regret for action and inaction in some domains ([Chen, Chiu, Roese, Tam, & Lau, 2006](#); [Komiya, Watabe, Miyamoto, & Kusumi, 2013](#)). We therefore aimed for a direct investigation of the role of social norms for the action-effect.

We begin by reviewing norm theory and findings related to the underlying core concept of normality, proceed to discuss the different normality categories and related findings regarding the action-effect, then highlight gaps and inconsistencies in the normality category of social norms, and finally theorize and test the role of social norms for the action-effect.

1.1. Normality

Regret occurs when a person is faced with an outcome that triggers the thought of what could have happened differently to result in a different outcome (counterfactual thinking). Norm theory ([Kahneman & Miller, 1986](#)) offered a conceptual framework highlighting normality as an important factor in the experience of regret. The theory argues that the affective response to an outcome is affected by the magnitude of the difference between the expected outcome and the actual outcome. Events are cognitively classified as normal or abnormal, with abnormal outcomes being more cognitively mutable than normal outcomes. Meaning, that it is harder to elicit alternatives to an expected normal behavior than it is to imagine alternatives to an unexpected abnormal behavior. Therefore, higher mutability and more abnormal outcomes elicit more counterfactual thought and therefore more regret. For example, the decision to take a certain road from point A to point B is evaluated in regards to whether taking this road deviates from one's typical behavior. If taking a certain road is an unusual behavior and something bad happens, then the negative outcome would elicit more counterfactual thought of what might have been and hence higher likelihood for regret, but if a chosen road is perceived as normal for the person then there is lower likelihood for counterfactual thinking and regret. To act consistently with normal and accepted behavior reflects a more careful and justified decision process ([Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002](#); [Reb & Connolly, 2010](#)), which affects the degree to which the involved actor is held accountable when events turn bad ([Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002](#)) and also the degree to which the person would feel bad and regretful about the decision.

The perception of normality, whether a behavior is normal or abnormal, affects feelings of regret, but what is normal? Normal can be evaluated using several types of normality ([Koonce, Miller, & Winchel, 2015](#)), most notably – (1) the extent to which a behavior is similar to past behavior (sometimes referred to as intrapersonal normality; [Roese, 1997](#)), (2) the extent to which an event or a behavior is unusual or unexpected, and (3) the extent to which a behavior resembles or conforms to the behavior of others.

[Kahneman and Miller \(1986\)](#) discussed an example highlighting the contrast between different types of normality and their impact on regret:

Mr. Jones almost never takes hitch-hikers in his car. Yesterday he gave a man a ride and was robbed. Mr. Smith frequently takes

hitch-hikers in his car. Yesterday he gave a man a ride and was robbed. Who do you expect to experience greater regret over the episode?

The normality discussed in the above scenario is in regards to the person's past behavior. In their sample, 88% of 138 participants answered that Mr. Jones – who acted abnormally in comparison to his usual behavior – would be more regretful than Mr. Smith who acted as he normally would. Meaning, that the degree to which the action is perceived normal in the person's life would impact feelings of regret when things go wrong. However, [Kahneman and Miller \(1986\)](#) also asked “who will be criticized most severely by others?”, which refers to social norms for behavior, and in response to the norms question 77% of participants rated that Mr. Smith – who typically takes hitchhikers – would be criticized more. Their findings suggest that the feelings of regret in the above scenario were more about normality in terms of the person's past behavior rather than the social norms of what society perceives to be as normal and acceptable.

1.2. Normality and the action-effect

Normality, therefore, plays a role in feelings of regret in decision making, in that abnormal easily-mutable behavior is regretted more than normal behavior. To address implications of norm theory for the regret for action versus inaction, [Kahneman and Miller \(1986\)](#) suggested that the action-effect could be interpreted using the concept of normality. Inactions could be seen as normal and actions considered unusual, which makes it cognitively easier to think of counterfactuals for action than for inaction, and as a result actions are more regretted than inactions ([Roese, 1997](#)). However, [Kahneman and Miller \(1986\)](#) did not discuss or contrast between the different types of normality in terms of the action-effect, and their arguments seem as if assuming inaction social norms ([Landman, 1987](#)). The literature regarding action-effect that followed has largely used normality as a broad term but focused mainly on intrapersonal normality ([Roese, 1997](#)).

In reference to the types of normality discussed in the previous section, the normality explanation for the action-effect could either be that – (1) the perceived typical past behavior in the action-effect scenarios is to not act, (2) inaction is the typical expected behavior in the situation or role in the action-effect scenarios, or that (3) the perceived general social norms in the action-effect scenarios are for the person to not act. In terms of the implications for norm theory, the action-effect would be weakened and possibly reversed when – (1) perceived past behavior is to act, (2) the expected behavior in the situation or role is to act, (3) the perceived general social norms are to act. Below, we discuss the literature regarding each of those categories.

First, the implications of the past behavior normality on action-inaction biases were examined in a number of studies looking at the omission-bias. The omission-bias is an action-inaction bias regarding people's preference for inaction (omission) over action (commission) under risky situations with possible negative outcomes ([Anderson, 2003](#); [Ritov & Baron, 1990](#)). Building on the action-effect, the theory is that actions are generally perceived as being more intentional and accountable and people aim to minimize the risk of being held accountable for negative outcomes. The effect was initially illustrated using decision making regarding vaccinations – that people consider the risk of harm from vaccinations (action) side-effects as more serious than the risk of harm from not vaccinating (inaction) and getting sick (for a summary, see [Baron & Ritov, 2004](#)). Similar to the action-effect, there have been findings showing a weakening of the bias, even at times resulting in a commission-bias or action-bias ([Reb & Connolly, 2010](#)), arguably due to various moderating factors, such as personal responsibility ([Baron & Ritov, 2004](#)). Studies on the omission bias have generally concluded that the action-inaction biases were stronger than past behavior and that the higher regret for action over inaction was not affected by what the typical behavior for the person was ([Baron & Ritov,](#)

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