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Titel:

Why people follow rules (with Lucas Molleman and Daniele Nosenzo)

Abstract:

Rules regulate social life and have long been recognised as fundamental for stable social order in society. Stability requires people to follow rules intrinsically, even when they could be broken with impunity, as they can in many real-world situations. The human sciences have conflicting views about why people comply with rules. Here, we show in a series of thirteen experiments (n=14,034) using a minimalist rule-following task that intrinsic rule-following is a major source of people's rule compliance: between 58 and 70 percent of people comply with an arbitrary rule even when compliance results in a net loss and people are aware of it; when acting alone; and when no-one is hurt by a violation. Because these are stark and often unrealistic conditions, we benchmark our findings with settings involving other people, negative consequences for others of a violation, and weak and strong incentives to comply. We guide our analysis by developing a framework that integrates non-social cost-benefit considerations and social expectations for rule-following. Our analysis reveals that people expect others to follow rules, and view rule-following as being socially appropriate. Testing key causal predictions, we find that rule-breaking is contagious and renders violations less socially inappropriate, but across experiments, rule-following rates never drop below 40 percent. Sanctioning violations boosts compliance. . Our results also reveal that rule-following depends on the interplay of social and non-social motives, neither of which can explain rule-following on its own. Our framework provides the conceptual elements to study this interplay for any rule of interest