

# Cosi fan tutte: Information, Beliefs, and Compliance with Norms

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**Summary:** Social norms help to solve collective dilemmas. In addition to the internalization of norms, social control, rational calculation, and rational acceptance, this paper analyzes the role of information in regard to compliance with norms. We predict that people will cooperate if they believe that others will cooperate as well, and that they will defect if they believe that others will defect. Each reaction represents a rational course of action. Beliefs about the validity of norms are influenced by information, whether public (as obtained from the media) or private (gained from personal experience), with which individuals update their beliefs. Complementing existing explanations of norm compliance, this paper studies the effect on norm compliance of information which allows individuals to adjust beliefs about whether a norm is valid. The empirical findings based on a multilevel analysis of survey data from 24 countries strongly confirm the prediction that collectively held beliefs about the validity of norms are a major factor in determining compliance, comparable in its strength to the internalization of norms.

**Keywords:** Beliefs; Social Norms; Deviant Behavior; Information; Reciprocity.

**Zusammenfassung:** Soziale Normen helfen bei der Lösung von kollektiven Dilemmata. Zusätzlich zu den Erklärungsfaktoren Internalisierung, soziale Kontrolle, rationales Kalkül und rationale Akzeptanz analysiert dieser Aufsatz den Effekt von Informationen auf die Befolgung von Normen. Individuen, so wird argumentiert, befolgen soziale Normen, solange sie überzeugt sind, dass die Norm gültig ist, d. h. sich auch alle anderen daran halten. Wenn die Norm hingegen nicht mehr als gültig angesehen wird und das Individuum nicht mehr von die Gültigkeit der Norm überzeugt ist, wird es die Norm missachten. Beide Reaktionen lassen sich als Ergebnis einer rationalen Wahl auffassen. Überzeugungen hinsichtlich der Gültigkeit von Normen werden durch Informationen beeinflusst, und zwar sowohl durch öffentliche Informationen (etwa aus den Medien) als auch durch private Erfahrungen. Individuen korrigieren und aktualisieren ihre Überzeugungen hinsichtlich der Gültigkeit von Normen auf der Grundlage dieser Informationen. In Ergänzung der vorliegenden Ansätze zur Erklärung von Normbefolgung testet dieser Aufsatz die Relevanz von Informationen. Die empirischen Ergebnisse zeigen basierend auf einer Mehrebenenanalyse von Umfragedaten aus 24 Ländern eine starke Evidenz dafür, dass die gesellschaftliche Verbreitung von Überzeugungen hinsichtlich der Gültigkeit von Normen ein wichtiger Faktor für ihre Befolgung sind, der in seiner Stärke mit dem Effekt der Internalisierung von Normen vergleichbar ist.

**Schlagworte:** Überzeugungen (beliefs); Soziale Normen; Abweichendes Verhalten; Information; Reziprozität.

## 1 Introduction: Compliance and Deviance

Social order and, to some degree, economic welfare depend on the compliance of people with norms (Putnam 1993; Fukuyama 1995; Tyler 1990). How social order among selfish rationalists originally comes about is still a controversial issue (Voss 1985; Axelrod 1984, 1986; Elster 1989a; Opp 1983, 2000; Bravo & Tamburino 2008), but once it is there, it has a range of positive effects in many domains of society.

Complying with certain standards of behavior – henceforth labeled “norms” – is in most interactions beneficial from a societal perspective. But from the perspective of the individual, there is oftentimes also a substantial incentive to defect, respectively a substantial risk that the other side in an

interaction will defect, thus exploiting those individuals ready to cooperate. Social order and cooperation is beneficial for everybody, particularly in the long run, but it might be even better to be the only defector in a cooperative world.

Norms, whether formal or informal ones, are functional for solving problems of interpersonal cooperation. Norm compliance has accordingly been one of the most persistent issues in sociological theory and research. While formal norms are sanctioned by the authority of the state, the fear of possible (but by no means certain) punishment does not generally cause law-abidance (Tyler 1990; Scholz & Lubell 1998). Furthermore, there are vast “gray areas” of unregulated interpersonal exchange. Reputation and third party sanctioning can foster norm compliance, but there are also interpersonal

exchanges of a one-shot or anonymous nature in which deviant behavior cannot be sanctioned (Burt & Knez 1995). Here only the individual's decision to comply with a given norm determines the actual course of action. Sociologists have argued that in particular with regard to situations of the latter type, compliance with norms is not a result of rational calculation, but occurs because the norm is internalized (Scott 1971). Supplementary to the "internalization by socialization" thesis, the psychology of cooperation found an inborn tendency to cooperate (Fehr & Gintis 2007) that favors reciprocity, if not altruism (Diekmann & Voss 2008). Theorists of social order, beginning with Hobbes and Locke, have also been delivering a rational underpinning for this tendency to cooperate: it is not irrational to sacrifice some utility by abiding to norms and the "social contract" because of the many advantages arising from the general validity of norms such as predictability of behavior and social order (Voss 1985; Axelrod 1986; Opp 2000; Elster 1989a).

In this paper, an argument will be explored and tested that results from combining analytically the inborn tendency to cooperate with the rationality-based underpinning of the genesis of norms. Compliance with norms is based on reciprocity, or, more concretely, on the belief that reciprocity will occur. An individual may reason as follows: "I comply, because the others also comply", and, "I comply with the norms, as long as everybody else does". But does everybody indeed comply? To this question, the individual would respond: "I comply, as long as I hold the *belief* that the norms are valid in the society I live in. If the norms are no longer valid, I'd be a fool to be the only one complying with norms any longer." In this scenario, compliance with norms is primarily determined by whether the individual *believes* that the norms are valid and thus that complying with them makes sense.

This paper will investigate the importance of information – in the form of public information and private experience – which allows individuals to update their beliefs about whether a norm is valid. The argument is that, apart from internalization and an inbuilt tendency for cooperative behavior, norm compliance has a strong component of conditionality. When playing what is basically an iterated prisoner's dilemma or, respectively, an assurance game, it is, for the sake of the long term pay-off, rational to comply with the cooperative norm using Rapoport's tit-for-tat strategy. However, this is true only for as long as the norm is valid. Lacking objective information about the actual likelihood of compliance with norms in society, individual beliefs

about this likelihood are the relevant factor. If an individual subjectively believes that a norm is valid, which is to say that the norm is complied with in all or at least most interactions, the individual will comply. If the individual does not believe this to be the case, it will tend to opportunistically deviate from the norm.

There is a substantial body of empirical and conceptual work on the effect norms exert on actual behavior (e.g. Cialdini 2003, 2007), and there is also research using experimental evidence on the effect of the situational context on the abidance to norms (e.g. Keizer et al. 2008). Despite many substantial similarities across the findings, experimental studies of cooperation also point to certain cultural differences (cf. Diekmann 2008). This raises the question whether there are similar effects across the varied and often diffuse societal instances of norm compliance and deviance. Irrespective of the actual causal mechanism, one can ask whether the presence of litter on the street increases the likelihood that an individual also litters, and whether information or the prevalence of norm breaking that is collectively available at the societal level also increases individual-level norm-breaking.

Using survey data and multilevel regression, the present paper will compare the importance of contextual features and individual-level properties for the abidance to norms. The explanatory contribution of the proposed explanation will be compared to the contribution of other explanations of compliance and deviant behavior available in sociology (internalization and temptation) and in political science (social capital and "having had a say in setting the norm").

## 2 Reasons of Norm Compliance: Internalization, Social Control, Rationality, and Information

Compliance with norms comes in many forms, not all of which are subject to law and thus legally enforceable. Norm compliance takes the "negative" form of not defecting in a cooperative exchange, of not exploiting a common pool, or of not breaking a norm. Positively put, compliance with norms may take the form of contributing to a public good even though the cost-benefit calculus dictates that this is irrational. To explain why people comply with norms – most of the time voluntarily and even in settings in which they could deviate without being noticed – several disciplines have proposed a variety of answers.

The sociological “standard” theory about the compliance of individuals with norms refers to a process of internalization (Durkheim 1938; Parsons 1937; Scott 1971). Norms are internalized during socialization, work by the “grip on the mind”, and thus are not subject to rational calculation (e.g. Elster 1989b). Persons do not calculate the pros and cons of abiding to a norm in each and any situation, but they comply with norms because this is “appropriate”. Underlying this automatism is a process, postulated by the sociological theory of roles, in which persons play the role which is appropriate in the situation which they encounter (March & Olsen 1989).

Investigations of the psychological mechanism underlying the framing of situations have shown that the automatism assumed by sociological theory is spurious (Esser 2000, 2001). Esser’s frame-selection-model presumes that there are “frames”, understood as models of typical situations, coupling symbols by which the situation can be recognized and a certain behavioral repertoire for this particular situation. These “frames” are shared in a culture and transmitted by socialization. A frame is chosen rationally as a situation is recognized by its symbols, and the associated behavior repertoire is activated. But the consequences of a certain framing also affect the choice of a frame: if the situation is associated with negative consequences, the individual will prefer to interpret the situation in terms of a different frame, even if certain symbols are therefore ignored. Assume, for instance, that for a particular situation following a norm is part of the behavior collectively associated with this situation. Deviant behavior comes about if the situation is not recognized, e.g. because conflicting symbols are present, or if the temptation to deviate is too strong. In the latter case, the individual chooses to see the situation as one in which ignoring the norm is acceptable.

Political science has also considered the problem of norm abidance. Just two approaches shall be mentioned here; firstly, the social capital approach. This approach is close to the sociological theory of internalization, but it puts additional emphasis on social control. According to this approach, if one is socially integrated, e.g. in a group, one will be more cooperative and, in particular, more trusting, but one will also be aware that the group will sanction non-cooperative behavior like free-riding or defection (Putnam 1993; Burt & Knez 1995; Boix & Posner 1998: 687, 690; Simpson 2006; Horne 2008). A particular hypothesis common to this approach is that social capital in the form of generalized trust

and social engagement (memberships in groups) increases compliance with norms.

Secondly, there is an approach which could be labeled “instrumental” or “rational” acceptance (cf. Kelman 2006: 14). The norms (notably the laws) of society may not be considered as intrinsically valuable but found to be better than any other alternative. In this perspective, norms derive their importance in an indirect manner: citizens acknowledge that norms and compliance are important because the functioning and performance of the collective depend on it. And, moreover, in democracies, the norms are created with input from citizens who live according to norms which they themselves determine (Letki 2006).

Game theory, in particular the work on iterated games, delivers an argument why abiding to norms is to be expected even among selfish actors. Compliance with norms is the behavior which is rational in the long term, granting the highest payoffs in repeated interactions (Axelrod 1986). Elaborations based on mixed strategies allow to model the degree of uncertainty about the other’s motives, expected behavior and discounting (Taylor 1987; Myerson 1991: 308). In particular the elaborations on the expectations concerning the behavior of others actor in iterated games between two actors is equivalent to a game which is played among members of a heterogeneous group in which cooperators as well as defectors exist. In each variant, updates about the chances of encountering cooperators respectively defectors will affect behavioral choices (Ebenhöh & Pahl-Wostl 2008).

In many experiments, the psychology of social cooperation found that people are more or less born for cooperation and reciprocal exchange. They start as cooperators, and they continue to be cooperators, but this is conditional on the behavior of others. People intrinsically like to sanction defectors, which is why cooperation in groups with non-anonymity is much higher than in anonymous settings.<sup>1</sup> This experimental evidence basically provides the underpinnings for the effects of group membership on cooperation presumed by the social capital approach. The psychology of moral behavior supplements this accounts by discussing the mechanisms of internalization, viz. the mechanisms of shame, guilt and moral pride (Tangney et al. 2007). Social psychologists argue for instance that the effects of socially shared norms occur in two forms,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Fehr & Gintis (2007) for a summary on the psychological theories and the experimental evidence on social cooperation.

basically also differentiating between internalization and external reasons: normative social influence denotes the situation when people comply because they want to be liked by the group, while informational social influence refers to a situation in which a person complies because she wants to do the correct thing (Kallgren et al. 2000; Schultz et al. 2008). The argument made here will provide a rational underpinning to norm compliance.

Taking these explanations which differ substantially in how they presume norm compliance to operate into account, the question remains when people will actually start to deviate from norms. And, moreover, which process – internalization, social control, temptation, rational acceptance, or something else – is generally more important for norm compliance?

The frame-selection model suggests the existence of an important effect of information on norm compliance. Assume that a frame is established, i.e. shared among all members of the society, linking a certain prototypical situation to a behavioral script of cooperative behavior and entailing specifically the belief that the norm is valid. The frame-selection argument states that on recognizing the situation, the cooperative frame will be activated and the behavior will follow suit, typically without a rational calculation of costs and benefits (Esser 2000). This works, if a) the situation is identified as a concrete instance of the abstract situational model for which the frame model prescribes certain behavior and activates certain expectations, viz. the norm (matching) and b) the frame as a situational model exists and the norm is part of it. If the frame, i.e. the model per se, is disrupted, or, more specifically, if the belief that the other will be cooperative is eliminated from the model, people will start to deviate. In particular, they will start to calculate whether deviation or compliance pays off.

If the norm is complied with and the belief in the validity of the norm is widespread, it is rational to comply with the norm. Suppose one enters an exchange and it is certain that the other side will comply with whatever commitments are involved. Compliance with the norm will then be reciprocated and both sides will realize the benefits of cooperation: the benefits of the present cooperation and the stream of benefits from future cooperation which will be realized because the norm is perpetuated. Given a respective belief, norm compliance is rational.

As a counter example suppose that one enters an exchange in a society in which no norms are valid

and in which it is certain that cooperation will be exploited. Norm compliance is not an element of the frame as the situational model. Instead, the individual now believes that defection will occur. In such instances, ignoring norms is rational.

At its most basic the argument is that people will cooperate in a situation if they believe that others will cooperate, and they will defect if they believe that others will defect. Information will affect respective beliefs. In the first example, both sides play a prisoner's dilemma game firmly believing that the other side will cooperate. In the second example, both play the game firmly believing that the other side will defect. The objective situation is the same – it is the belief which makes all the difference for individuals' behavior and for both short-term and long-term outcomes.

Beliefs about the likelihood of encountering cooperation or defection in an interaction may be updated with respect to whether the person one is dealing with is cooperative or not (Deutsch 1958), or with respect to whether the likelihood of encountering someone who is abiding to norms is low or high.

If a belief in the validity of norms is firmly established, i.e. if the frame as a model including the norm is firmly established, actors will “automatically” cooperate whenever they enter a cooperative situation. They may, at least to some degree, ignore contradicting information about incidences of deviant behavior and dismiss respective experience. Too much contradicting information, however, will destabilize the belief and change the frame. The belief that a norm is valid and that it is rational to comply with it will be replaced by the belief the norm is no longer valid, and to continue cooperation would potentially be harmful. Behavior will follow suit. Believing that deviance is to be expected from others, people will deviate.

This argument is similar in its explanatory scope and predictions to an argument going back to Popitz (1968: 17; cf. also Diekmann et al. 2011): If it were common knowledge how often norms are broken, people would disregard norms even more, because breaking the rules is the new rule and punishment loses its stigmatizing effect. The breaking of the norm then becomes what Cialdini (2003) labels a descriptive norm: a norm about how most people actually behave in a certain situation. The frame approach differs from these explanations, in that it explicitly allows for and models a deviation which is motivated by temptation, while norm-based explanations have difficulties to conceptually integrate rational deviation from norms.

Our main argument regarding an empirical application of this explanation is that this belief depends on the information the individual receives. In our case, the information concerns the validity of the norm in the society the person is living in: Is the norm valid? Is it complied with by the majority of people or only by a minority?

The belief about the validity of norms and the existence of the frame – understood as a model of the situation and the behavioral script activated in the situation – is based directly or indirectly on objective information which may be publicly available but may also result from personal experiences.

Media predominantly cover incidences where norms were broken, and a message like “today, no one deviated from a certain norm” will never make the headlines (Norris 1996; Olken 2006; Furedi 2006). This is true for grave incidences of deviant behavior, e.g. acts of violence, but also for more subtle norms of social interaction frustrated by cheating, corruption, fraud, or tax evasion. The media, by reporting incidences of cheating, fraud, and so on, provide information about the relevance of a certain norm in a society. If the media report incidences of massive tax evasion, this will limit the validity attached to the norm of paying taxes. Listening to the news, an individual may well obtain the impression that it is the only one actually paying taxes while everyone else is more clever, and given such circumstances, deviation from the norm would be rational.

Apart from the information component, other aspects may affect the likelihood of deviant behavior; each is derived from one of the alternative explanations given above. The first aspect arises from the game theoretic perspective and concerns the nature of the game underlying the interaction. Is the interaction a dilemma game or an assurance game? In the case of dilemma games, the incentive to deviate is unconditional. It is always, and irrespective of what others do, tempting to defect. Free riding in public traffic is the classical dilemma game. Irrespective of the behavior of the others, free riding is always the option with the highest short-term payoff. In the assurance game the case in which all sides cooperate – comply with norms – is the best outcome. But individual losses if others – for whatever reason – defect may be substantial. An exchange on a “black” market is a typical assurance game: both sides would like to make a deal, but both might hesitate to make the first step, i.e. to hand over the money or the product. Thus, in interactions of the dilemma type, there is one dominant

motive, which is to defect. In interactions of the assurance type, cooperation would be best, but only if the other party choose to cooperate as well.

The second aspect concerns the social setting in which the interaction takes place and the breach of the norm occurs: Is it played in a bilateral face-to-face setting, e.g. in the case of selling someone something? Or is it played “anonymously”, against an institution which is not actually a person. We would expect that in the case of a face-to-face interaction the inhibition threshold for defecting and cheating is higher than for defecting and cheating in an anonymous setting, i.e. in the case of faking documents, avoiding taxes, or claiming government benefits one is not entitled to. Cheating an anonymous institution may also take the form of both sides of an exchange colluding against the institution, e.g. in the case of paying cash to avoid paying VAT. Both sides benefit at the cost of the “government” and the perception that harm is done is weak because the collective impact of this particular incidence of fraud is negligible.

Other aspects which were found to be relevant for norm compliance are internalization, social control (e.g. peer-group effects) and what has been labeled the rational acceptance of norms because of their benefits or because the individual has had a say in the making of norms.

### 3 Dependent Variables

The data set used here is the second wave of the European Social Survey (Jowell et al. 2005). This survey was conducted among persons of at least 15 years of age in West and Central European countries in 2004/5, covering themes like morality, political attitudes and socio-economic background information. The net sample size is about 30,000 respondents in 24 countries. The survey contains seven questions on the personal compliance with norms, asking about whether and how often the respondent did engage in certain forms of “immoral” behavior. Though it is perfectly clear that data based on respective responses will presumably underestimate the frequency of deviant behavior substantially, the data that were gained in this survey allow insights in the mechanisms underlying deviant behavior.

The variables on which the analysis is based refer to respondents’ replies to the following battery of questions: How often – if ever – respondents have

- kept change from shop assistant/waiter when given too much during the last 5 years.

- paid cash with no receipt to avoid VAT or tax during the last 5 years.
- sold something second-hand and concealed its faults during the last 5 years.
- misused/altered documents to pretend eligibility during the last 5 years.
- made an exaggerated false insurance claim during the last 5 years.
- offered favor/bribe to public official for service during the last 5 years.
- falsely claimed government, social security or other benefits during the last 5 years.

The answer categories were for each of these seven items: never, once, twice, 3 or 4 times, 5 times or more in the last five years, the coding is 0 to 4.

We constructed the following variables which cover certain aspects we are particularly interested in, especially regarding the setting in which deviant behavior occurs:

- *BrokenNorm* is simply the additive index of how often the respondent has broken any of the above-mentioned norms. As argued above there are qualitative differences regarding the setting in which the norm is broken.
- *BrokenNormFace2Face* is an additive index of how often the respondent has cheated in a face to face interaction – e.g. kept change, sold something second hand which she knew to be faulty, but covered the fault to sell it nevertheless or at a better price. We would expect that the inhibition to do this may be higher than for instance in a situation in which one is corresponding with a bureaucracy.
- *BrokenNormAnonymous* is an additive index of how often the respondent has broken a norm in a “faceless” anonymous interaction with an institution, by which we mean fudging documents, making exaggerated insurance claims or trying to claim benefits from the government or the social security system he is not entitled to. The last variant takes into account that there are forms of deviant behavior which, while clearly illegal, are often not seen as being immoral. The immoral behavior is not committed against the person one is dealing with, who indeed may be just as willing to do this, because both sides benefit. The third party, viz. the community, at whose expense this is done, is not present, respectively much too abstract to care about.
- *BrokenNormCollusive* measures how often the respondent has paid cash to avoid paying VAT.

## 4 Explanatory Variables

The explanation presented below links deviant behavior to the information which an individual has received. Information which affects the belief about the validity of norms can originate from the macro-level, i.e. by way of public reports about deviant behavior, and from the micro-level, i.e. from personal experience of the validity of norms. The empirical question is how important this explanation is compared to other explanations of norm compliance. From the enumeration of psychological, political and sociological explanations discussed in the above section, a range of explanatory variables can be generated which measure the factors that are relevant according to each explanation. Depending on the approach, explanatory variables are located either on the macro-level of society or on the micro-level of individual experience.

### 4.1 Micro-level Variables

The information-based explanation can be operationalized using several indicators. An immediate information the individual has is the personal experience of incidences in which the norm was broken, i.e. in which an individual has suffered from being the victim of deviant behavior. The more often this was the case, the more evidence the respondent has that the norm is no longer valid and that honest behavior will not be reciprocated.

We generated an indicator called *ExperienceCheating* which measures how often in the last five years the respondent experienced that norms were broken. The indicator combines the following survey questions: Were you overcharged by a craftsman? Were you sold food with bad bits concealed in it? Did a bank or an insurance took advantage of you by offering you not the best deal? Were you sold things second hand which had concealed faults? Did a public official ask for a bribe?.

In addition, there is information about a much more crucial and personal experience of deviant behavior, namely the question whether the respondent or a respondent’s relative was subject to a crime. Getting cheated may not matter that much for the belief that in the society norms are still relevant, but being victim of an assault or a burglary may change your view more fundamentally. We would predict that having been subject to a crime increases the likelihood of deviant behavior, for the very reason that it is a very relevant information to update your beliefs about the status of norm compli-

ance. It informs individuals, in a drastic way, that even on a very basic level, the “social contract” is no longer respected (*CrimeVictim*).

The internalization of norms is the central element of sociological theories of norm compliance. If a norm is currently internalized, it is assumed to be effective in governing behavior. This internalization has to become ever more fragile and has to dissolve before the actual behavior will eventually change. From the information based explanation, a similar implication can be derived: the belief about the validity of the norm is updated, and behavior follows suit. As we have only cross-sectional data, we cannot investigate the processes by which internalization is dissolved and whether indeed the dissolution of belief comes first. On a psychological level, there is also the possibility to infer from one’s behavior on one’s beliefs. What we can test is the relevance of the current level of internalization. Internalization of norms may come in two variants. On the one hand, it may be conceptualized in very abstract terms, referring to notions like “law” and “proper behavior”. On the other hand, it may refer to very specific forms of deviant behavior. The difference between the two is that persons may or may not see a certain behavior as deviant. For some people, certain forms of deviant behavior will simply not count as breaking a norm. They may agree that the behavior is wrong if they are explicitly asked to take a stance, but otherwise they will not give it a thought. To capture this distinction, we generated two indicators. The first is the (dis-)approving attitude towards the very concrete forms of deviant behavior listed above (*InternalizationSpecific*). The second is an indicator of rather abstract internalization, an additive index measuring agreement with two items, the “importance to follow always the rules” and the “importance of always behaving properly” (*InternalizationGeneral*).

The costs of norm compliance, but also the temptation to and costs of disregarding norms, differ among people. They do so in relation to certain socioeconomic features which serve as control variables:

– *Income* as the subjective costs of norm compliance may affect whether and what norms are broken. It might be cheap for someone who is quite rich to comply with the norm of not free riding in the public transport system or not to claim government benefits. The first is too small an amount to bother and in the case of the second “temptation”, a wealthy respondent is probably so far above the level of entitlement that it is not a realistic option

anyway. But if someone is poor, the price of a ticket may matter and if someone is close to being entitled to claiming benefits, it may be a realistic option to give it a try.

– *Importance for reputation*. Breaking a norm incurs certain risks, e.g. costs in material terms, as fine or other material sanctions, but also in terms of loss of reputation. There is a substantial literature stating that the interest in reputation fosters cooperation and honesty, whereby the mechanism is similar to the one proposed by Axelrod (1986): in the long run, the payoff of reputation outweighs the short run gain made by defecting.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, there are internal costs: If a person cares about the view others have of her, she may abstain from certain forms of behavior for fear of losing reputation and for fearing embarrassment if she is caught in the act of behaving in an “unsocial” or nasty manner. On the other hand, if a person doesn’t care, this constraint is absent. Two variables, the importance the respondent assigns to be admired and to be respected, are used to cover the reputational stakes of the respondent. A further indicator could potentially be constructed on the argument that the higher the socioeconomic status, the higher the loss in the case of breaking rules and getting caught in doing so will be. There is however no feasible indicator of this in the data set used.

– *Minority*. There is substantial evidence that ethnic fragmentation lowers trust, in particular between groups (Lenard 2008: 321; Letki 2008). The argument among political sociologists is that in the case of discrimination, trust, reciprocity and cooperation are all focused on the in-group, and not on the majority which is discriminating the respondent. In such cases, the norms are “theirs, not mine”. We operationalize this mechanism by including whether the respondent feels discriminated by the majority in the country for whatever reason.

– *MemberReligion* and *Religious*. An important aspect of internalization is of course religion – not so much the internalization of the religious norm, but the internalization of the fear that a breach of the norm will be sanctioned by some “higher” authority. We use two indicators: the formal membership in a religion and the degree to which the respondent classifies herself as religious, i.e. the degree to which the mechanism of “internalized fear” matters.

– *ValueEquality*. Specific attitudes towards people may matter for norms which concern bilateral ex-

<sup>2</sup> See Ely & Välimäki (2003) for an overview and for a counterargument.

changes – e.g. keeping change from the shopkeeper or concealing faults of something you sell to someone second hand. Interpersonal attitudes will not matter in the case of “faceless” interactions, e.g. in the case of taxpaying or when dealing with an insurance company. The attitude towards people in general can be positive or negative, and will be measured by the Rosenberg trust scale (Rosenberg 1956), consisting of three questions about whether in general people can be trusted, whether in general people are fair and whether in general people are helpful. The argument is that an individual will abstain from cheating people if it holds them in high regards. However, on the other hand, the argument can also be made in exactly the opposite direction: cheating becomes more attractive and easier if the others are generally trusting and may accept an excuse even in case the cheater is caught in the act. The flip side of believing people to be trustworthy is to believe that people are gullible. Another aspect of the general attitude towards people and fairness is the value an individual places on an equal distribution of wealth in the society.

– *FrameFit*. The degree to which the belief – “the norm is generally complied with” – still fits or is already put in question will also matter for the deviations. If the respondent firmly believes in the predominance of the norm, she will not worry about being treated dishonestly. The question we use to cover this is “How worried are you of being treated dishonestly?”. If the belief is put into question, this will first of all express itself in a certain cautiousness. This may not immediately affect behavior, but it is an indicator of the beliefs’ lessening grip on a respondent’s mind.

– *PeerGroup*. An important factor for the individual’s behavior is the social environment which indicates what norms are still valid (see the argument of the social capital school sketched above). Social involvement per se might not matter that much because you will not ask someone in the club in which you are a member to assist you in cheating for the fear that you will be rejected and that the word will spread. But in your network of close friends, this might be very different. First of all, the network is not necessarily overlapping, i.e. if you ask one friend, the risk of gaining a bad reputation is smaller, because this person might not inform the others in your network of friends. The European Social Survey asks whether the respondent could ask persons in his circle of friends to assist in cheating, more specifically, in claiming government benefits to which the respondent is not entitled. We interpret this as how strongly the peer group tolerates or

even accepts and support cheating. There is unfortunately no data on the respondent’s membership in voluntary associations.

– *TV\_total* as a measure of media exposure. As stated above, media, in particular TV, tend to report bad news, and incidences of deviant behavior are bad news. Thus we presume that people with stronger media exposure, in particular to TV, will be less likely to believe that the norms are still abided to.

## 4.2 Macro-level Variables

The political explanation of norm compliance states that the perceived legitimacy of the norm is a relevant factor for norm compliance. Prior research, in particular by Tom Tyler (2006) has shown compliance with norms to depend on the legitimacy the individuals assign to norms. The legitimacy of norms crucially depends on the legitimacy of the norm-maker but also to the individual’s role in the process by which the norm was made.<sup>3</sup> It depends on aspects like procedural fairness and involvement. Applied to the question at hand, we would argue that in a democratic system the compliance with norms is – *ceteris paribus* – higher because the individuals are subject to norms they themselves took part in creating through the democratic process. Thus a control variable on the macro level is the degree of democracy in the country, measured as a combination of the Freedom House index of political and civil liberties (Freedom House 2003).

The belief that certain norms are valid in the society a person is living in is influenced by the publicly available information about how matters stand with respect to the compliance with norms across society. Our explanation specifically refers to information and firstly this concerns the incidence of immoral behavior in society. We use the Corruption Perception Index, CPI, provided by Transparency International, to measure the incidence of corruption as a type of immoral behavior in society. High values indicate absence of corruption. The CPI measures three effects:

Firstly, it covers the baseline validity of a certain but far reaching norm: is there, as a baseline, a high degree of compliance with norms or is breaking the rules – by giving and accepting bribes etc. – simply the way things are?

<sup>3</sup> Tyler (2006) provides an extensive review of the psychological aspects of legitimacy and the implications for politics and compliance.



Secondly, in a society in which bribes are not usual, individuals behave in a more “moral” manner for the simple reason that corruption takes two. If a person cannot find an official to accept his bribe in order to achieve what he wants, that person will not engage in the respective form of corruption – not because he would consider it inappropriate, but because he is not presented with opportunities to bribe his way to what he wants.

Thirdly, and this is close to the argument of compliance due to legitimacy, the factual acceptance of norms depends on the perceived integrity of the norm maker, i.e. the political system. If the political system is corrupt, it will be held in low esteem just as much as the norms which it produces (Anderson & Tverdova 2003; Bowler & Krap 2004). We would expect that this matters in particular for norms like those about paying taxes (Scholz & Lubell 1998). If the political system is corrupt – examples would be Japan and Italy (Pharr 2000; della Porta 2000) – the acceptance of and the compliance with norms produced by the system will presumably be lower even though it might be fully democratic.

As for macro-level control variables, we will control for the level of wealth, measured as GDP per capita. Another macro-level feature found to be relevant for social trust and pro-social behavior is the level of equality (Rothstein & Uslaner 2005). If a society is fragmented, the argument is that the laws are made for the upper classes and implemented in their favor. We control for this by using the Gini index of inequality in income distribution from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators; (World Bank 2008). The exact description of each variable is given in the appendix.

## 5 Implementation and Results

The explanation makes use of macro- and micro-level factors and the statistical implementation is chosen accordingly. An explicit task is to explore the cross-national variation using properties of the country on the one hand, and within country variation using features of the individuals on the other. The appropriate method for this approach is multilevel regression (Snijders & Bosker 1999; Steenbergen & Jones 2002) which allows estimating simultaneously the effect of macro- and micro-level features.

The basic data set is the second round of the European Social Survey, conducted 2003 to 2004, which was supplemented with macro-level data (cf. Ap-

pendix). The countries included are very different, ranging from Switzerland to the Ukraine, which also yields substantial variation in the macro-level variables.

Table 1 gives the results of a multilevel regression of each of the four norm compliance variables on the independent variables.

### 5.1 Information Effects

All information effects have the predicted direction and substantial magnitudes. Information in the form of personal experience (*ExperienceCheating*) is the strongest factor for breaking norms. If the individual was cheated, she will also cheat.

Doubt about the validity of the norm also increases the incidence of norm breaking. If people start to worry about whether the “social contract” is valid, i.e. about whether the overall reciprocity still holds, the belief will start to lose its grip and deviant behavior becomes much more likely. In the case of doubt and updating beliefs based on new information the breaking of norms takes place because people rationally adapt to an environment which has changed and not because they are intrinsically morally corrupt.

Having been victim of a crime is a strong indication that there are people around you who do not respect what has since Hobbes been considered the most basic manifestation of reciprocity, namely personal safety. Just as expected, receiving this piece of information also puts a respondent’s belief in question.

TV consumption, i.e. being exposed to “bad news”, also has a corrosive effect on compliance and, in our interpretation, this effect operates by destroying the belief that people by and large comply with norms. This effect, however, is only of a minor magnitude.

### 5.2 Micro-level Effects

The individual-level variables explain why a certain person deviates in her norm compliance from the country average. If norms are highly internalized, in particular in specific terms, the incidence of deviant behavior is lower. Vague notions of law and propriety matter only little for actual norm compliance.

There is no indication of a calculation of “reputational costs” which reduces the chances of breaking norms. The degree to which others and their opi-

**Table 1** Factors for Breaking Norms

	<b>BrokenNorm</b>	<b>NormFace2Face</b>	<b>NormAnonymous</b>	<b>NormCollusive</b>
<b>Macro Level Variables</b>				
gdp2002	-0.037 <i>0.009</i>	-0.023 <i>0.009</i>	-0.007 <i>0.009</i>	-0.034 <i>0.010</i>
CPI2003	0.065 <i>0.011</i>	0.133 <i>0.011</i>	0.009 <i>0.011</i>	0.007 <i>0.011</i>
GINI2000	-0.033 <i>0.006</i>	-0.040 <i>0.006</i>	-0.032 <i>0.006</i>	0.011 <i>0.007</i>
Democracy	-0.046 <i>0.004</i>	-0.029 <i>0.004</i>	-0.009 <i>0.004</i>	-0.032 <i>0.004</i>
<b>Micro Level Variables</b>				
Age	-0.102 <i>0.006</i>	-0.203 <i>0.006</i>	-0.040 <i>0.006</i>	0.006 <i>0.007</i>
Female	-0.096 <i>0.005</i>	-0.039 <i>0.005</i>	-0.023 <i>0.005</i>	-0.108 <i>0.006</i>
Education	0.014 <i>0.006</i>	-0.009 <i>0.006</i>	-0.011 <i>0.006</i>	0.032 <i>0.007</i>
Income	0.068 <i>0.008</i>	-0.006 <i>0.008</i>	-0.002 <i>0.008</i>	0.118 <i>0.008</i>
Minority	0.006 <i>0.005</i>	0.000 <i>0.005</i>	0.016 <i>0.005</i>	0.006 <i>0.006</i>
TV_total	0.015 <i>0.005</i>	0.043 <i>0.005</i>	-0.003 <i>0.006</i>	-0.010 <i>0.006</i>
PeopleFair	0.008 <i>0.007</i>	0.012 <i>0.007</i>	-0.008 <i>0.007</i>	0.009 <i>0.007</i>
PeopleHelpful	-0.016 <i>0.006</i>	-0.010 <i>0.006</i>	-0.003 <i>0.007</i>	-0.016 <i>0.007</i>
PeopleTrustworthy	0.000 <i>0.007</i>	-0.004 <i>0.007</i>	0.003 <i>0.007</i>	0.004 <i>0.007</i>
MemberReligion	0.004 <i>0.006</i>	-0.028 <i>0.006</i>	-0.007 <i>0.006</i>	0.026 <i>0.007</i>
Religious	-0.025 <i>0.006</i>	-0.025 <i>0.006</i>	0.000 <i>0.007</i>	-0.025 <i>0.007</i>
ValueEquality	-0.036 <i>0.006</i>	-0.032 <i>0.005</i>	-0.011 <i>0.006</i>	-0.026 <i>0.006</i>
<b>Information Effects</b>				
ExperienceCheating	0.200 <i>0.006</i>	0.112 <i>0.006</i>	0.082 <i>0.006</i>	0.166 <i>0.006</i>
CrimeVictim	0.028 <i>0.005</i>	0.021 <i>0.005</i>	0.021 <i>0.005</i>	0.019 <i>0.006</i>
FrameFit	-0.010 <i>0.006</i>	-0.016 <i>0.006</i>	-0.014 <i>0.006</i>	0.010 <i>0.006</i>
NormInternaliationSpecific	-0.158 <i>0.006</i>	-0.091 <i>0.006</i>	-0.085 <i>0.006</i>	-0.135 <i>0.006</i>

Table 1 (Continue)

	BrokenNorm	NormFace2Face	NormAnonymous	NormCollusive
NormInternaliationGeneral	-0.107 <i>0.006</i>	-0.080 <i>0.006</i>	-0.046 <i>0.006</i>	-0.083 <i>0.006</i>
ImportanceAdmired	0.036 <i>0.006</i>	0.031 <i>0.006</i>	0.023 <i>0.006</i>	0.022 <i>0.006</i>
ImportanceRespect	0.034 <i>0.006</i>	0.014 <i>0.006</i>	0.020 <i>0.006</i>	0.035 <i>0.006</i>
PeerGroup	0.111 <i>0.006</i>	0.095 <i>0.006</i>	0.101 <i>0.006</i>	0.051 <i>0.006</i>
<b>Model Fit</b>				
R <sup>2</sup> within	0.181	0.131	0.048	0.107
R <sup>2</sup> between	0.566	0.541	0.403	0.132
R <sup>2</sup> overall	0.190	0.145	0.051	0.104
N	30329	31033	31178	30947
Countries	24	24	24	24

Note: Variables are standardized; entries are b and SE in italics as obtained using STATA xtreg routine with random effects. Due to standardization, the magnitudes of the coefficients are directly comparable.

nion about a person matter for this person actually increases the level of breaking norms. People are seemingly not afraid of “getting caught” as they are not afraid of losing reputation by deviant behavior. The substantial effect of the peer group adds another twist to the mechanism: if most of the respondent’s friends would assist in cheating the government or another institution, this strongly increases the likelihood of cheating. This implies that the reputation in the peer group, i.e. among friends, is not decreased by cheating – cheating may even increase it. This finding is in line with discussions of the “dark sides” of social capital and of processes in which members of groups focus cooperative behavior and trust on other group members at the expense of the society as a whole and other groups (Levi 1996).

Most socioeconomic variables have the expected effects: higher levels of income makes overall breaking of norms more likely but given the pattern of its impact on the different types of breaches of norms, the effect comes about solely by the fact that wealthy people more often avoid VAT by paying cash. The reasons underlying this finding are presumably twofold: Firstly, wealthier people buy more expensive things so that the absolute amount of VAT is higher, creating a higher incentive to avoid it. Secondly, wealthier people can more easily pay for substantial purchases in cash. Cheating in such cases is therefore not actually a question of

morality, but one of having an incentive and also the means to pursue it.

Education has roughly the same effect as income. Females are more law abiding than men, and elder people are more law abiding than younger ones. Feeling discriminated does not increase the likelihood of deviant behavior in dealings with other people, but increase it this likelihood in the setting of the “anonymous” breaking of norms. We interpret this as alienation from the “system” and its institutions, rather than from the people one is dealing with on a daily basis. While formal membership in a religion does matter only for certain norms, being religious exerts a strong positive effect on norm compliance. The general attitude towards people matters only slightly, if at all. The only variable which has an, albeit very minor, effect is the belief that people are helpful. Contrary to the other two variables which refer to rather lofty terms like trustworthiness and fairness, we would suspect that this helpfulness variable reflects to some degree the respondent’s experience of having received help and having been treated well by others in the past, and a felt obligation to reciprocate. The value assigned to equality also increases the compliance with norms.

### 5.3 Macro-level Variables

The macro-level variables account for the average level of the compliance measures in different countries. The effects are robust against the exclusion of macro-level variables. Included as a very basic control variable, GDP has a positive effect on norm compliance. In wealthier societies, norms are on average broken less often. We would argue that is most likely to be the case simply because the necessity to do so is less urgent. There is, however, also the alternative interpretation that the effect is spurious because some of the questions, like the one about being sold food with bad bits mixed in, is something which is more likely to happen in less developed countries where street markets play a more important role as opposed to supermarkets in wealthier countries. Still, the “collusive” breaking of norms, i.e. the paying cash to avoid VAT, is also less frequent (at least reported or avowed less often) in richer societies in which VAT rates and incentives to dodge them are generally higher.

Two findings are counterintuitive, the first of which is that norms are broken more often when less corruption is perceived. The CPI in which high values indicate low levels of corruption has an increasing effect on the incidence of breaking norms. The effect on the overall breaking of norms is only due to the fact that norms are broken more often in face-to-face interaction. For the breaking of norms in relations to the state or in anonymous settings, the CPI does not matter. Secondly, norms are broke less often in a less egalitarian society. This seems reasonable in the case of face-to-face interactions which by all likelihood take place among equals from the same societal strata. But the effect in the case of anonymous norm breaking is counterintuitive to the argument that in fragmented societies some strata do not feel a “belonging” to the system and thus feel less bound by the system’s rules.

More in line with our expectations is the finding that the procedural legitimacy of the norm giver, proxied here as the degree to which the political systems is democratic, which is to say that the citizens subject themselves to norms which they themselves contributed to making through the political process, decreases the incidence of breaking norms.

### 5.4 Explanatory Power

Multilevel regression differentiates the overall variation into two components. The deviation is composed of the deviation of the group mean – in this case, the country’s mean – from the “grand mean”

(the average of the overall sample) plus the deviation of an individual from the group mean (Snijders & Bosker 1999: 16–22). Macro-level variables explain the deviation of the group mean from the grand mean, i.e. the variation between countries (between  $R^2$ ) in the average level of how often norms are broken. Micro-level variables explain the variation within the country, i.e. why a citizen of a country is breaking certain norms more often than another citizen of this country (within  $R^2$ ). The explanatory power is given in the lower rows of table 1. The overall  $R^2$  measures the degree to which we can explain why a person differs from the grand mean, combining the explanatory contribution of the country features and personal characteristics. The overall explanatory power is on the whole quite low, and varies from only 5 percent in the case of the breaking of norms in the “anonymous” setting to about 20 percent in the case of the overall incidence of breaking norms.

The macro-level variables can explain about half of the between country variation in the compliance with norms, only in the case of “collusive” breaking of norms the country features explain much less variation. The explanatory power of the micro-level variables varies from only 5 percent in the case of the “anonymous” breaking of norms to 18 percent in case of overall incidence of breaking norms.

Taken together, the low explanatory power indicates that there are substantial factors which are not included in the model, e.g. factors concerning the situation in which deviations from the norm takes place, including situational hints as proposed by the “broken window” approach (Kelling & Wilson 1982). This may also indicate further issues with respect to the degree to which concrete situations match a situational model for which the frame prescribes a certain, automatic, behavior.

## 6 Conclusion

This paper has explored the role of information about the validity of norms for norm compliance. At the theoretical level, we argued that people comply with norms if they believe others will also comply but update their belief about the validity of the norm using information obtained from the media and gained in personal experience. The empirical findings indicate that the theoretical argument underlying the paper is adequate: the experience-based information that the “reciprocity” contract is broken is the strongest factor for breaking norms. The effect of information about the validity of

norms is comparable in its strength to the internalization of norms.

A first implication of this is that, as was found in experimental studies, people are by nature reciprocal (Fehr & Gintis 2007: 45). People are – as a baseline – not breaking the rules on their own initiative, but do so as a reaction to the experience of breaches. They are willing to cooperate, but they do not want to be the only one compliant to a norm by which no one else is restrained. People, in other words, take care not to be duped. If they believe the societal contract still holds, they too will continue to comply.

The meanwhile substantial literature in the discourse about social capital argues that social trust is the main factor for solving social dilemmas (cf. Putnam 1993), which also offers an explanation for compliance with norms. Contrary to these arguments, we find that there are no effects of social trust on norm compliance. What makes people comply with norms is not blind trust which is by definition the absence of knowledge and certainty, but belief based on information that a norm is effective and that it is hence rational to comply with it. As Levi (1996) in response to Putnam's argument has remarked, social embeddedness can work in either direction. If an individual's friends would go along in breaking a norm, this strongly increases the chances that the individual in question will break a norm, and vice versa. Social embeddedness per se tells us nothing, it depends on the group the individual is embedded in.

The remaining unexplained variation, which is substantial, might be due to forms of internalization

for which we have no proxy, and to temptations within the situation in which deviant behavior takes place. Another psychological underpinning might be what Cialdini (2003) denotes as injunctive and descriptive norms: the former prescribe what the appropriate behavior is, the latter describe what kind of behavior typically occurs. This model also implies an effect for information very similar to the “broken window” theory proposed by Kelling & Wilson (1982). It is indeed difficult to think of an *experimentum crucis* to tip the scales in favor of one of these theories.

The argument made here implies a certain long term effect. Cooperation is a stable equilibrium, even in the long-term. Just like the underlying model of reciprocity, it can very well explain an overall deterioration of norm compliance – i. e. a ratchet effect by which some immoral behavior or “moral shocks” lead to even more immoral behavior (Guiso et al. 2007). Indeed one may at first be tempted to think that it can explain only such cases. But it can in principle also explain why the norm was installed and became effective in the first place, namely by an updating of information about the increasing rather than the decreasing validity of norms. How social order came about in the first place may not be an altogether different story from how it dissolves.

If there is a practical implication, it is that breaking norms has an effect which goes beyond the interaction in which it occurred. Both defector and victim will update their beliefs about breaking norms: the former that breaking norms is feasible, the latter that the breaking of norms is to be expected.

## Appendix: Description of Variables

Countries in the analysis: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, and United Kingdom; for detailed documentation see Jowel et al. 2005.

Dependent Variables	Mean	Std. Dev.
BrokenNorm: index of how often respondent (R) has broken a norm; see text.	1.02	1.79
BrokenNormFace2Face: index of how often R has broken a norm in a face to face interaction; see text.	0.36	0.87
BrokenNormAnonymous: index of how often R has broken a norm in an anonymous interaction; see text.	0.09	0.51
BrokenNormCooperative: indicates whether R has ever paid cash in order to avoid paying VAT	0.54	1.10

Macro Level Variables	Mean	Std. Dev.
gdp2002 GDP per Capita in US\$, 2002	23184	11119
CPI2003: Corruption Perception Index, 10 = lowest level of corruption	6.70	2.24
GINI2000: Gini Index of family income distribution, high values indicate high inequality	31.10	4.79
Democracy: average score of political and civil liberties, high values indicate high levels of democracy	-2.71	1.51
Micro Level Variables		
Age: age of respondent in years	45.17	18.46
Female (1 = female)	0.54	0.50
Education: years of education	11.52	4.03
Income: household income of respondent, 10 = highest income class	5.73	2.78
CrimeVictim: respondent or close person was victim of crime (1 = yes)	0.20	0.40
Minority: respondent feels as member of a discriminated minority (1 = yes)	0.06	0.24
TV_Total: total time spent watching TV on an average weekday (0 = none; 7 more than 3 hours)	4.31	2.04
ExperiencedCheating: index of frequency the respondent experienced incidences of cheating; R was cheated by craftsmen/shopkeeper, was cheated by buying food. was cheated by a bank/insurance. was cheated buying second hand, was cheated by a public official	2.28	2.73
PeopleFair: 0 = most people take advantage of me, 10 = most people try to be fair	5.50	2.39
PeopleHelpful: 0 = people mostly look out for themselves; 10 = people mostly try to be helpful	4.73	2.41
PeopleTrustworthy: 0 = you can't be to carefull in dealing with people, 10 = most people can be trusted	4.92	2.49
MemberReligion: member of a religion (1 = yes)	0.62	0.49
Religious: respondents is religious (0 = not at all, 10 = very religious)	4.86	2.98
ValueEquality: government should reduce income differences (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)	3.84	1.05
NormInternalizationSpecific: additive index of current internalization of specific norms; rating of certain forms of deviant behavior as wrong (1 = not wrong, 4 = seriously wrong); list of deviant behaviors are the types of behavior used in the dependent variable	15.41	3.05
NormInternaliationGeneral: summary index combining respondent's rating of the following items: importance to do what is told and to follow rules; importance to behave properly; "you should always obey the law even if it means missing good opportunities" (-6 to +9 scale, 9 = strong internalization)	1.31	2.34
FrameFit: "How worried are you about being treated dishonestly?" (-2 = not at all worried, +2 = very worried)	0.79	1.20
ImportanceAdmired: degree to which R wants to be admired (1 = not important, 6 = very important)	3.71	1.37
ImportanceRespect: degree to which R wants to be respected (1 = not important; 6 = very important)	3.80	1.36
PeerGroup : "Would friends support you to get unjustified government benefits?" (0 = none would, 4 = all would)	1.45	0.71

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