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How descriptive norms shape reasoning about rules

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Abstract

Rules are central to the successful coordination of large-scale societies. However, official codified rules (like laws) and other important social information like descriptive (often implicit) norms can sometimes provide conflicting accounts of what someone should do. Here, we explored two situations in which official rules and descriptive norms conflict—with implications for enforcement and punishment. Experiment 1 looked in the US and Belgium and found that descriptive norms shape the extent to which violating a codified rule is seen as actually breaking a rule. In Experiment 2 we demonstrated that descriptive norms also influence who people think was the cause of a punishment—the rule enforcer, not the rule breaker, is seen as the cause when the rule is rarely enforced (i.e. descriptive norms of enforcement are low.) Overall, this work suggests that norms play a vital role in shaping how we understand official rules and those who break them.