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Research article

Descriptive norms, prescriptive norms, and social control: An intercultural comparison of people's reactions to uncivil behaviors

MARKUS BRAUER^{1*} AND NADINE CHAURAND²

¹Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and Clermont
Université, France

²Clermont Université, France

Abstract

Social control is the generic term for any reaction through which a bystander communicates to the “perpetrator” of a norm transgression that his/her action is socially unacceptable. In order to understand the characteristics of behaviors that lead to social control reactions in public settings, we conducted a study with respondents from eight different countries. Respondents were presented with a description of 46 uncivil behaviors and indicated for each behavior (a) its prescriptive normativity (how deviant it was), (b) its descriptive normativity (how frequent it was), and (c) how likely it was that they would express their disapproval to the “perpetrator.” Results showed that in all eight countries, prescriptive normativity was the primary determinant of respondents' social control reactions. In addition, respondents from collectivistic cultures reported that they would exert more social control than respondents from individualistic cultures. The findings suggest that people will exert social control when they feel personally implicated by the uncivil behavior. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Social norms are among the most powerful determinants of behavior (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). Social norms are useful because they guide behaviors in ambiguous situations and render the reactions of others more predictable. They also facilitate positive interactions among group members (e.g., the reciprocity norm, politeness-related norms) and protect valued entities or ideas (e.g., the norm not to litter, the norm to wear clothes in public). Social norms are perpetuated in a variety of ways, such as socialization (through parents, teachers, etc.; Hoffman, 1970), appeals from officials (politicians, priests, etc.), observational learning (Bandura, 1976), and social control. The term “social control” refers to any kind of disapproval reaction that a person might express toward someone who transgresses a social norm (Chaurand & Brauer, 2008; Gibbs, 1981). Some researchers use the terms “pressures to conformity,” “negative social sanctions,” or, when the norm transgression is an uncivil or immoral behavior, “civil courage” for this same behavior (Greitemeyer, Osswald, Fischer, & Frey, 2007; Hollander, 1960; Schachter, 1951). The present paper is about the factors that influence social control. What determines people's reactions to norm transgressions? Why do certain norm transgressions elicit stronger social control reactions than others?

Previous research in social psychology has dealt mostly with people's reactions to deviants in small groups. Schachter (1951) showed that a group member who held a position that was opposite to that of the other group members was ignored during the group discussion and received the lowest rankings when participants were asked to rank all other group members in order of preference for remaining in the group (see also Janis, 1982, and Marques, Abrams, & Serôdio, 2001). Although such research is fascinating and has made important theoretical contributions, it deals exclusively with small

*Correspondence to: Markus Brauer, Laboratoire de Psychologie Sociale et Cognitive, Clermont Université, 34, Av. Carnot, 63037 Clermont-Ferrand, France. E-mail: markus.brauer@univ-bpclermont.fr

face-to-face groups whose members know each other and maintain contact over an extended period of time. What about people's reactions to "deviants" in larger societies? What happens if someone observes another person engaging in a counternormative (uncivil) behavior in the street? Or in a park? Or in a public library? Prior research shows that a substantial proportion of bystanders do indeed exert social control, even if they do not personally know the "deviant." For example, one study showed that 40% of the individuals who witnessed the behavior expressed their disapproval to a confederate who threw an empty plastic bottle in the bushes of a small neighborhood park (Chekroun & Brauer, 2002). Likewise, another study showed that 79% of the inhabitants of a large apartment building exerted social control toward a confederate who littered in the entrance hall of the apartment building (Brauer & Chekroun, 2005). It appears, then, that social control is not limited to small face-to-face groups, but occurs—and contributes to the perpetuation of social norms—also in larger groups whose members do not know each other.

What factors influence people's reactions to norm transgressions in public? Given its central role in the perpetuation of social norms, it is not surprising that social control is a core concept in sociological thinking (Black, 1984; Meier, 1982; Ross, 1901). Social control has received relatively little attention in social psychology, at least in the sense used here (i.e., people's reactions to counternormative behaviors in public). Brauer and his colleagues (Brauer & Chekroun, 2005; Chaurand & Brauer, 2008; Chekroun & Brauer, 2002; Chekroun & Brauer, 2004; Nugier, Niedenthal, Brauer, & Chekroun, 2007) examined situational variables and individual differences that affect the likelihood that a given individual will exert social control in a given situation. The fundamental conclusion of their work is that the bystanders' feeling of being personally implicated is a primary determinant of their reaction to the counternormative behavior. Any variable that decreases the feeling of being personally implicated—be it because the counternormative behavior takes place in a location that is usually supervised by paid guards, because the deviant confederate is accompanied by a friend, or because the counternormative behavior affects a public (e.g., a sidewalk) rather than a personal space (e.g., the entrance hall of one's apartment building)—decreases the likelihood that people will exert social control.

The primary purpose of the research presented in this paper was to examine the influence of different types of norms on social control. Cialdini and his colleagues (Cialdini et al., 1990; Reno, Cialdini, & Kallgren, 1993) distinguish between two types of norms. *Prescriptive norms* (or injunctive norms) refer to moral values and societal standards about behaviors. The question is "what is right or wrong" or "what people ought to do" or "what behaviors are socially acceptable and valuable." *Descriptive norms* refer to the frequency with which given behaviors occur. The question is "what do most other people do" or "what behaviors are generally adopted." As Cialdini and his colleagues demonstrate, the same behavior can be prescriptively normative and descriptively non-normative, or *vice versa*. For example, donating blood is prescriptively normative (it is a good thing to do) but descriptively non-normative (few people actually do it). Driving one's car to go to a place nearby is prescriptively non-normative (it is a bad thing to do) but descriptively normative (many people do it).

The central hypothesis guiding the present research was that in the realm of uncivil behaviors, social control reactions are strongly related to prescriptive norms. The more a behavior violates societal standards the more it disturbs social order and the more it transgresses social norms that are considered important by the individuals who compose the society. Strong norm violations (e.g., stealing) thus have a more negative effect on people's well being than weak norm violations (e.g., burping in public). In addition, previous work has shown that hostile emotions play a crucial role in social control (Chaurand & Brauer, 2008). These hostile emotions are more likely to be created by highly deviant behaviors than by behaviors that are low in deviance. Therefore, one might predict that the degree to which an uncivil behavior is prescriptively counter-normative has an effect on the likelihood that bystanders will exert social control (hypothesis 1).

Descriptive norms should be related only indirectly to social control reactions in the realm of uncivil behaviors. There is no reason to assume that over and above the effects of prescriptive normativity, the perceived frequency of a behavior should influence bystanders' decision to intervene. None of the psychological processes involved in social control (e.g., feeling of personally implicated) is theoretically related to perceived frequency. Therefore, we have no reason to assume that there is a direct causal link between descriptive norms and social control. It is likely the case, however, that descriptive norms influence prescriptive norms and are thus indirectly related to social control. We are not aware of any research that has systematically examined the link between the descriptive norms and prescriptive norms across behaviors, but it is safe to assume that in the realm of undesirable behaviors (norm transgressions, uncivil behaviors) there is a negative correlation between the extent to which a behavior is frequent and the extent to which it is seen as violating societal standards (see Kalmijn & Unk, 2007, and Lindbeck, Nyborg, & Weibull, 1999, for a similar idea). The more people engage in a given behavior the less the behavior violates societal standards (hypothesis 2). Taken together we predict that there is a bivariate

relationship between descriptive normativity (frequency) and social control but this relationship will disappear if we statistically control for prescriptive normativity (hypothesis 3).

A secondary purpose of our research was to compare the responses of participants from different countries. We did so for two reasons. First, we wanted to make sure that our findings were not restricted to one particular country with one particular set of societal standards. If our findings describe universal psychological processes, then we expected to find evidence for hypotheses 1–3 across the different countries. A given behavior may be seen as more frequent (descriptive normativity) or more deviant (prescriptive normativity) in one country than another (Triandis, 1995), but if our hypotheses are correct then the influence of the two types of norms on people's reactions to norm transgressions should be similar in the countries under consideration. In other words, we predicted that the relationship between prescriptive norms and social control would be invariant across countries (hypothesis 4).

Second, we wanted to explore the role of culture in people's reactions to counternormative behaviors. As already mentioned, Brauer and his colleagues (Brauer, 2004; Brauer & Chekroun, 2005; Chekroun & Brauer, 2002) found that personal implication was an important determinant in social control reactions. Whether or not someone feels personally implicated most likely depends on the psychological distance that he or she perceives between the "perpetrator" of the counternormative behavior and him/herself. Countries differ in the extent to which they endorse collectivistic or individualistic values (Hofstede, 2001). People in collectivistic cultures tend to have a more interdependent definition of the self and feel more interconnected with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 2001) and, therefore, should also feel more personally implicated when they witness another person engage in a counternormative behavior. In addition, it is likely that people from collectivistic cultures consider their neighborhood to be a more central element in their self-definition than people from individualistic cultures. Uncivil behaviors that deteriorate the neighborhood may thus be seen as more problematic. As a consequence, we expected that respondents from collectivistic countries would be more likely to exert social control than respondents from individualistic cultures (hypothesis 5).

In order to test our hypotheses, we conducted a study in which we collected data from participants in eight different countries. Each country contained a student and a non-student sample. Respondents were presented with a list of 46 counternormative behaviors that varied both in descriptive and prescriptive normativity. The behaviors were all "incivilities" such as littering, failure to pick up after one's dog, or smoking in areas in which smoking is prohibited. The common characteristic of these behaviors is that they occur in public and negatively affect the perpetrator's fellow citizens. Respondents rated each behavior with regard to its perceived deviance (prescriptive normativity), perceived frequency (descriptive normativity), and indicated the likelihood that they would react and express their disapproval to the perpetrator of the uncivil behavior (social control).

Some readers may wonder why we used a vignettes and self-reports methodology. This was done for two reasons. First, self-reports have been shown by prior research to be quite accurate estimates of actual levels of social control. Brauer and Chekroun (2005) examined bystanders' reactions to a variety of uncivil behaviors. Half of the participants were in the questionnaire condition and reported how they would react if they were to witness the behavior under consideration. The other half of the participants were in the behavior condition in which they observed a confederate engage in the uncivil behavior and their reaction was being measured. In each of the two conditions, the percentage of participants who exerted social control was recorded. Across uncivil behaviors, the correlation between the self-reports and the actual social control reactions was .84. Second, our goal was to examine a variety of behaviors some of which could not be staged by a deviant confederate in the street (for ethical or practical reasons). In order to be able to include these behaviors as well, we had decided to use a vignette methodology in the present studies.

METHOD

Participants

Different experimenters recruited 1048 respondents in eight countries. There were 75 participants from USA, 127 participants from England, 102 participants from Germany, 101 participants from the francophone part of Belgium, 205 participants from France, 70 participants from Italy, 236 participants from Spain, and 132 participants from Portugal. These countries spanned the entire range of individualistic and collectivistic cultures. In Hofstede's (2001) classification, values range

(theoretically) from 0 to 100 with higher values meaning greater individualism. Portugal, with a score of 27, is quite similar to typical collectivistic countries such as China (20) and Malaysia (26), and is very dissimilar to typical individualistic cultures such as the USA (91) and the UK (89).

There were 70.3% women and 29.1% men in the total sample (six participants did not indicate their gender). The percentage of women varied from 56.0% (USA) to 86.3% (Portugal). There were 71.5% students and 20.9% non-students in the total sample (80 participants did not indicate their occupation). The percentage of students varied from 49.7% (France) to 95.7% (Portugal). The average age of the students was 20.8 years ($s = 3.2$), that of the non-students 39.2 years ($s = 13.6$). Most students were recruited at their university. They filled out the questionnaire during one of their classes, in exchange for course credit, or were paid for their participation. The non-students were recruited in a variety of ways. Some filled out the questionnaire during a continuing education class, other were contacted at their work place, yet others were acquaintances of one of the many experimenters who helped run the study, and some were colleagues of the experimenters' spouses. In general, an effort was made to include people with varying occupations and varying levels of education in our samples.

Material and Procedure

Participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire in their country's official language. The different versions of the questionnaire were obtained by having the English version of the questionnaire translated into each of the other languages by a native speaker of that language. In the initial instructions, participants were informed that the questionnaire was about people's reactions to behaviors that, for some people, go against current social norms. Participants were then asked to imagine themselves observing each of the behaviors listed below. They were to imagine that the person who does the behavior was a young man, about 20 years old, unknown to them¹. The clothes and the haircut of the young man were average. Participants were also asked to imagine that the young man had not noticed them and thought he was unobserved (unless otherwise specified), that the young man was unaccompanied, that they were also unaccompanied, and that the scene occurred during the day in a public place (generally in the street). Participants were asked to answer three questions about each behavior: (1) "To what extent is the behavior deviant (i.e., to what extent does it go against the norms of the society)?" (prescriptive normativity), (2) "To what extent is the behavior common (i.e., to what extent is it frequently observed in your country)?" (descriptive normativity), and (3) "To what extent would this behavior make you react (i.e., to what extent are you likely to express, in one way or another, your disapproval to the perpetrator of the behavior)?" (social control). Below these instructions followed a list of 46 behaviors. Some of these behaviors were rather banal (e.g., "The person blows his nose loudly in public," "The person uses a cell phone and speaks very loudly in a public bus"), others were common incivilities (e.g., "The person litters (throws away a used Kleenex) not far from a trash can," "The person tries to cut in front of the people ahead of him in a line at the cinema"), others were violations of traffic laws (i.e., "The person parks his car on the sidewalk in such a way that pedestrians are forced to step in the street in order to pass by," "The person, driving, enters a one-way street and blocks the cars that arrive from the other direction"), and yet others were acts of petty crime ("The person steals a magazine in a book store," "The person damages the seats in a public bus by bending the plastic of his seat."). Participants were asked to evaluate each behavior on the three dimensions "deviance," "frequency," and "social control," using a 9-point rating scale with endpoints labeled 1 = "not at all" and 9 = "very much." In the second part of the questionnaire participants were given the chance to list other behaviors that go against the norms of the society and that had not been mentioned in the list of 46 behaviors. At the end, participants indicated their gender, their age, their civil status, their occupation, their religion, their degree of religious practice (on a 7-point scale with endpoint labeled 1 = "not at all practicing" and 7 = "very practicing"). When participants responded that they belonged to "no religion" they were given a score of 0 on the degree of religious practice variable. Participants also indicated their nationality, the country in which they currently lived, and the country in which they had spent most of their life. We only considered participants who indicated the same country in response to the last three questions. This procedure led to the

¹We made this choice because we wanted to hold the characteristics of the "perpetrator" constant. We are currently conducting a research project in which we systematically vary the gender and the age of the perpetrator. However, the influence of the characteristics of the perpetrator on bystanders' social control reactions was not the topic of the study reported here. This is why we asked all participants to imagine the same perpetrator. We chose a young male perpetrator because previous research has shown that people consider a young man to be the typical perpetrator of uncivil behaviors (Chaurand & Brauer, unpublished raw data).

exclusion of 4.6% of the participants. The sample sizes reported above are the final sample sizes, i.e., containing only participants who had the nationality of the country they currently lived in and who had spent most of their life in this country.

RESULTS

Comparisons Between Behaviors

We estimated a series of multi-level hierarchical models to assess the effects of descriptive and prescriptive normativity, country, cultural dimensions, and the demographic variables on people's reactions to uncivil behaviors. First-level units were the 46 behaviors that each participant evaluated on three dimensions, resulting in a total of 48 208 behaviors to be analyzed. Second-level units were the 1048 participants who varied in gender, age, occupation, civil status, religion, and degree of religious practice. Third-level units were the eight countries that varied on Hofstede's (2001) individualism dimension. Multilevel modeling was implemented through SPSS Mixed Models, Version 16. Hierarchical models allow researchers to analyze data collected at different levels of analysis (e.g., behaviors, participants, countries) without violating the independence assumption in linear multiple regression. For example, the fact that the same individual evaluates all 46 behaviors implies that the 46 ratings are not independent of one another. Multi-level modeling estimates and statistically removes the dependency that is caused by higher-level units.

We started out with a relatively simple model in which social control was regressed on prescriptive normativity, which was centered around each participant's own mean. For ease of interpretation, we reversed the deviance ratings so that higher values represent greater prescriptive normativity. In order to take into account the variability among individual participants within countries as well as the variability among countries, we declared both participants and countries to be random effects. For each of these higher-level units we put a random effect on the intercepts (the average ratings) and on the slopes (the relationship between DV and IV) and allowed these random effects to be correlated ("unstructured covariance matrix" in SPSS). The results revealed a strong relationship between social control and prescriptive normativity, $t(3.86) = 49.97$, $p < .0001$, and thus confirms hypothesis 1. The less a behavior was seen as prescriptively normative (the more deviant it was), the more participants reported that they would react to it and express their opposition. When we regressed prescriptive normativity on descriptive normativity we observed a significant relationship between the two constructs, $t(8.06) = 4.49$, $p < .01$. As predicted by hypothesis 2, the more people perceive a given behavior to be common the less the behavior violates societal standards. Further analyses revealed that descriptive normativity was related to social control, $t(8.12) = 2.87$, $p < .02$. However, this effect disappeared when prescriptive normativity was added to the model, $t(8.66) = .03$, ns. Note that the effect of prescriptive normativity on social control remains significant when statistically controlling for descriptive normativity, $t(3.09) = 48.11$, $p < .0001$. The data are correlational, and it is impossible to draw firm causal conclusions. All we can say is that the data are consistent with hypothesis 3 according to which there is no direct causal link between descriptive normativity and social control and the observed bivariate relationship is due to the fact that both variables share common variance with prescriptive normativity.

Comparison Between Individuals

Initial analyses revealed that the variables age, civil status, and occupation were highly related to each other. Married participants ($M = 42.8$) and divorced/widowed participants ($M = 49.2$) were older than unmarried participants ($M = 21.6$), $F(2, 967) = 790.16$, $p < .0001$. Non-students were older ($M = 39.2$) than students ($M = 20.8$), $F(1, 915) = 1084.82$, $p < .0001$. Finally, married participants (14%) and divorced/widowed participants (8%) were less likely to be students than unmarried participants (90%), $\chi^2(2) = 434.82$, $p < .0001$. In order to avoid problems of collinearity, we decided to include only the variable age in the analyses reported below.

In order to examine hypotheses 4 and 5, we estimated a series of more complex multi-level models. These models contained predictors from all three levels and at least one interaction between variables from different levels. Given that we were interested in differences between countries and/or in the moderating effect of country, we declared country to be a

fixed effect. We kept the random effects for participants and allowed the random intercepts and the random slopes to be correlated. In the first model we estimated participants' self-reported reaction as a function of prescriptive normativity (a continuous first-level variable, centered around each participant's own mean), gender (a categorical second-level variable with two levels), religion (a categorical second-level variable with four levels), age (a continuous second-level variable), country (a categorical third-level variable with eight levels), and the interaction between prescriptive normativity and country. The results revealed a highly significant main effect of prescriptive normativity on social control, $F(1, 916.75) = 2978.40, p < .0001$, which replicates the effect reported in the previous section and confirms hypothesis 1. The effect of prescriptive normativity on social control was not moderated by country, $F(7, 913.98) = 1.41, ns$. Our data thus provide no evidence for the idea that the effect of prescriptive normativity on social control differed from one country to the next. Although it is problematic to accept the null hypothesis, this latter result is consistent with hypothesis 4. The analyses revealed a significant main effect of country, $F(7, 965.96) = 4.59, p < .001$. As can be seen in Figure 1, participants from countries differed significantly with regard to how strongly they would react to the 46 behaviors. We will come back to this effect later. The analyses further yielded significant effects for age, $F(1, 934.11) = 32.05, p < .001$, and religion, $F(3, 919.54) = 2.82, p < .04$. Older participants reported that they were more likely to exert social control than younger participants. Catholics were more likely to exert social control than protestants, respondents with another religion, and respondents who indicated that they were not affiliated with a particular religion (see Table 1). The main effect of gender was non-significant, $F(1, 905.96) = 1.89, ns$, replicating similar null effects found in earlier work. In a different analysis, in which we replaced religion by degree of religious practice and included only participants who declared themselves as being affiliated with a particular religion, the effect of degree of religious practice was marginally significant, $F(1, 640.26) = 3.23, p = .07$. We estimated another model that contained all main effects and all two-way interactions of the above-mentioned variables. None of the two-way interactions was significant, p 's $> .24$. Table 1 contains the descriptive statistics of the demographic variables, and some between-group comparisons with the participant as the unit of analysis.

Comparison Between Countries

To examine potential reasons for the observed differences between countries, we attributed to each behavior an individualism score that depended on the country in which the respondent lived. These scores were derived from Hofstede's (2001) classification of more than 100 countries. We then regressed social control on prescriptive normativity, gender, age, religion, and Hofstede's individualism score. The original model, which contained random effects (intercept

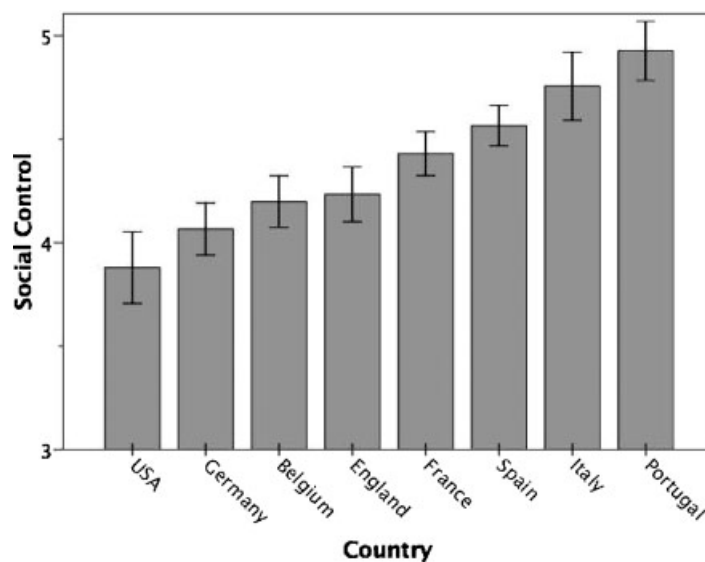


Figure 1. Mean social control rate by country. Error bars represent one standard error

Table 1. Average social control scores as a function of the socio-demographic variables

	Unadjusted means and standard deviations		Adjusted means, controlling for country
Gender			
Men	$M = 4.39$	$s = 1.52$	$M = 4.33$
Women	$M = 4.44$	$s = 1.48$	$M = 4.39$
Test	$F(1, 1035) = .39, ns$		$F(1, 1028) = .002, ns$
Occupation			
Students	$M = 4.33$	$s = 1.41$	$M = 4.30$
Non students	$M = 4.68$	$s = 1.65$	$M = 4.69$
Test	$F(1, 963) = 9.32, p < .002$		$F(1, 956) = 10.96, p < .001$
Civil Status			
Married	$M = 4.93$	$s = 1.57$	$M = 4.95$
Divorced/Widowed	$M = 4.64$	$s = 1.93$	$M = 4.68$
Single	$M = 4.32$	$s = 1.44$	$M = 4.29$
Test	$F(2, 1022) = 11.21, p < .001$		$F(2, 1015) = 12.18, p < .001$
Religion			
Catholic	$M = 4.58$	$s = 1.47$	$M = 4.54$
Protestant	$M = 4.19$	$s = 1.55$	$M = 4.29$
Other	$M = 4.07$	$s = 1.61$	$M = 4.10$
No religion	$M = 4.28$	$s = 1.43$	$M = 4.21$
Test	$F(3, 1005) = 5.12, p < .002$		$F(3, 998) = 3.52, p < .02$

and slope) on both the participant and country, failed to converge despite the fact that we softened the Hessian convergence criterion to .001 and increased the number of iterations. We thus estimated a simpler model in which we put a random effect on the intercept, but not the slope, of both participant and country. The results revealed a significant effect of individualism, $F(1, 7.35) = 6.19, p < .04$. The greater a country's individualism score the smaller the likelihood that participants from that country will exert social control. The size of this effect is quite large, $r = .46$.

DISCUSSION

In the present paper we examined the determinants of people's reactions to uncivil behaviors in public. Comparing the responses of participants from eight countries, we were interested in the influence of prescriptive norms and descriptive norms on individuals' self-reported social control reactions. The results provided support for our hypotheses. Prescriptive normativity was strongly related to social control in that highly deviant behaviors generated more social control than less deviant behaviors (hypothesis 1a). Descriptive normativity was only indirectly related to social control. Descriptively normative (frequent) behaviors generated less social control than rare behaviors but this link disappeared entirely when the effect of prescriptive normativity (deviance) was statistically controlled for (hypothesis 3). Although no causal inferences can be drawn from correlational data, it appears that the bivariate relationship between descriptive normativity and social control is due to the fact that descriptive norms and prescriptive norms are negatively correlated (frequent behaviors are perceived to be low in deviance, hypothesis 2) and that prescriptive norms are a primary determinant of people's social control reactions. Note that the relationships between prescriptive normativity, descriptive normativity, and social control were obtained with the specific set of behaviors included in the study, i.e., uncivil behaviors. We do not know if they generalize to other types of behaviors.

The cross-cultural comparisons yielded several interesting results. First, the relationship between prescriptive normativity and social control were not moderated by country (hypothesis 4), at least not for the behaviors studied here. Countries differed in the extent to which certain behaviors were seen as prescriptively normative. For example, "a person violently kicks a soda machine" was seen as more prescriptively normative (less deviant) in the USA ($M = 5.8$) than in Spain ($M = 2.6$). Countries also differed in the extent to which certain behaviors generated social control reactions. According to participants' self-reports, "a person smoking in a public building, although signs clearly indicate that

smoking is forbidden” generates stronger disapproval reactions in Italy ($M = 6.5$) than in Germany ($M = 3.4$). Despite these differences among individual behaviors, countries were quite similar to each other with regard to the influence of prescriptive normativity on social control across a large number of behaviors: The more deviant a behavior the more people reported that they would express their disapproval to the “perpetrator” of the behavior. Given that it is always problematic to accept the null hypothesis, a more cautious conclusion might be to say that we have no indication whatsoever that the relationship between prescriptive normativity and social control is moderated by country.

Second, countries differed in their average social control rate. Inhabitants of countries such as Portugal, Spain, and Italy reported that they were more likely to express, in one way or another, their disapproval to the perpetrator of an uncivil behavior than participants from countries such as USA, England, and Germany. The multi-level analyses revealed that a country’s individualism score, as established by Hofstede (2001), was a good predictor of people’s social control reactions, over and above the effects of lower-level variables such as prescriptive normativity, age, and degree of religious practice. The more individualistic a country as a whole, the less strongly its inhabitants react to norm transgressions in public. There is no doubt that country-level variables such as Hofstede’s classification allow researchers to draw only limited conclusions about what happens in the mind of individuals and that it would have been better to ask each participant to fill out an individualism/collectivism scale. Given that such a scale was not included in the study, we can only speculate about the possible meaning of the observed differences between countries. One possible interpretation is that someone’s neighborhood is a more central element in the self-definition of an individual from a collectivistic culture than in that of an individual from an individualistic culture. When individuals from a collectivistic culture witness another person littering or drawing a graffiti in the neighborhood, they may have the impression that their self is being affected, feel personally implicated to a greater extent and, thus, be more likely to express their disapproval. For them, social control is merely an act of self-defense. Another interpretation is that individuals in collectivistic cultures attach more importance to social cohesion and the group’s well being. As a consequence, norm transgressions are more threatening to them. Individuals in individualistic cultures, however, attach greater importance to individual liberties and personal standards, and may thus feel less personally implicated when they witness an uncivil behavior. Future research is necessary to address these issues.

We report several other findings at the between-participants level that are of lesser theoretical relevance but nonetheless interesting. For example, the fact that older individuals reported that they would react more strongly to uncivil behaviors may be due to the fact that exerting social control requires psychological and emotional resources. The fact that religion and degree of religious practice were reliable predictors of self-reported social control indicates that moral standards play an important role in social control, underscoring the central role that prescriptive norms play in people’s reactions to uncivil behaviors.

According to our knowledge, the present paper is the first one to examine the link between prescriptive norms and descriptive norms across behaviors. According to focus theory (Cialdini et al., 1990; Kallgren, Reno, & Cialdini, 2000), both types of norms influence human behavior depending on which norm is currently in focus. If individuals focus on societal standards about what is right or wrong they are influenced by prescriptive norms. But if individuals focus on what most other people do, they are influenced by descriptive norms. Focus theory remains silent with regard to the relationship between descriptive and prescriptive norms. The present paper shows that descriptive normativity and prescriptive normativity are negatively related to each other in the realm of uncivil behaviors. Rare behaviors are seen as deviant whereas frequent behaviors are perceived as being relatively low in deviance. Of course, it is also possible that people engage less frequently in behaviors that the society considers deviant. According to the analyses reported above, the present results are consistent with the idea that the descriptive normativity of a behavior influences its prescriptive normativity which, in turn, influences people’s reaction to it.

Another contribution of the present research is that it provides a database on uncivil behaviors that can be used in future research. If researchers want to compare people’s real social control reactions in different countries, they may want to use behaviors that are similar in frequency and deviance across countries. If not, observed differences between countries cannot be attributed unambiguously to culture but may be due to the degree of counternormativeness of the behaviors under consideration. The current work allowed us to provide the scientific community with a list of uncivil behaviors and people’s perceptions of these behaviors in different countries (Web Page: <http://wwwpsy.univ-bpclermont.fr/~brauer/index.html>).

For reasons outlined in the introduction, we used a vignette and self-report methodology. Despite the advantage of being able to include a large number of incivilities, there is no doubt that this methodology has several disadvantages. We do not know, for example, if respondents present themselves in favorable manner or if they are accurate in predicting their own behavioral reaction. It would be interesting to confirm the present results with a series of field studies in which a

confederate of the experimenter performs the uncivil behaviors in the street and bystanders' natural reactions are measured by unobtrusive observers.

In the present paper, we examined people's self-reported reactions to uncivil behaviors, a specific form of deviance. Whereas several researchers have examined reactions to deviance in small face-to-face groups consisting of members that are in contact with each other over an extended period of time (Janis, 1982; Marques et al., 2001; Schachter, 1951), we studied reactions to deviance in public settings where the "observer" and the "perpetrator" do not know each other and probably will not see each other again after the encounter. The present studies and previous work show that a substantial proportion of observers report that they would exert social control (Chaurand & Brauer, 2008; present studies) or actually do exert social control (Brauer & Chekroun, 2005; Chekroun & Brauer, 2002) when they witness an uncivil behavior in a public setting. These findings testify to the key role that social control plays in the perpetuation of social norms that guide people's behaviors in public settings. The present research yielded important results: First, prescriptive normativity is a primary determinant of social control, whereas descriptive normativity is only indirectly related to social control, and these relationships are remarkably invariant across countries. Second, respondents in collectivistic cultures report that they would react more strongly to norm violations than people in individualistic cultures.

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