



# **The Beneficial and Unintended Consequences of False Beliefs about Norm Violation.**

## **When Is there a "Preventive Effect of Ignorance"?**

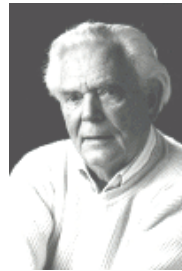
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## Outline of the Presentation

- The proposition to be discussed: Die „Präventivwirkung des Nichtwissens“ („The Preventive Effect of Ignorance“)
- How plausible is the “preventive effect of ignorance”?
- When is there a preventive effect of false and when of correct beliefs about norm compliance? A theoretical model
- Discussion of the model

# The "Preventive Effect of Ignorance" ("Die Präventivwirkung des Nichtwissens")

The subject of this presentation is a hypothesis by the German sociologist Heinrich Popitz (1925-2002).



See: Heinrich Popitz. 1968. *Über die Präventivwirkung des Nichtwissens. Dunkelziffer, Norm und Strafe*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Also included in: Popitz, Heinrich. 2006. *Soziale Normen* (hrsgg. von Wolfgang Eßbach und Friedrich Pohlmann). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

The basic idea is the following:



Assume the following situation exists.

- There **exists a norm** (i.e. there is most of the time the norm is accepted). Example: Don't jaywalk!
- The norm is **useful**.
- There is a **belief that norm violation is rare** (this is common knowledge).
- **Sanctioning** is rare.
- **Then** credible evidence is publicized that there is **actually an unexpectedly widespread norm violation**. **Norm compliance has thus been overestimated.**

## What happens in this situation? Popitz argues:

- The **norm attenuates** and will finally disappear, i.e.:
  - norm compliance (= behavior) decreases, and
  - norm acceptance (= a motivation) decreases.
- **Sanctioning costs increase** (sanctioning was low before wide-spread norm violation was publicized).

This is the "preventive effect of ignorance" ("Präventivwirkung des Nichtwissens"):

"Eine Gesellschaft, die jede Verhaltensabweichung aufdeckte, würde zugleich die Geltung ihrer Normen ruinieren." (Popitz 2006:164). Weiter besteht eine "Entlastung der Sanktionskomponente" von Normen (Popitz 2006: 170).

**Thus: Ignorance of norm violations is socially beneficial, there is a "preventive effect of ignorance."**

## Some conceptual clarifications

### What is a norm?

Norms are defined as statements claiming that something ought to or ought not be the case.

### Norm attenuation

has two meanings:

- more frequent norm violation and
- less norm acceptance

### What are “beneficial” or “harmful” consequences?

A norm has “beneficial” consequences if its existence creates positive externalities or removes negative externalities, **from the perspective of the actors** (or a subgroup of actors) **for the group** (problem – net utility of consequences ...).  
(Traffic rules: avoid accidents; Christmas gifts ...)



## How Plausible Is the “Preventive Effect of Ignorance”?

Let us look at two examples.

## **Example 1 (not in Popitz): fare evasion in subways - an illustration of the preventive effect of ignorance**

### **Initial situation (see before):**

- There exists a norm (to pay fares).
- The norm is useful.
- There is a belief that norm violation (fare evasion) is rare.
- There is rare sanctioning.
- In a next period credible evidence is publicized indicating that there is widespread norm violation. Norm compliance was thus overestimated.

### **Consequences?**

- The norm attenuates, i.e. there will be more fare evasion and lower acceptance of the norm.
- There will be more sanctioning.

**Conclusion: ignorance was beneficial (= preventive effect of ignorance).**



## Example 2 (not in Popitz): Clergy sexual abuse (2009/2010): A counter-example of the preventive effect of ignorance?

### Initial situation:

- There **exists** a norm (not to abuse children).
- The norm is **useful**.
- There is a general **belief** that norm violation (child abuse) is rare.
- There is **rare sanctioning**.
- **THEN** Credible evidence is publicized indicating that there is widespread norm violation. Norm **compliance was thus overestimated**.

### Consequences?

- The norm will not attenuate, the norm will strengthen.
- There will be **more sanctioning**.

## The example indicates:

Ignorance (i.e. overestimation of norm compliance) was **not beneficial**, it was **harmful** (suffering of victims and relatives).

**There is thus a preventive effect of correct beliefs about norm violation** in the sense that the norm would have been stronger had there been correct information about norm violation. **There is not a preventive effect of wrong beliefs about norm violation** (i.e. of overestimation of norm conformity).

# Summary: the examples compared

## Fare evasion

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- Norm exists
- Norm is useful
- Belief that violation is rare
- Rare sanctioning
- Overestimation of compliance

Leads to:

- **Norm attenuation**
- **Increase of sanctioning**
- **Preventive effect of false beliefs about (overestimation of) norm compliance**

## Child abuse

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- Norm exists
- Norm is useful
- Belief that violation is rare
- Rare sanctioning
- Overestimation of compliance

Leads to:

- **Norm strengthening**
- **Increase of sanctioning**
- **Preventive effect of correct beliefs about norm compliance**

# When Is there a Preventive Effect of False and when of Correct Beliefs about Norm Compliance? A Theoretical Model

## Scope conditions

- There exists a norm.
- There is an overestimation of compliance.
- In a next period, credible evidence is provided that norm violation is much higher than expected.

A basic assumption of the preventive effect of ignorance is:

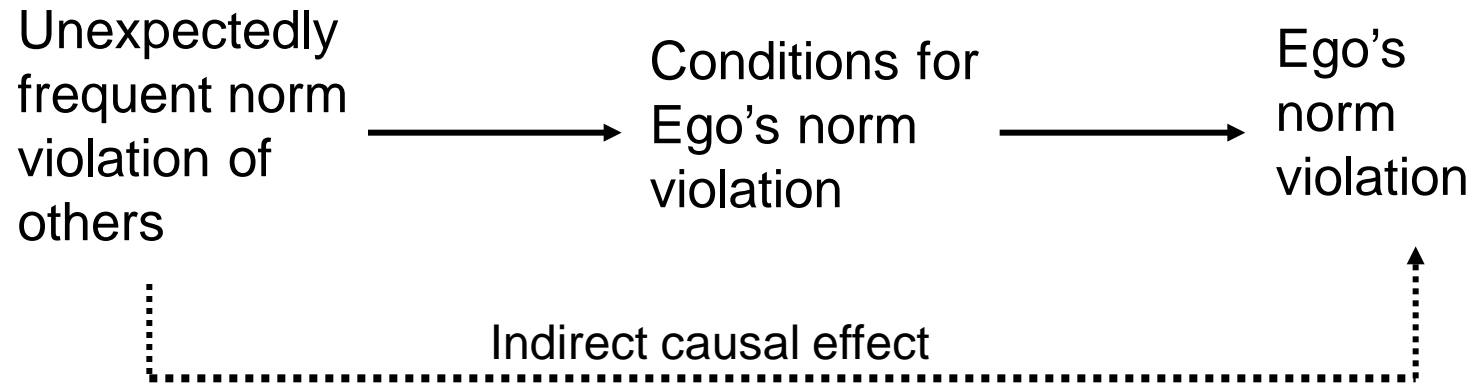
**The detection of an unexpected high frequency of norm violation by others increases norm attenuation of Ego.**

Why should it matter to Ego when more others than expected violate a norm?


**Others' behavior will only influence Ego's behavior if others' behavior changes the conditions for Ego's norm violation and norm acceptance.**

Thus, there will be an **indirect causal effect of norm violation** of others and Ego's norm attenuation.

The model thus is:



This is the implicit hypothesis in the literature.



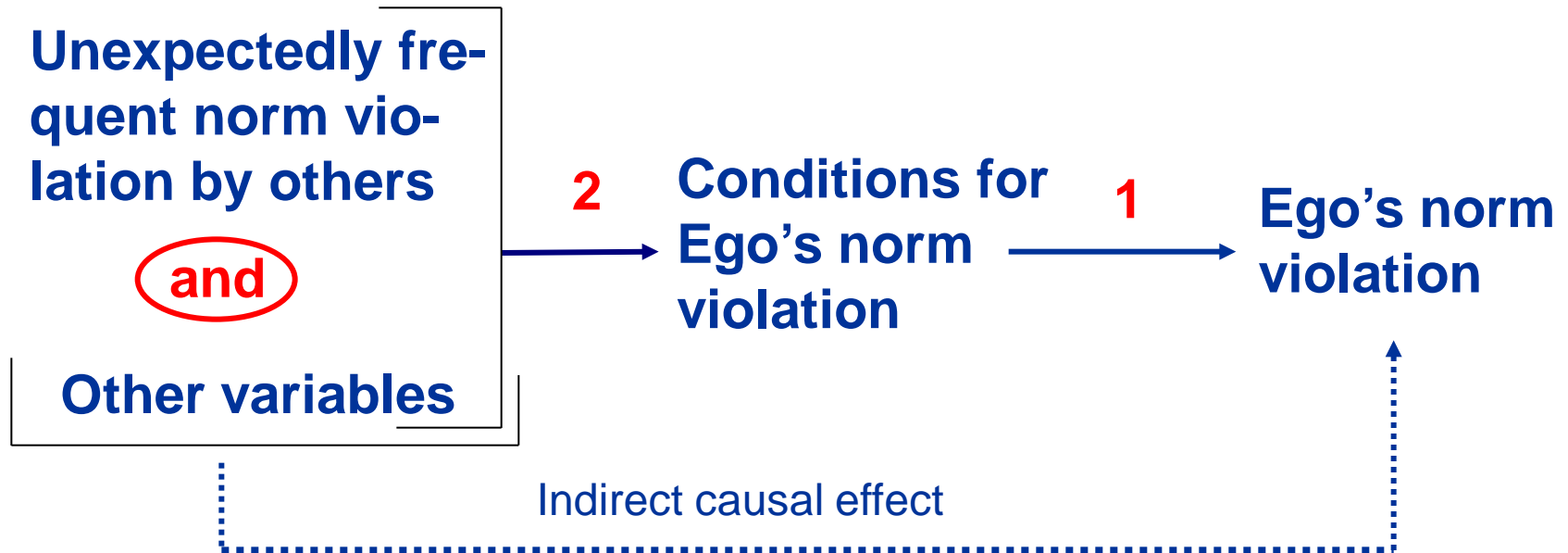
**Problem:** If the behavior of others sometimes leads to imitation by Ego and sometimes not, the question to be answered is: **under what conditions** does Ego imitate Alter?

Thus, the effects of others' behavior **depend on** the values of certain variables. In other words:

**Interaction effects must be introduced.**



## The model explaining norm attenuation must thus be modified:

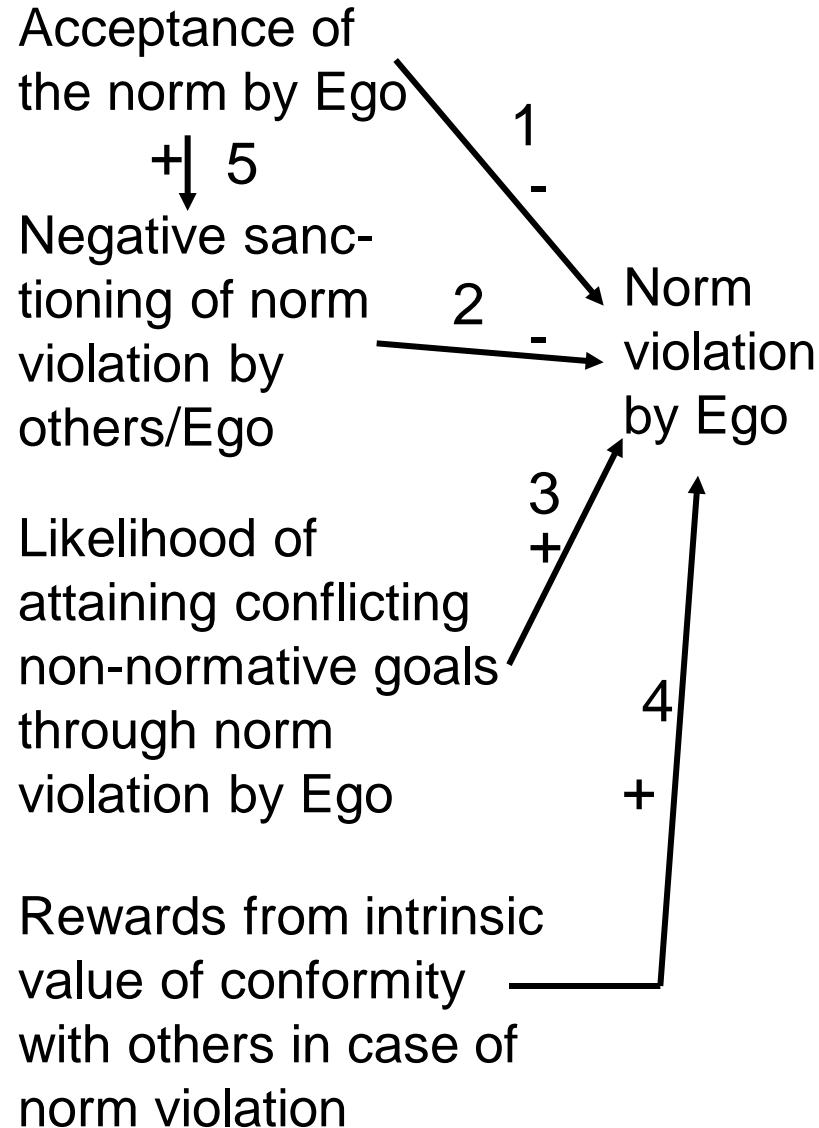


### Two questions must be answered:

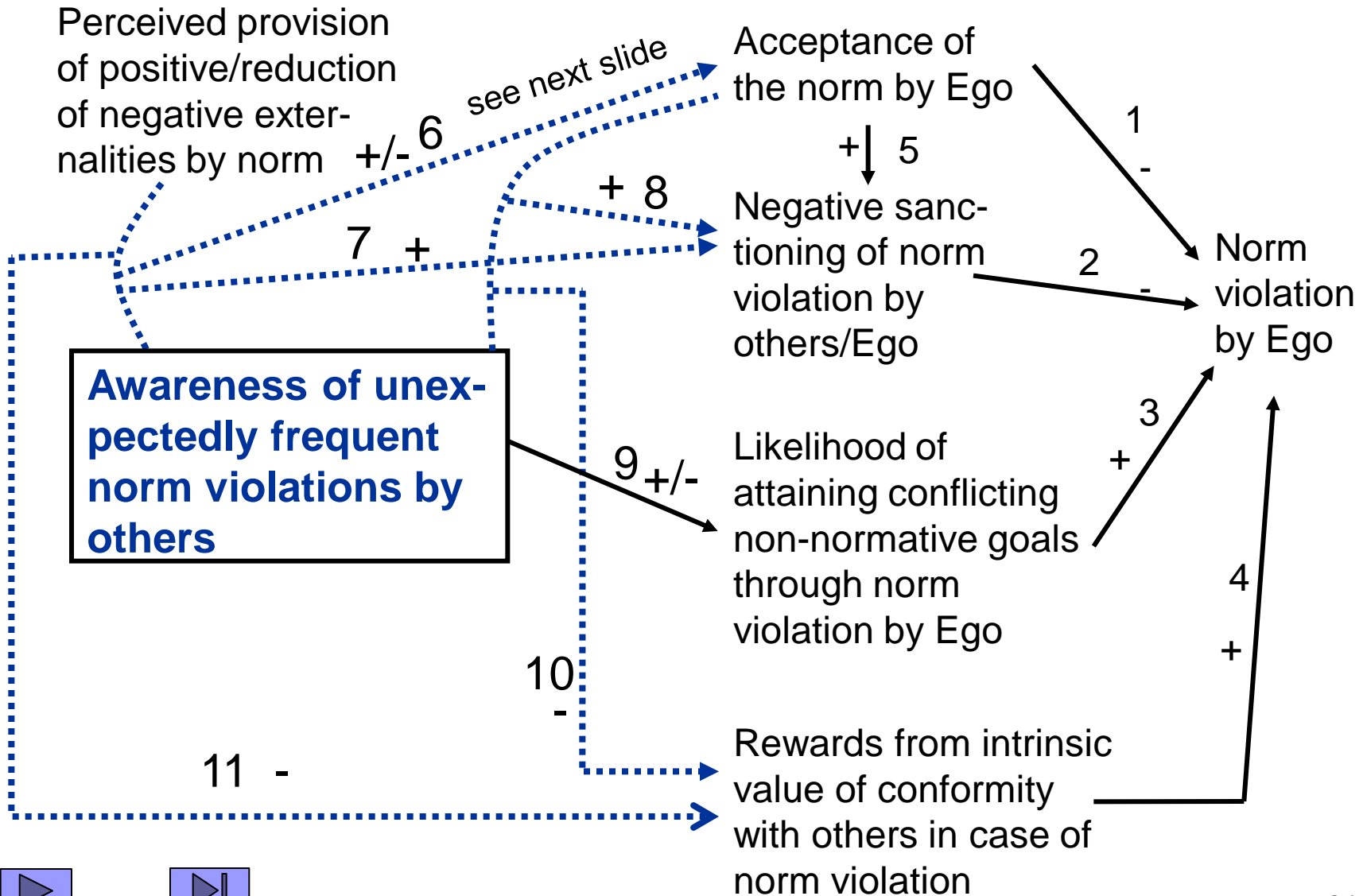
(1) What are the conditions for Ego's norm violation? See **arrow 1** in the previous diagram.

(2) What other variables affect these conditions? See **arrow 2**.

# Conditions for Norm Violation



# Effects of the Norm Violation of Others



Norm  
acceptance  
by Ego

**High** usefulness  
of the norm (do not  
abuse children)

**Low** usefulness  
of the norm (do not  
jaywalk) (= preventive effect  
of ignorance)

Frequency of unexpected  
norm violation by others

**Explanation of this effect?**  
(Signaling ... Fishbein/Ajzen)



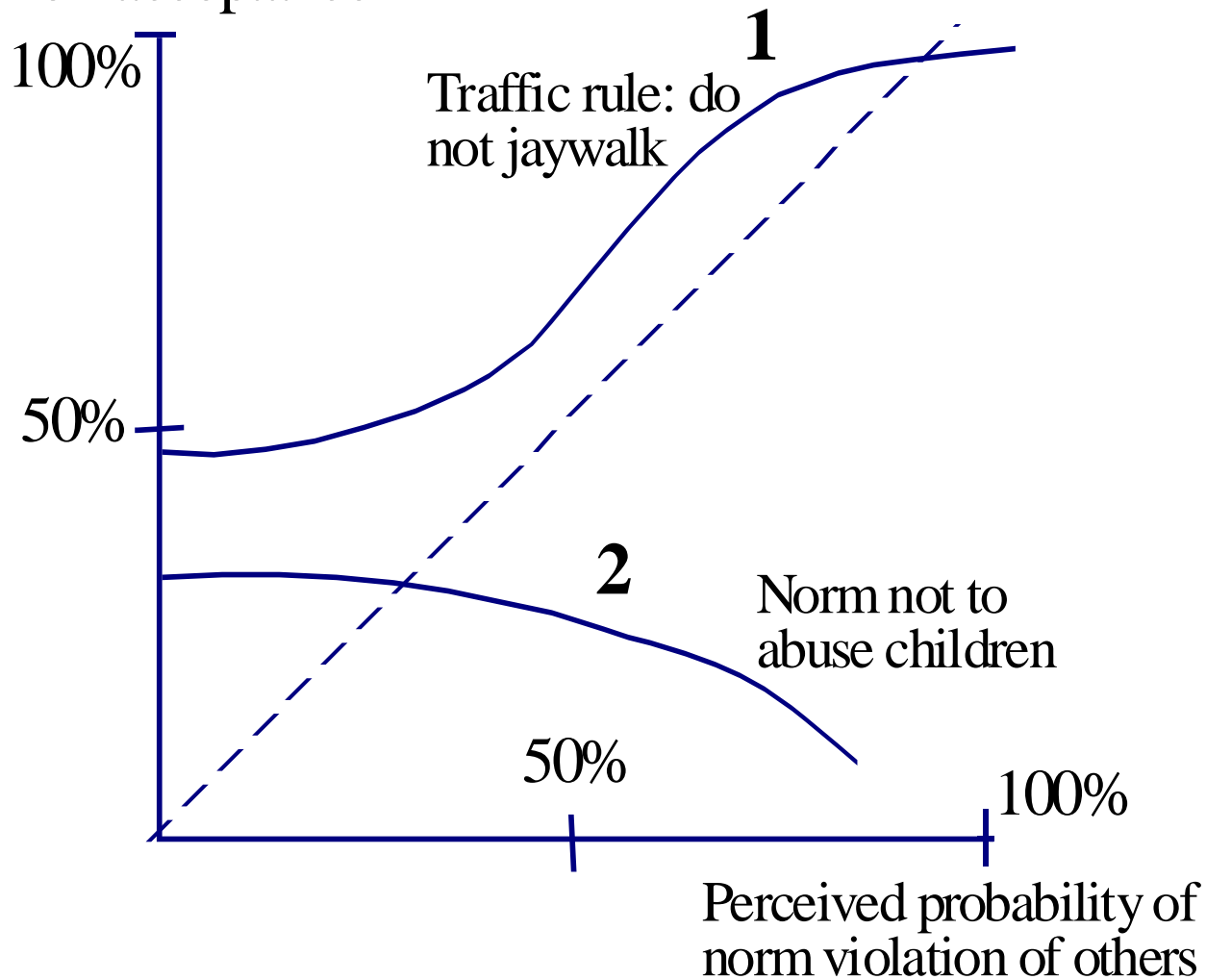


**Threshold** effects

**Cascades** of norm violation

Assume there are ***variations of norm violation***. *What are the effects on norm attenuation?* (next Figure)

# Actual norm violation and non-acceptance



## Discussion of the Model

**Does it matter for the effects of information about norm compliance whether evidence for an increased norm violation is unexpected?** (For example, there is a report in the media that the crime rate has increased – there is no expectation about the real crime rate.)

**Priming effect:** the discovery of unexpected norm violation draws attention to the specific behavior. This will set in motion cognitive processes that lead to a **clearer view of the costs and benefits** of performing the respective behavior.

The variable „**Awareness of unexpectedly frequent norm violations by others**” must be reformulated as “**Awareness of the frequency of norm violations by others**”


If there are incentive effects of the behavior of others, they will be stronger if the frequency of behavior is unexpected.



**What are the effects of an underestimation of norm compliance? (= compliance is higher than expected and not overestimated, as the “preventive effect of ignorance” assumes.)**

Example: A well-known politician in Germany (Frank-Walter Steinmeier) has donated one of his kidneys to his wife in 2010. Assume that it turned out that this happens more often than expected. What would be the effects on norms about organ donations?

Can the model be applied, if some of the variables are recoded?  
(Point for discussion!)



## What are the effects of “*ignorance*” in the sense that people do not have any estimate at all?

There is thus no „surprise“ and no expectation that is not fulfilled. A „priming effect“ does not exist.

In this case, only the number of others who violate a norm matters. The model can thus be applied. See the first point of the „Discussion.“

## Plausibility tests

Does the model hold for the following **examples** – assume always there was an overestimation of compliance to the respective norm and evidence of unexpected norm violation.

- Plagiarism of dissertations in academia (zu Guttenberg)
- Multiple publications of papers (e.g. a paper in German is published in slightly modified form in English without mentioning the German version)
- Cleaning up after one's dog
- Non-enforcement of the law against smoking in pubs
- Moonlighting in private households
- Unfaithfulness of husbands and wives
- Littering on highways.
- **“Thousands of female migrants are forced to marry each year”, according to a study by the Ministry of Family Affairs (Spiegel Online Nov. 9, 2011, see also DIE WELT 9.11.11).**

## Can the model be applied to scandals?

Scandals can be **defined** as norm violation by at least one individual that nobody had expected and that rouses moral indignation of the public.

**Examples:** sex affairs (Bill Clinton, D. Strauss-Kahn), CDU donation affair – Spendenaffaire 1999.

Examples in Wikipedia <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skandal> or <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scandal>, reports about right-wing murders over the past 10 years (recent reports November 2011).

(See: A. Adut, 2008, On Scandal, but the question whether norms that are violated may change is not posed.)

## Are other variables relevant?

- Ego's previous norm violation
- Norm violation in Ego's network
- Status of the norm violators – homeless people vs. professors who fake data.
- Other variables? **Suggestions, ideas?**  
Where in the model (slide 23) could the variables be included?

## Future theory and research

- **Experiments** are useful. Example: Diekmann, Przepiorka, and Rauhut (2011) about cheating. This should be extended with variations of experimental conditions, as in the model.
- **Factorial surveys.**
- If some scandal comes up or some unexpected norm violation (or compliance), one could explore norm changes with **surveys.**
- **Computer simulation.** For example, one could assume that effects of variables are different (such as a strong effect of norm acceptance). Question: what are the effects if norm compliance has been overestimated?



## General question:

The beneficial or harmful consequences of false beliefs of **various kinds** (e.g. about his or her own abilities) are a fascinating theme of social theory and research that is rarely addressed!



This is really the  
end of the talk!