

RUNNING HEAD: Normative Symbols and Normative Behavior

Staff, Miter, Book, Share:

How Attributes of Saint Nicholas Induce Normative Behavior

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Abstract

In three studies the hypothesis was tested that for young Dutch children, who associate Saint Nicholas with the norm to share one's wealth with others, attributes of Saint Nicholas (miter, book, and staff) would spontaneously activate the "sharing norm" and subsequent sharing behavior. The results confirmed our expectations. In two studies, young Dutch children share more candy with others after being primed with attributes of Saint Nicholas compared to being primed with a dwarf in the control condition. In a third study, children evaluate sharing more positively after being primed with attributes of Saint Nicholas, and more negatively after being primed with the Toys R Us logo, compared to being primed with a dwarf. This is the first empirical evidence that attributes of normative symbols can induce normative behavior and change norm judgments.

Keywords: social norms, normative symbols, normative behavior, norm judgments

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How Attributes of Saint Nicholas Induce Normative Behavior

Every year in mid November, a steamer from Spain docks in a Dutch harbor. The steamer brings precious cargo; Saint Nicholas, his horse, his helpers (Black Peters) and tons of gifts and candy. The arrival of Saint Nicholas's steamer is the starting signal of three highly exciting weeks (the day after the big finale of gift giving on the 5th of December, Saint Nicholas returns to Spain) for young children in the Netherlands. During these three weeks, Saint Nicholas and his helpers observe, listen and make notes in Saint Nicholas's big book about how well or how poorly everybody behaves. At nighttime Saint Nicholas rides his horse over the rooftops and his helpers drop small gifts in people's chimneys. Santa Claus, or Father Christmas, may bare similarities with the Dutch Saint Nicholas, but the moral element of the Dutch version is relatively unique. Children both fear and love Saint Nicholas because he rewards good children with presents and candy, but he punishes bad children and threatens that they may be beaten with a rod or even kidnapped and taken to Spain! Good children are well-mannered and obedient, and most importantly, they share their toys, candy and other goodies with others. The importance that Saint Nicholas attributes to sharing one's wealth with others is made explicit in the Saint Nicholas songs ("...we will share everything equally..." --translated from the Dutch) and also in his own behavior (giving gifts and candy to sweet children).

The aim of the present study is to test whether Saint Nicholas is indeed a normative symbol for the sharing norm and to explore whether mere exposure to attributes of Saint Nicholas will suffice to spontaneously induce normative behavior in children and change their evaluation of the sharing norm.

Theoretical Background

Social norms are rules of behavior that are either formal or informal, and prescribe how one should (not) behave in a given situation. They are complex cognitive structures that contain different kinds of information such as objects, environments, behaviors, and people. They typically prescribe or forbid a certain type of behavior (e.g., “do not swear”). Just like other cognitive structures, such as goals and attitudes, social norms can be primed to influence cognitions and behavior (see for example Cialdini et al., 1990; Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2003; Epley & Gilovich, 1999; Hertel & Kerr, 2001). But so far, to our best knowledge, the question whether reminders of other people, and specifically of normative symbols like Saint Nicholas, can prime social norms has been under investigated.

Ever since Cooley (1902) proposed the “looking glass self” idea, the idea that people often see themselves through the eyes of others, there has been an overwhelming amount of research that has focused on the diverse effects that the mental representation of other people or “inner audiences” may have. These mental representations of others have shown to spontaneously influence people’s goals (e.g., Shah, 2003; Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003), stereotypes (e.g., Devine, 1989), relational schema’s (Baldwin, 1992), and behavior (e.g., Bargh, Chen & Burrows, 1996; Dijksterhuis & van Knippenberg, 1998; Jonas & Sassenberg, 2006; Schubert & Häfner, 2003). For example, pop-icon Madonna’s provocative flirtations with explicit sexual behavior may induce a more laissez-faire attitude about sex in the general public, whereas mental images of the pope may influence people’s thoughts about sex more in the direction of chastity and virginity (Baldwin, 1992). Similarly, we argue, the image of Saint Nicholas and the norms he is associated with may spontaneously influence cognition and behavior in the direction of norms that are associated with Saint Nicholas. And indeed, it has been argued previously that historical figures (such

as Saint Nicholas) can remind people of the obligations (such as sharing) that one believes these figures hold for people (Moretti & Higgins, 1999). However, we know of no studies that empirically and systematically tested the assumption that people, like the pope and Saint Nicholas, may become symbols for normative conduct and accordingly influence thought and action.

Recent studies from Jonas and Sassenberg (2006) on priming response behavior seems to bear resemblance to the present research goal (priming sharing behavior). Jonas and Sassenberg (2006) used social stimuli (e.g., celebrity) to prime response behavior, that is the cognitive representation of common responses (e.g., clapping) towards a social category (e.g., a celebrity). Celebrity primed participants responded faster to words such as clapping and admiring in a word recognition task. However, in the case of Saint Nicholas and sharing, sharing is not typical response behavior towards Saint Nicholas himself. When children finally meet Saint Nicholas in person on the 5th of December, he rewards their good behavior of the past weeks with gifts and candies, and they do not have to share these rewards. Thus typical response behavior towards Saint Nicholas is “keeping”, and possibly “singing songs in celebration of Saint Nicholas”, but not “sharing”. The studies on relational schemas by Baldwin (for a review see Baldwin, 1992) bear most resemblance to the notion that (pictures of) people may act as injunctive, normative symbols. Baldwin, Carrel, and Lopez (1990) showed that catholic students rated themselves more harshly after they had been primed with a scowling picture of the pope and had read a sexually permissive fiction text. The authors argued that the picture of the pope primed a relational schema that represents typical interaction patterns between the self and the pope (e.g., the pope’s norms about sex). The activation of this schema lowered the catholic student’s self-evaluations because they felt ashamed that they had read (and

sort of enjoyed) a text about sex. The question whether such relational schema's can also influence norm-guided behavior remains unanswered, however.

In the current studies we build on Baldwin's studies (Baldwin & Holmes, 1987; Baldwin, Carrel, & Lopez, 1990) not by showing pictures of faces, but by testing whether attributes that are typical for and unique of Saint Nicholas suffice to activate the concept of Saint Nicholas and the sharing norm that is associated with him. The idea that attributes have meaning, and can function as a reminder of Saint Nicholas and the sharing norm, is supported by previous research by Kay, Wheeler, Bargh & Ross (2004). They showed that *attributes* (e.g., a briefcase and a board room table) convey meaning ("competitive") and influence people's thoughts and actions (more competitive behavior). We thus test the hypothesis that a person such as Saint Nicholas not only prime's relational schema's (Baldwin, 1992) or goals (Shah, 2003; Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003), but may also spontaneously prime normative behavior and change people's judgments about norms. Furthermore, we test our assumptions using young Dutch school children because Saint Nicholas is in their eyes a real existing person. The use of attributes, instead of faces, overcomes a drawback in Baldwin's studies (Baldwin et al., 1990; Baldwin et al., 1987) as it excludes confounding between the hypothesized normative effect of Saint Nicholas and possible normative effects of his facial expression (i.e., a scowling facial expression).

In the present studies, we investigate whether Saint Nicholas spontaneously induces sharing behavior in young Dutch school children. We assume that in the eyes of these children, Saint Nicholas is strongly associated with the sharing norm because he himself shares his gifts and candy with all the children in the country and because the children sing songs that remind them of the importance that Saint Nicholas attributes to sharing. The association between Saint Nicholas and the sharing norm

may spontaneously activate sharing behavior and change judgments about sharing, in the same way as ‘other people’ have been shown to activate stereotypes (Devine, 1989), goals (Shah, 2003; Fitzsimons et al., 2003) or behaviors (Bargh et al., 1996; Dijksterhuis & van Knippenberg, 1998). The attributes of Saint Nicholas are expected to raise the salience of the sharing norm and sharing behavior. Because salient norms are more likely to influence behavior (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990), children should be more likely to share after being primed with Saint Nicholas’s attributes.

In sum, we will test whether normative symbols can spontaneously lead to corresponding normative behavior and change norm judgments. More specifically, we will assess young children’s sharing behavior after being primed with attributes of Saint Nicholas. We will first assess in a pilot whether Saint Nicholas is a normative symbol for the sharing norm. In Study 1 we will experimentally test whether Saint Nicholas increases sharing behavior. Study 2 is a conceptual replication of Study 1. In Study 3 we will test whether Saint Nicholas primed children become less selfish and judge sharing more positively.

Pilot Test

Participants and Design. Twenty children, between 4 and 7 years of age, participated in a single-condition pilot, testing whether the children know the sharing norm and associate it with Saint Nicholas. We chose participants between 4 and 7 years of age because we expected that the effect of Saint Nicholas might be strongest for those children who truly believe in Saint Nicholas. Children who are older than 7 may not believe in Saint Nicholas any more, or experience doubts as to whether he really exists. Secondly, most children between 4 and 7 years will have developed the necessary cognitive capacities to participate in the study. They are capable of mentally representing things or people like Saint Nicholas and of taking other people’s

perspectives (e.g. other children also want candy) (Sroufe, Cooper, & DeHart, 1996; Pepitone, 1980). They understand the possession rule (e.g. sharing candy implies losing possession of candy) and can forgo an immediate reward in order to have a better reward later (e.g. share candy now, be rewarded for it by Saint Nicholas later) (Sroufe et al., 1996).

Procedure and Materials

The children had to get accustomed to the experimenter. She therefore arrived at the beginning of the day, was introduced as a new teacher and joined class activities for at least an hour. The experimenter told the children she would do a game with them and invited all children, one by one, with her in the hallway. The experimenter gave each child a bag with 10 pieces of candy and a coloring picture of a dwarf. To put the child at ease, the experimenter and the child first discussed the coloring picture for approximately half a minute. Then she would ask them whether they wanted to share their candy with children in other classes, because otherwise those children would not get any candy. The experimenter explained that they were free to decide whether they wanted to share and they were also free to decide how many candies they wanted to share. The children would leave behind the amount of candy they wanted to share (between 0 and 10) on a tray. Before the next child arrived, the experimenter removed the candy from the tray in order to avoid imitative responses. The advantage of this sharing task is that the material consequences are directly visible for the child.

Finally, to assess whether the children know the sharing norm and associate it with Saint Nicholas she asked them what Saint Nicholas would have wanted them to do with the candy. The children's responses were categorized into three categories; share my candy with other children, keep my candy, and do not know. To be able to

compare their answers we also asked what they thought their teacher and parents would have wanted them to do with the candy. Then the experimenter would thank them for participating and bring them back to their classroom.

Because our participants were very young and could not read yet, we needed an experimenter to talk them through the experiment. We tried to avoid demand-effects by standardizing the experimental procedure in a script that the experimenter had to follow to the letter. In this script we standardized every step from how the experimenter would invite each child to participate, to standard responses to questions the children may raise, until thanking them for their participation. For example, the experimenter would ask “What do you see on the coloring picture?” After the child responded (“a dwarf”), the experimenter would say “well done”.

We took several precautions to prevent the children from discussing the study with their classmates upon returning in the classroom. Firstly, the pilot was run during normal classes so that all children were busy playing and drawing. They hardly noticed other children leaving and returning with experimenter and participants immediately distracted upon returning to their classroom. Secondly, the experimenter rolled up the coloring pictures and fixed the bag with candies to it with an elastic band to prevent the children from showing it to the other children. Thirdly, the children were told to hand it all in with their teacher who would return it to them at the end of the day. And finally, the teacher was asked to distract the children whenever she would overhear them talking about the study. This proved to be necessary only once.

Results and Discussion. The results (see Table 1) show that, as we had expected, Saint Nicholas is a normative symbol and he stands for sharing. Children associate sharing mostly with Saint Nicholas, more so than with their teacher or parents¹. No less than 80 % of the children said that Saint Nicholas would want them

to share their candy with other children. Only 55% of the children said that their teacher would want them to share and only 45 % replied that their parents would want them to share their candy with other children. One girl spontaneously explained that children who share are sweet and that Saint Nicholas rewards sweet children with gifts. Based on these results it seems safe to conclude that young Dutch children associate the sharing norm with Saint Nicholas.

Study 1

The aim of this study was to test whether children share more candy with others after being primed with attributes of Saint Nicholas than after being primed with a picture of a dwarf (in the control condition).

Method

Participants and Design. Twenty children, between 4 and 7 years of age, from two small countryside schools, were assigned to either the Saint Nicholas or the dwarf condition (the first child got Saint Nicholas, the second got the dwarf, the third Saint Nicholas and so on). The experiment was conducted at the end of November, the period that all Dutch children suffer from “Saint Nicholas fever”. This ensured us that even the four-year olds would have a clear concept of Saint Nicholas by that time.

Procedure and Materials. The procedure and script was the same as that of the pilot test. The only difference is that, after discussing the coloring picture with the experimenter and the sharing task, the experiment was over. The children did not have to answer questions about whether their parents would like them to share. The experimenter could not be blind to conditions in this study.

Results and Discussion.

An analysis of variance on the mean number of shared candies with gender, school and coloring picture as factors revealed that coloring picture influenced the

data significantly ($F(1,12) = 5.94, p < .04$), but gender ($F(1, 12) = 1.06, p = .32$) and school ($F < 1$) did not and will therefore not be discussed further. To test our hypothesis that children share more candy with others after being primed with attributes of Saint Nicholas than with a dwarf, we performed a t-test on the mean number of shared candy. The result confirmed our expectation. The children shared more pieces of candy after they were given a coloring picture depicting Saint Nicholas attributes ($M = 2.72, SD = 2.9$) than when they were given a picture of a dwarf ($M = 0, SD = 0$) $t(10) = 3.12, p < .02$, in which case they kept all the candy to themselves.

These results show that attributes of Saint Nicholas indeed spontaneously lead to sharing behavior in young Dutch children. We feel confident that Saint Nicholas's attributes sufficed to activate the concept of Saint Nicholas, especially because two children spontaneously reported seeing Saint Nicholas upon seeing his attributes. Nevertheless, we would feel more confident in the validity if this result proves to be replicable. City children may provide a stricter testing condition for our hypothesis and the robustness of the Saint Nicholas effect. Dutch people in the cities are, compared to people living in the countryside, subjected more to a heterogeneous and less traditional living environment. The adults are usually higher educated (Steenbekkers, Simon & Veldheer, 2006) and tend to raise their children less conformism oriented, but more autonomy oriented (Herweijer & Vogels, 2004). If city children are less conformist, they may be less sensitive to normative influences such as Saint Nicholas's attributes. However, we expect to replicate the results of Study 1 that attributes of Saint Nicholas spontaneously lead to more sharing in city children as well.

Study 2

Method

Participants and Design. Twenty-seven children of a school in the city of Groningen, between 4 and 7 years of age, were assigned to either the Saint Nicholas or the dwarf condition. Study 2 was run two days after Study 1.

Procedure and Material. The procedure and materials were exactly similar to that of Study 1.

Results and Discussion. We tested our expectation that city children, just like countryside children, share more candy with others after being primed with attributes of Saint Nicholas compared to being primed with a dwarf. We performed a t-test on the mean number of pieces of candy shared to test our expectation. As we had expected, the pattern of effects replicate that of Study 1. The children shared more candy after being primed with attributes of Saint Nicholas ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 2.9$) than when they were primed with a dwarf ($M = 1.69$, $SD = 1.89$) $t(25) = 2.89$, $p < .01$. Thus, seeing attributes of Saint Nicholas spontaneously leads to more sharing behavior in young Dutch children, whether they live in the countryside or in the (less conformist) city.

Because Saint Nicholas rewards the sweet (sharing) children, one may wonder whether Saint Nicholas truly primed the sharing norm and whether the sharing behavior was in fact normatively motivated. Could the children have shared their candy out of greediness? Sharing out of greed sounds counterintuitive, but it is not when you realize that in the long run Saint Nicholas might reward your kind sharing act with even more candy or gifts. In fact, many Dutch people complain (on the radio, television and weblogs) that the Saint Nicholas tradition has become too commercial and that it makes children greedy and spoiled. To address the issue whether Saint Nicholas primes the sharing norm or greediness, we will assess in Study 3 whether reminders of Saint Nicholas change children's evaluation of the sharing norm when

they have nothing to lose or gain by their answers. Therefore, in Study 3 the children do not get candy and Study 3 will be executed in May, five months after Saint Nicholas has left the country. After Saint Nicholas has returned to Spain, he cannot see or reward the children for their good manners. Saint Nicholas and his helpers are only able to observe and spy on children in the three weeks before December 5th, when they are physically present in the country. And in May, Saint Nicholas is not as salient as he was in the winter when for example streets and shops are decorated with his image and Saint Nicholas has his own daily news broadcast on national television.

If there is truth in the alternative explanation that Saint Nicholas primes greediness (but not the sharing norm), children will evaluate sharing more negatively after being primed with Saint Nicholas. But if Saint Nicholas really primes the norm to share, as we expect him to do, children will evaluate sharing more positively after being primed with Saint Nicholas. We do not expect Saint Nicholas to prime greediness, but a reminder of a toy store (such as the logo of Toys R Us) may have such a materialistic effect on children. For reasons of comparison, we include a coloring picture with the Toys R Us logo in Study 3.

Study 3

Method

Participants and Design. The teacher of a small-town school in Goirle selected 61 children who had, in the teacher's opinion, the linguistic skills to participate in this study. The children varied in age between 5 and 7 years (29 girls and 32 boys). They were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions (coloring picture: attributes of Saint Nicholas, dwarf, Toys R Us). The experiment was conducted in April, five months after Saint Nicholas had left the country.

Procedure and Material. The same materials, script and similar procedure as that of the previous studies was used again. The coloring picture of Toys R Us showed the logo of the store and a doll. Even though not all participants could read, they had no difficulties recognizing the logo.

Different than in the previous studies the experimenter only gave the children a coloring picture but no candy and consequently no sharing task. Another difference is that after discussing the coloring picture with the experimenter they were asked to answer three questions on four-point Likert type scales. The three questions assess whether the children's evaluation of the sharing norm changes as a result of our manipulations. The first question was "How nice is it to share things with others?" the second "What is it like to get a lot of gifts while others get nothing?" (both; 1 = very bad, 4 = very nice, reverse coded for the latter question), and the third and final question "How good is it to share things with others?" (1 = very bad, 4 = very good). Then the children were thanked for participating and returned to their classrooms.

Results and Discussion.

We first summed the score of the three questions into one scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$) with low means indicating more negative evaluations and high means indicating more positive evaluations of the sharing norm (see Table 2). Next, we tested our hypotheses that, Saint Nicholas, even when he is not in the country, primes the sharing norm in such a way that children evaluate sharing more positively, whereas Toys R us changes children's evaluation of sharing in a negative direction, compared to the control condition. We conducted an Analysis of Variance with coloring picture and gender as factors, and age as a covariate on the norm evaluations. Gender and age will not be discussed further as they did not significantly influence the results ($ps > .14$). Coloring picture significantly influenced children's evaluations

of the sharing norm $F(2, 54) = 13.24, p < .01$. Contrast test revealed the expected pattern of effects (see Table 2). Compared to the control (dwarf) condition ($M = 2.67, SD = 0.47$), children's evaluations of the sharing norm became significantly more positive in the Saint Nicholas condition ($M = 3.19, SD = 0.74, t(58) = -2.26, p < .03$) and significantly more negative in the Toys R Us condition ($M = 2.05, SD = 0.79, t(58) = 2.8, p < .01$). These results show that reminders of Saint Nicholas, even when he is not in the country and cannot reward the children for their good behavior, indeed prime the sharing norm, and not greediness. Children become greedier after being reminded of Toys R Us.

General Discussion

One may think that traditions like the Dutch Saint Nicholas tradition makes children materialistic, greedy, and less likely to share with others as they are spoiled with gifts and candy. However, our results clearly show that children in The Netherlands still associate Saint Nicholas with “sharing with others” rather than with “receiving” or “keeping for myself”.

The goal of the present studies was to explore whether *attributes*, features associated with a well-known figure, may be *sufficient* to prime a norm and spontaneously induce the normative behavior this person is associated with and change norm judgments. We first established in a pilot test that young Dutch children associate Saint Nicholas with the sharing norm. Then we tested whether attributes of Saint Nicholas were strong-enough symbols to spontaneously prime sharing behavior in these children (Studies 1 and 2) and change their evaluation of the sharing norm (Study 3) even in May when Saint Nicholas is less salient and cannot reward them for their positive evaluation of the sharing norm. The results confirmed our expectations. As we had expected, attributes of Saint Nicholas (miter, staff, and book)

spontaneously induced sharing behavior. And even in May when Saint Nicholas is not as salient as in December, when he is not in the country and cannot hear their pro-sharing answers, attributes of Saint Nicholas made children's evaluations of sharing more positive. Saint Nicholas clearly did not make the children greedier but a reminder of a toy store did. In the back of children's minds Saint Nicholas may be a "private audience" and function as a normative standard for their behavior. But the "real" Saint Nicholas cannot hear them and cannot sanction their behavior when he is not in the country. The fact that attributes of a normative symbol like Saint Nicholas has norm inducing effects in three different studies on behavior and judgment measures, and with children from the countryside and the city, increases our confidence in the (ecological) validity of the results.

It is important to note that these findings support and extend previous studies on inner audiences and on social norms (see e.g., Baldwin, 1992; Cooley, 1902) (Hertel & Kerr, 2001; Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2003; Cialdini et al., 1990; Epley & Gilovich, 1999). Not only do these results illustrate that an inner audience like Saint Nicholas may have a normative meaning, but they also show that inner audiences may spontaneously induce normative behavior and change people's evaluations of normative behavior. Furthermore, the attributes that are uniquely associated with an inner audience like Saint Nicholas are strong enough to lead to the relevant behavior and change norm judgments. Interestingly, for research on normative behavior and social influence techniques designed to induce normative behavior, these results suggest that priming "norm-associated attributes" or "norm-associated people" may be an effective new way to raise the salience of norms and evoke normative behavior.

In most social psychological experiments the participants are adults. For our specific research question, we needed young children who believe that Saint Nicholas

is a real person. As a consequence, we had to adjust our methods to our participant's abilities and the experimenter could not be blind to the experimental conditions. To avoid experimenter-demand effects, the experiments were completely standardized in a script that the experimenter had to follow to the letter.

Significant others, such as family members, friends, and Saint Nicholas, are pre-eminently the people that influence us and teach us what is good and what is bad, and what the social norms are in our society. It therefore only seems logical that certain people become normative symbols that may spontaneously influence people's thoughts and behavior. The current studies show that these human normative symbols may even be so strong that a picture of the attributes associated with them suffices to activate the appropriate behavior. Give Dutch children a coloring picture depicting the attributes of Saint Nicholas' (a book, miter, and a staff) and they will give away more of their candy. Thus, these studies underscore the importance of further exploring the effects of such normative symbols on people's thoughts and behavior.

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Foot note

1) As far as we know, there is currently no statistical analysis to test whether the sharing goal is significantly more associated with Saint Nicholas than to parents and teachers. For example, a chi square test with this data is impossible because we would violate the assumption that each participant only contributes to one cell, which is clearly not the case with our within-subject data.

Table 1

Children's categorized responses (%) to the questions whether they believed that Saint Nicholas, their teacher and their parents would have wanted them to do with the candy.

	Saint Nicholas	Teacher	Parents
Share candy	80	55	45
Keep candy	15	25	20
Do not know	5	20	35

Table 2

Mean (SD) Evaluations of the Sharing Norm as a Function of Coloring Picture

	Coloring picture		
	Toys R Us	Dwarf	Saint Nicholas
Norm	2.05 ^a	2.67	3.19 ^a
Evaluations	(0.79)	(0.47)	(0.74)

Note. Means with superscript ^a differ significantly from dwarf condition with at least $p < .03$