

PhD Theses defended in 2018

January

On January 30, 2018 **Eftychia Stamkou** successfully defended the PhD thesis entitled "The dynamic nature of social hierarchies: The role of norm violations and hierarchical concerns" at University of Amsterdam (UvA).

Promotors

prof. dr. Gerben A. Van Kleef

prof. dr. Astrid C. Homan

Summary

Social hierarchy is a fundamental feature of social relations (Fiske, 1992; Sapolsky, 2005). Hierarchies are appealing psychologically because they clarify roles and facilitate group functioning, which explains why they tend to be reinforced and perpetuated (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Hierarchies, however, can also become unstable and eventually undergo change because people are motivated to compete for a higher rank and the benefits that come with it (Anderson et al., 2012, 2015; Brief et al., 2001; Leavitt, 2005; Tannenbaum et al., 1974). This begs the question of how one ascends the hierarchy. One may demonstrate skills to gain prestige, but one may also attempt to climb the ladder through the demonstration of dominance displays, such as norm-violating behavior (Cheng et al., 2013; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Van Kleef, Homan, Finkenauer, Gündemir, & Stamkou, 2011). Norm violations, however, create irregularities and may instigate a status quo change depending on how people respond to them (Friesen et al., 2014).

So how do people's responses to norm violations influence the transgressor's potential to climb the ladder? Previous research is inconclusive: Norm violators obstruct group functioning, which decreases their possibility to be supported in higher ranks of the hierarchy, but they also seem powerful in the eyes of others, which enhances their chances to be supported (Van Kleef et al., 2015). To shed more light on these contradictory findings, we proposed that people's responses to norm violators depend on the context and we examined this idea in four empirical chapters. More specifically, we studied the cultural context where a particular norm violation occurs (Chapter 2), the leeway of the domain in which a norm violation is evaluated (Chapter 3), and the involvement of the observer's self-interest (Chapter 4). Our studies suggested that people's concerns about their own position in the hierarchy (i.e., hierarchical concerns) are crucial in understanding their responses to a norm violator, since the violator's behavior threatens the established status quo and may subsequently alter their position. We therefore expected that hierarchical concerns may also shape people's attention to other information that signals a threat to their position, such as emotions that have informative value in the context of a hierarchical struggle (Chapter 5).

February

On February 16, 2018 **Nils Köbis** successfully defended the PhD thesis entitled "The Social Psychology of Corruption" at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

Promotor

prof.dr. P.A.M. Van Lange

Co-promotors

dr. J.W. van Prooijen

dr. F. Righetti

Summary

Corruption has enormous detrimental consequences for people around the world. Reducing it requires evidence-based policies. Although a rich and diverse literature from various disciplines such as economics, political science and sociology exists that mostly looks at corruption on the macro level, social psychological research studying the micro-determinants of corrupt behavior is almost non-existent. In the quest to fill that gap, this dissertation makes theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions:

Theoretical: A theoretical chapter discusses the definition of corruption and introduces a new conceptual framework that models the decision to engage in corruption as a social dilemma. It distinguishes two types of corruption dilemmas: individual (e.g. embezzlement) and interpersonal corruption (e.g. bribery), both entailing different, at times even opposing, social psychological mechanisms.

Methodological. As a novel behavioral paradigm, the dissertation presents a corruption game that models a typical bribery transaction. The game allows experimental research into the situational, social, and personal factors that shape corrupt behaviour.

Empirical. The empirical contributions are summarized in three empirical chapters. First, three studies using the corruption game illustrate that the perception of what others do (descriptive norms) and not necessarily what is considered acceptable (injunctive norms) drives corrupt behavior: "I bribe because others are doing it too, even though I know it is wrong". Second, two experiments show that the physical presence of a (non-punishing) other person reduces unethical behavior in general and corruption in particular – even when the other person is a friend or can co-benefit from the unethical behavior. Third, four experiments are reported that examine how corrupt behavior unfolds over time. The results challenge the popular explanation of how severe corruption emerges, namely the slippery-slope metaphor postulating that corruption occurs gradually. Instead the results revealed a higher likelihood of severe corruption when participants were directly given the opportunity to engage in it (abrupt) compared with when they had previously engaged in minor forms of corruption (gradual). Neither the size of the payoffs, which we kept constant, nor evaluations of the actions could account for these differences. At times the road to severe corruption is not a slippery slope but a steep cliff.

The dissertation concludes with a General Discussion that embeds these contributions in a bigger context, asking: what are the novel insights gained? How can they help to curb corruption? And what are avenues for future research into social psychological factors of corruption?

March

On March 16, 2018 **Mike Keesman** successfully defended the PhD thesis entitled "Observing the mind instead of acting on it: How mindfulness empowers people to live healthily" at Utrecht University.

Promotors

Prof.dr. Henk Aarts
Prof.dr. Michael Häfner
dr. Esther K. Papies

Summary

While much research suggests that mindfulness reduces cravings and other reactivity to energy-dense products, less is known about how mindfulness exactly works. In this dissertation, I took two steps to examine how mindfulness might operate on appetitive reactivity. First, I focused on the role of the mind in inducing appetitive reactivity, such as salivation and cravings; and second, I scrutinized the active component of mindfulness that can bring about changes in appetitive reactivity. If we can reduce reactivity to energy-dense products, this might offer people a window of opportunity to act in line with their conscious reflections and intentions, such as that of eating healthily.

Overall, the research conducted and reviewed for this dissertation suggests that simulations and mental imagery play a key role in inducing appetitive reactivity. In one of the experiments, we for instance found that imagining the consumption of an energy-dense snack increased salivation. The research conducted and reviewed for this dissertation further suggests that the decentering component of mindfulness, i.e. the meta-cognitive insight that all experiences are impermanent, is key in making simulations and imagery less compelling. Decentering thereby reduces the extent to which simulations and imagery induce reactivity such as salivation and cravings to consume. This decentering can be taught to meditation-naïve people within 3 to 15 minutes, and people can then engage in decentering towards novel stimuli. By providing an account of how decentering works to reduce appetitive reactivity, and by providing a brief decentering training, the current dissertation makes this active component of mindfulness accessible to researchers, and to psychologists who wish to complement existing lifestyle interventions with decentering. In sum, the research of this dissertation highlights the working mechanism and potential application of decentering as a mind-tool to empower people to live healthily in a world full of temptations.

On March 29, 2018 **Miriam Oostinga** successfully defended the PhD thesis entitled "Breaking (the) ice: Communication error management in law enforcement interactions" at University of Twente.

Promotors

Prof. dr. Ellen Giebels (University of Twente),
Prof. Dr. Paul J. Taylor (Lancaster University)

Summary

Over the last two decades the focus of research has been on what should be said and done in suspect interviews and crisis negotiations to make the suspect cooperate. Less is known, however, about what happens when a law enforcement officer says something in error. The goal of this doctoral thesis is, therefore, to 1) describe the type of errors made as well as the follow-up responses used by law enforcement officers, 2) understand the impact of errors on the suspect (the error receiver), but also on the law enforcement officers themselves (the error sender), and 3) determine the relative effectiveness of various kinds of responses. By doing this, this thesis creates the groundwork for error research within this and related domains on which future research can build. Next to that, this research can be used by practitioners to provide some initial guidance for when this situation occurs. Overall, communication errors appear to have positive and negative effects, but it is the following response that may incline law enforcement officers to break (the) ice.

On March 29, 2018 **Wieke Scholten** successfully defended the PhD thesis entitled "Banking on Team Ethics: A team climate perspective on root causes of misconduct in financial services" at Leiden University.

Promotor

Prof.dr. Naomi Ellemers

Summary

This book provides insights and tools for managers and in- and external supervisors within financial services that help to define and assess team climates in order to prevent future misconduct. There is by now broad consensus that cultural and behavioural changes are needed in banking in order to prevent future unethical behaviour. Applying social psychological insights about team conditions that invite unethical behaviour at work, can help understand and improve current work practices in financial services.

There is much to win by addressing dysfunctional team practices, as a way to prevent future misconduct. I argue that the current response to misconduct from banks and financial supervisors is insufficiently effective and that team climates are a blind spot for banks and financial supervisors. In this book I aimed to provide a practical approach to analyse team climate as an internal or external supervisor. I present the 'Corrupting Barrels' model that can be used to characterize teams within the same organization on the three 'aspects that facilitate unethical behaviour: ineffective error approach, outcome inequality and dysfunctional moral climate. By combining desk research, team observations, and interviews in a deep dive review, it is possible to effectively define team climates, identify meaningful differences in these team climate characteristics that are known precursors of organizational misbehavior. The Corrupting Barrels survey that is a less labour intensive way to provide a first impression of team climate characteristics. Although the use of the survey for my analysis revealed that the instrument can be perfected and its predictive value needs improvement, the first step in developing and conducting the survey is taken successfully. So, the data I presented from the deep dive review and survey attest to the validity of my analysis and suggests possible ways of taking up a practical approach in preventing misconduct by defining and assessing team climates.

The analysis provided is based on data gathered while the author worked as a senior supervisory officer of behavior and culture in the financial industry (at the Dutch central bank, DNB) and provides illustrative examples (quotes) from interviews with board members, senior managers and traders within large European banks.

April

On April 5, 2018 **Marije Bakker** successfully defended the PhD thesis entitled "Turning Crisis into Opportunity: the Influence of the Government and the Social environment" at University of Twente.

Promotor

Prof. dr. José Kerstholt (TNO & University of Twente), Prof. dr. Ellen Giebels (University of Twente), dr. Marco van Bommel (University of Twente)

Summary

The main research goal of this doctoral thesis was to investigate to what extent risk- and crisis communication from the government, accountability for a crisis, and information from the social environment influence how citizens deal with a crisis. First, the government can provide courses of action in risk- and crisis communication. The question would be whether citizens are willing to follow up these courses of action. Whether citizens are willing to do so also depends on the quality of the relationship between citizens and the government. When citizens, for example, have less trust in the government, they will be less inclined to follow the governmental advice. Second, who or what is held accountable for the crisis can also affect citizens' behavior and perceptions. For example, when the government is held accountable, it may have a negative effect on the relationship between citizens and the government, possibly resulting in less willingness to follow up the advice. Third, narratives and (online) reactions from peers can also influence behavior during a crisis. The information received from peers may not only affect how citizens deal with the crisis, but it may also affect the perceptions of citizens towards their peers. When the reactions from peers are all different during a crisis, this may lead to less trust in their peers. Based on this doctoral thesis we can conclude that in general citizens are willing to act during a crisis: they are willing to help others and are willing to take actions to protect themselves against the consequences of a crisis. The government can stimulate citizens to act in an adequate way during a crisis by providing risk- and crisis information with courses of action. Whether the government is held accountable for the crisis makes no difference for citizens' willingness to take actions. Depending on the context, the influence of the social environment can be both positive and negative for the self-reliant behavior of citizens.

May

On May 9, 2018 **Xia Fang** successfully defended the PhD thesis entitled "Perceiving and Producing Facial Expressions of Emotion: The Role of Dynamic Expressions and Culture" at University of Amsterdam.

Promotors

Gerben A. van Kleef

Disa A. Sauter

Summary

We spend much of our waking lives interacting with other people, reading their facial expressions to figure out what they might be feeling, thinking, or intending to do next (Ekman 1994; Fridlund 1994). At the same time, we also express our own feelings, thoughts, and intentions through facial expressions. Knowing how to read and express emotional facial expressions is not always easy, and it may become particularly challenging when interacting with people from other cultures (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002; Elfenbein & Ambady, 2003; Elfenbein, Beaupré, Lévesque, & Hess, 2007). The goal of the present dissertation was to shed more light on the two processes of emotion communication—expression and perception/inference—with a primary focus on the roles of dynamic expressions and cultural frame in emotion communication. The empirical work presented here highlights that (a) people from different cultures differ in the specificity of emotion communication (i.e., Westerners are more specific than Easterners in both perception and production of facial expressions of emotion), (b) people from different cultures differ in the interpretation of positive emotions (i.e., the interpretation of a smile depends on its intensity and cultural context), and (c) people infer others' personality traits based on their perception of dynamic facial expressions (i.e., people weigh the end emotion more heavily than the start emotion in dynamic facial expressions). While the current work answers some important questions, many questions remain and new ones emerge. It is my hope that this dissertation might stimulate future work that extends these findings.

On May 24, 2018 **Mariko Visserman** successfully defended the PhD thesis entitled "The Art of Sacrifice: Self-Other Dilemmas, Biased Perceptions, and the Emergence of Gratitude." at Free University, Amsterdam.

Promotor

Prof. Paul A.M. van Lange

Co-promotor

Dr. Francesca Righetti

Summary

Romantic couples inevitably encounter situations in which their preferences diverge, which may call for one of them—or both—to sacrifice their own self-interest and invest in the relationship instead. The present dissertation aimed to uncover (a) how couples navigate these self-other dilemmas, (b) how partners perceive and appraise each other's sacrifices, and (c) how sacrifices affect gratitude. To investigate these questions from a dyadic perspective, we conducted intensive bi-hourly and daily experience sampling studies of romantic couples, and couples' conversations about sacrifice in the laboratory, in the Netherlands and the United States. Additionally, we also provided some experimental support for our findings obtained from these highly ecologically valid methods. Moreover, we employed advanced analysis techniques (i.e., quasi-signal detection analysis, Truth and Bias modeling) to assess these questions in couples' daily lives.

Based on our findings from four empirical chapters, we conclude that there may be an art to sacrifice. First, our findings demonstrated the importance of optimally balancing one's dedication to both personal and relationship concerns, and importantly, the role of self-control (i.e., the ability to behave in a goal-directed manner) in providing the ability to successfully deal with this inevitable challenge. Second, our findings suggest that there may be an art to "seeing" partners' sacrifices. People miss many of their partner's sacrifices and are only "somewhat" accurate in perceiving their partner's costs for sacrifice. Moreover, people "see" sacrifices that are not there, and overestimate the costly experience of partners' sacrifices. These findings illustrate romantic partners' biased construction of their "own realities" in their lives together. Third, our findings showed that the essential experience of gratitude emerges under two conditions: (a) when people—accurately or inaccurately—believe their partner to have sacrificed, and (b) when they attribute altruistic intentions to guide their partner's decision to sacrifice (i.e., perceiving their partner's motives to be free from self-interest). However, failing to see partners' costly investments fails to elicit gratitude, and ultimately fails to cultivate a high quality relationship. Together, these findings illustrate the power that perception holds in romantic couples' daily lives.

While research on sacrifice is still young, with the present dissertation we hope to have provided comprehensive insights into how couples can optimally deal with the inevitable conflicts of interests in their daily lives. Ultimately, with these insights, we aim to have contributed to a greater understanding of individuals' happiness and the well-being and thriving of relationships.

June

On June 21, 2018 **Bibiana Armenta Gutierrez** successfully defended the PhD thesis entitled "Stepping into old age. A dynamic perspective on age identity change in the transition from midlife to older adulthood".

Promotor

Prof. S. Scheibe, Dr. K. Stroebe, Prof. N. W. Van Yperen, Prof. T. T. Postmes

Summary

Getting older, and the identity transition that comes with it, can be a challenging experience but can also bring new opportunities. Amidst the ongoing global phenomenon of population aging, this dissertation examines processes that affect the well-being of adults who are stepping into old age. In particular, four studies examine how a new identity as an older adult is shaped and in turn shapes the well-being of adults between 50 to 70 years of age. The studies focus on two components of age identity: (1) How old adults subjectively feel, and (2) how identified or connected they feel with their age group. In general, results show that when facing a negative age-related experience, feeling younger may be beneficial while identifying with one's age group may be detrimental for older adults' well-being, at least in the short term.

The role that a new older-age identity plays can vary substantially between people. To better understand this variability, the present dissertation also advances an important predictor of identity formation: the perceived permeability of one's group boundaries—i.e. to what extent people see a possibility to leave the group and join a different group. A tool to measure permeability of the group of older adults, as well as other social groups, is developed. The new measurement tool can be used to predict not only how much people identify with a particular social group, but also how much people are willing to engage in behaviors aimed at escaping from, or protecting that identity.

September

On September 7, 2018 **Caroline Schlinkert** successfully defended the PhD thesis entitled "Minding the body: The role of rumination and stress in embodied information processing" at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

Promotors

Sander L. Koole, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Co-promotor

Nicola Baumann, University of Trier, Germany

Summary

Virtually everyone ruminates at least once in a while. However, some people ruminate more than others. Prior research has mostly focused on the cognitive aspects of rumination, even though rumination is associated with a wide variety of physical health complaints, hypertension, pain, and chronic fatigue. It thus seems important to ask whether and how rumination shapes the way people process their internal, bodily states. This general question is addressed in my dissertation. Specifically, my dissertation examined how various forms of stress may lead ruminators to become alienated from their own body. The results showed that under mild stress people higher in rumination reported more consciousness towards bodily signals and they were also better at detecting their own heartbeat. However, under low stress conditions, no association emerged between rumination and these two forms of body signal perception. Further, the results revealed that stress, as operationalized here by inhibitory control, disrupted healthy regulation of appetite for food among people higher in rumination. Though, this kind of stress did not disrupt healthy appetite regulation among people lower in rumination. Furthermore, the results showed that more stressful life experiences were associated with a drop in body vitality only among people higher in rumination. People lower in rumination were not affected by the body-vitality draining effects of life stress. Inducing mild stress likewise resulted in lower body vitality experiences among ruminators, compared to non-ruminators. Given that rumination is treated as a personality variable in my dissertation, I also took a step to theoretically compare the two personality theories self-determination theory and personality systems interaction theory. The two theories share the idea that personal growth should be seen as a whole systems process that takes into account mind, body and environmental information. Finally, I propose in my conclusion that the present findings may fit together in a more general psychosomatic model of rumination and coping with stress. According to this model, chronic ruminators cope with stress through psychosomatic processes that alternate between mobilization and minimization. Mobilization coping is characterized by heightened vigilance for internal body signals such as heartbeat and inhibition of bodily needs like hunger. Minimization coping is characterized by fatigue and physiological blunting, along with avoidance behavior such as over-eating and self-injury. Over time, mobilization-minimization alternation increases psychophysiological load, which can ultimately lead to physical degradation and organic disease. In sum, my dissertation sheds new light on the embodied aspects of rumination by suggesting that rumination not only happens between the ears, but is implicated in the health of all bodily functions.

November

On November 2, 2018 **Dalya Samur** successfully defended the PhD thesis entitled "From reading to feeling: A language-based approach to alexithymia" at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

Promotor

dr. Sander Koole

Co-promotor

dr. Mattie Tops

Summary

Almost everyone has experienced being at a loss for words when they are trying to express their feelings, for example during such events as a break-up, loss, or marriage. However, people with high levels of alexithymia find this especially daunting. Alexithymia is a personality dimension that relates to chronic problems in identifying and talking about emotions. The present dissertation examines alexithymia from a language perspective, which is crucial to understanding the underlying emotional problems and developing suitable interventions.

Reading requires emotional abilities, such as understanding emotions of self and others. Thus, the first part of the dissertation investigates the link between reading and alexithymia. The results show that alexithymia indeed predicts reading motivation and comprehension, and this helps to explain why people differ in how much they read. The second part of the dissertation explores the underlying language processes in alexithymia. Research indicates that the emotional processing problems manifest themselves particularly in more complex forms of language use, such as during mental simulation of narrative worlds. Finally, the third part of the dissertation considers how research on alexithymia and language may be translated into clinical-psychological interventions. Taken together, the four empirical articles and two review articles from the present dissertation highlight the profound psychological connections between reading and feeling.