

Breaking the Rules: Cognitive Conflict During Deliberate Rule Violations



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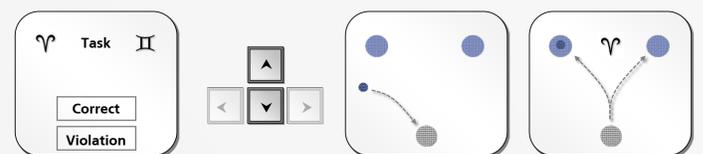
Background and Method

The goat to the right certainly has no clue that it is **violating a rule**. If it did, would it climb the rocks differently? – Interestingly, even though a considerable amount of research has documented the circumstances that may lead human agents to violate social norms and rules (Reason, 1990), very little is known about the processes going on in an agent's mind while he or she is violating a rule.

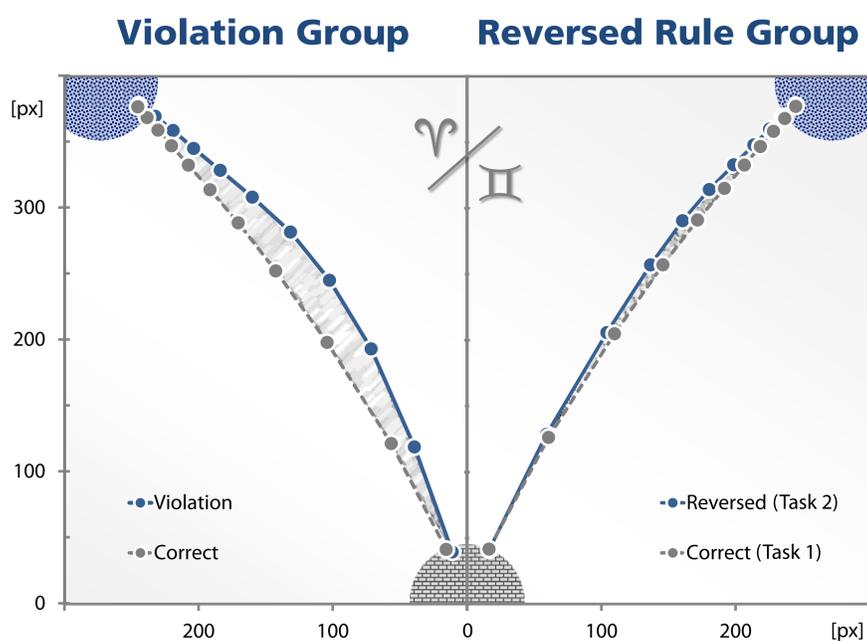
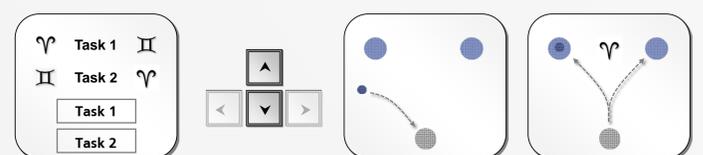
Because rules trigger conformity (e.g., Asch, 1956), we hypothesized rule violations to impose **cognitive conflict** on the rule breaker who is torn between sticking to the rule and intentionally doing the opposite.

To reveal such conflict, we analyzed **movement trajectories** in a simple two-choice pointing task with a computer mouse. Before each movement, participants indicated whether they would conform to the instructed stimulus-response rules.

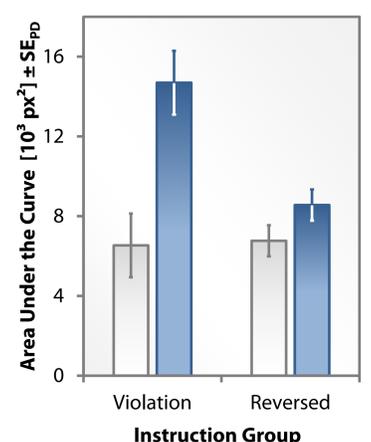
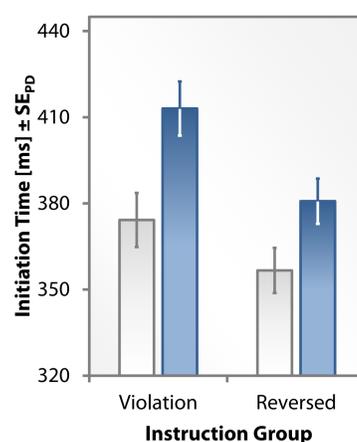
Violation Group



Reversed Rule Group



Key results: Trajectories were attracted toward the rule-based option for violations in the violation group (as measured via area under the curve), and this effect was stronger than in the reversed rule group.



Conclusions

Our findings show that rules are not easily broken – and even if they are broken eventually, behavior is still attracted toward compliance. Merely defining a rule, as arbitrary and irrelevant it may be, thus seems to prompt a tendency toward following it. Accordingly, rule compliance in humans might be a behavioral default that arises at least partly as a consequence of the cognitive burdens of rule violation without any ethical or moral implications.

References

- Asch, S. E. (1956). Studies of independence and conformity: I. A minority of one against a unanimous majority. *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied*, 70, 1-70.
- Reason J. (1990). *Human error*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

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