

# Deactivating the Antilittering Norm: A Field Test of Schwartz's Norm Activation Theory

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## Introduction

Littering, a violation of a social norm guiding a behavior that has environmental and human consequences, has been the subject of substantial inquiry by social psychologists. Research has repeatedly shown that settings with higher amounts of litter yields higher littering rates. Indeed, in experimental designs areas are often pre-littered to increase littering so that the effect independent variables can be more efficiently tested.

This observed increase in littering suggests that Schwartz's norm activation theory developed to explain interpersonal helping might apply to a norm governing a pro environmental behavior. According to his work if people believe their actions have no or reduced consequences for other people (Awareness of Negative Interpersonal Consequences--AC) and they do not feel personally responsible (Responsibility Denial--RD) for those negative consequences the norm can be deactivated and one can act inconsistently with the norm. While this theory has been used in environmental psychology to explain pro environmental behaviors and is at the basis of VBN models in current use a clear test to see if litterers were less aware of consequences and denied responsibility has not been reported in the literature. In most studies deactivation has been inferred from the changes in behavior rather than in self reports of the subject's perceptions and attitudes.

## Methods

To provide a clearer test we handed out 7,409 9.3 x 27.9 cm handbills on a busy

street in a tourist community in the United States. The antilittering norm in this setting was strong: 98.3 percent of the people did not litter as they walked along a 30 meter stretch of side walk. Litterers and a control sample of non litterers were interviewed and questions about RD and AC were embedded among more general questions about outdoor recreation. Participants were also mailed a survey which measured their general dispositional levels RD and AC.

## Findings

For those people who were high on AC and low on RD 11% littered. 74% of who were low on AC and high on RD littered. There was no statistical interaction suggesting that it was not a stepwise process of deactivation, but that either being unaware of consequences or denying responsibility were equally effective for deactivating the norm. This effect was replicated with the more general measures of RD and AC in the follow up mailed survey. All respondents had negative attitudes toward littering and there was no difference between litterers and non litterers in strength of holding the antilittering norm.

Although the study was not designed to test the Focus Theory of Norms we found that those people who reported that they "thought about" what to do with the paper were significantly less likely to litter. Both this variable and the two activation variables together predict littering when included in the same model, suggesting that focus and deactivation may be complimentary processes.