

Devos-Comby, L., & Devos, T. (2001). Social norms, social value, and judgments of responsibility. *Swiss Journal of Psychology*, 60, 35-46.

#### Abstract

We investigated the impact of social norms on responsibility attribution. We hypothesized that an actor would be held more responsible for a negative outcome when adopting a counternormative, rather than normative, conduct. Under these circumstances, judging someone responsible consists of casting the negative social value of the conduct onto the actor. In three experiments, we found that an HIV-positive person was judged more responsible for the infection when his or her conduct transgressed a social norm than when it did not. As expected, this effect was mediated by the social value attributed to the actor, but not by the affective reactions toward him or her. In addition, we ruled out several alternative interpretations of these findings. In Experiment 1, judgments of responsibility were unrelated to causal inferences. In Experiment 2, the salience of the counternormative conduct did not affect the impact of the social norm on responsibility attribution. In Experiment 3, the validation (commonness) of the conduct did not moderate the effect of its normativeness. Overall, the results provide strong support for the idea that responsibility attribution is based on the social desirability of behaviors.