

# The specification response: SMART stops progress

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**I wish you a good 2020 with a happy ending on the night of December 31 to January 1. That is very specific, what about all the other 365 (2020 is a leap year!) nights? I am annoyed by the riots that meanwhile seem to have become the new norm on New Year's Eve in the Netherlands.**

Before focusing on the violence during and around the Dutch New Year's Eve celebration, I'll present a broader perspective. Less specific - more abstract - is better sometimes! People use heuristics in their judgments, in which a subclass is often preferred over the super class. For example, when asked to estimate the likelihood of an employee to stand up for women's equal rights, test subjects prefer a specific type - one of the feminist lesbian employees (subclass) - over the superclass (one of all the employees). In the case of a violent incident at a youth center, our prejudices take us to a somewhat tinted young man of North African descent rather than to all young people. In both examples it is evident that the super class is by definition more likely than the subclass (set theory: by definition a subset is part of the total set).

The psychological mechanism to prefer specific (pre) judgments over general judgments has to do with control and defusing threats. By framing, what we fear becomes less generally threatening. For example, we specify an accident by looking at car age, driver's age, alcohol / drugs, brand of car, or state of maintenance, so that we can always discover aspects why it is not applicable to us or our situation; it won't happen to us.

Last New Year's Eve it was a war, as was witnessed by several shocking blogs and (social) media expressions of, among others, aid workers who were pelted with fireworks, stones and whatever else became available. The fireworks industry reacted, and explained. Year after year again, they specify, stating this is of course not due to fireworks in general, but rather to specific illegal fireworks, which exceeds a certain impact factor. They conclude with a truism: Illegal fireworks must be prohibited and stricter police interventions are needed. Almost immediately the police and the fire brigade respond: such a ban cannot be enforced. So for years now (politically) we have been doing little else than watching passively the derailed behaviour increase every year. Professionals including social workers, policeman, ambulance staff, and doctors, sometimes have to do their work in fear of death, with the support of the military unit. Environmental pollution is so immense that people walk through the streets with their mouth masks during the day. But it is such a nice tradition ...

The response from the fireworks industry is of course very easy to understand. It is what every interest group and many companies do with their lean and SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) working methods: divide and conquer. With the increasingly specific formulation of a problem, the "real" problem ultimately falls outside their specific responsibility. We see climate deniers doing the same, by isolating one detail of the climate aspects and not looking at the environment and mass extinction.

At this moment, however, there seems to be more support for the abolition of consumer fireworks in the Netherlands than there was for Brexit in the United Kingdom. I fear, however, that political parties will consciously or unconsciously use the specification response again to be able to save both the goat and cabbages: a ban on bang fireworks and flares. And so the ingrained psychological specification error aided by the SMART dogma is also a dangerous factor that stands in the way of progress. I fear that nothing will change. And indeed, it is more than fireworks; street furniture is thrown and cars are set on fire. More generally, it's about derailed behaviour and we have to ask why "we" need this derailment. But prohibiting fireworks is a start, it takes the proverbial wick out of the powder keg. But hope springs eternal, again I wish you a good 2020 with - less specifically - all remaining days and nights!