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Intersubjective Norms: Cultural and Interpersonal Perspective

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Keywords

culture, intersubjective norms, social influence

Normative perspectives in cultural psychology provide a fresh view to understand the processes of cultural influence on human behavior. Although much of the existing research focuses on individuals' internalized personal values and beliefs to explain cultural tendencies, the new perspective proposes perceived intersubjective norms as an alternative key component in cultural influence (Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi, Shteynberg, & Wan, 2010; Zou et al., 2009). Extending this newly emerging approach, the lead articles in this special issue address some of the important questions and issues of normative perspectives in cultural psychology.

The articles provide useful explanations for why individuals vary in the degree to which they acquire and engage in culturally normative behaviors. In particular, Gelfand and Harrington (2015) point to three core motivational forces—managing (a) uncertainty and threat, (b) reputation, and (c) low interpersonal power—that motivate individuals to follow descriptive norms. Morris and Liu (2015) discuss psychological functions that normative/counternormative behaviors serve, such as decreasing insecurity and defending identity. Finally, Tam (2015) applies the normative perspectives to cultural transmission, suggesting the factors that

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explain why some parents transmit culturally typical ways of being to their children more than others. All these articles offer important insights to understand within-cultural variation in the extent to which individuals learn and engage in culturally normative behavior.

Although these articles convincingly articulate how perceived norms are one of the important factors that underlie collectively shared psychological and behavioral tendencies in any given cultural context, two important issues are perhaps not fully addressed. The first issue is their insufficient consideration of the between-culture differences in normative processes. The individual and situational factors affecting the likelihood of individuals following social norms, as discussed in the target articles, may function somewhat independently from culture-level processes (e.g., Na et al., 2010). Given that, culture-level factors and relevant processes driving cross-cultural variations in normative influence deserve more attention.

Cultural variation in the strength of normative influence has been an important subject of research in cross-cultural and cultural psychology (e.g., Cialdini, Wosinska, Barrett, Butner, & Gornik-Durose, 1999; Fischer & Mansell, 2009; Triandis, 1989, 1995). Psychological processes involved in this cultural variation are likely to be more complicated than just the simple difference in the importance of norms. For example, cultures are likely to differ in dynamics between descriptive norms and injunctive norms. As Gelfand and Harrington (2015) acknowledged, these two types of norms are not fully overlapping and moreover, the degree to which they are overlapping is likely to vary between cultures. Little empirical research directly examines how and why cultures differ in the association between descriptive and injunctive norms. Although some notable research identified the cultural dimension of tightness–looseness (Gelfand et al., 2011), more work is required for better understanding of this process. This issue matters because cultural variation in the distance between descriptive and injunctive norms could result in considerable cultural differences in how norms exert their influence; such as how powerfully descriptive norms affect individuals' behavior, how individuals feel about engaging in nonnormative behavior, and how nonnormative characteristics are perceived and treated by others (Kinias, Kim, Hafenbrack, & Lee, 2014; Savani, Morris, & Naidu, 2012). For example, in some cultures, showing even innocuous but descriptively unusual characteristics, such as being left-handed, leads to negative social judgment, whereas the same characteristics may not implicate social judgments in other cultures (Kinias et al., 2014). In short, between-culture differences in normative processes may be much more complex than presented in the articles, and thus, culture-specific patterns of normative influence and their underlying reasons are worth further consideration.

The second issue is that these articles place strong focus only on strategic processes, both implicit and explicit, in explaining normative influence. That is, the authors assume that individuals perceive how others typically behave in their culture and follow the norms as an adaptation to their cultural contexts. There are certainly many cases when such strategic processes may be at play. For example, as Tam (2015) discusses, parents often recognize cultural norms, and subsequently, may intentionally transmit norms, which are perceived as supportive of well-being, to their children. Ample empirical research also supports that these direct responses to perceived norms effectively explain normative influences on behavior (e.g., Chiu et al., 2010; Shteynberg, Gelfand, & Kim, 2009; Zou et al., 2009). Yet, conformity in response to perceived norms is unlikely to be the full story of how social norms operate in affecting individuals' behavior.

Another important piece may be interpersonal influence, in particular, small social dynamics involving subtle social approval and disapproval embedded in everyday social interactions. Through these social feedback processes, culturally valued and normative behaviors are constantly reinforced, thereby being conditioned as default responses to respective contexts (Savani, Morris, Naidu, Kumar, & Berlia, 2011). Consequently, individuals engage in normative behaviors just by being in the situations (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). These processes are likely to occur without actors' awareness of cultural norms.

Humans sensitively and effortlessly process nonverbal cues in communication (Dimberg, Thunberg, & Elmehed, 2000; Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967), and it is likely through

this process that culturally normative patterns of behaviors are perpetuated. Nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, body gesture, and even silence in interactions convey meanings in interpersonal communication (Watzlawick et al., 1967). Thus, individuals engaged in social interactions end up receiving constant positive and/or negative feedback from others. Because such nonverbal feedback significantly affects state self-esteem (Lamer, Reeves, & Weisbuch, 2015), signaling one's relational value (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), others' nonverbal feedback in social interactions would exert strong influence on one's behavior. Consequently, whenever individuals engage in normative/counternormative behaviors, they would receive instant nonverbal feedback from other cultural members whereby their subsequent behaviors are modified. These processes are likely to occur beyond the direct conformity to perceived norms. We propose that this prompt, powerful feedback system in interpersonal contexts serves as a significant part of cultural influence, and it should also be considered to explain normative processes.

In conclusion, normative perspectives provide a new angle to approach the study of cultural influence on behavior. The articles noted above in this special issue contribute to our understanding of several important pieces of the normative processes: within-culture differences in normative influence and conformity based on perceived norms. Our intention here is to encourage the field to consider other important pieces of the story: between-culture differences in normative processes and implicit construction of culture-specific behavioral patterns. The comprehensive consideration of these important processes together would lead to a fuller understanding of the way in which norms operate in the interrelation between culture and human minds.

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Different Ways to Resolve Discrepancy Between Descriptive and Injunctive Norms Across Cultures

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Gelfand and Harrington (2015) define descriptive norms as personal cognitions concerning the dominant beliefs, values, and behaviors of a particular reference group, and discussed how different motivational factors may mediate the cross-cultural differences in compliance to the

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