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Enriching Cultural Psychology With Research Insights on Norms and Intersubjective Representations

Xi Zou¹ and Angela K.-y. Leung²

Norms are one of the most important yet least understood processes influencing social behavior. Since the seminal work of Kurt Lewin (1943), social norms have been widely studied in social psychology research, contributing to studies on attitude–behavior relations (e.g., Ajzen, 1991), social influence (e.g., Deutsch & Gerard, 1955), social control (e.g., Ajzen & Madden, 1986; Bandura, 1977), group decision making (e.g., Janis, 1972; Longley & Pruitt, 1980), conformity (e.g., Asch, 1951; Sherif, 1936), and stereotypes (e.g., Schaller & Latané, 1996; Stangor, Sechrist, & Jost, 2001). The goal of this Special Issue is to capture the latest wave of research discoveries on the role of norms in understanding culturally relevant psychological processes (see also Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi, Shteynberg, & Wan, 2010; Morris, Hong, Chiu, & Liu, 2015).

Overview of the Norm Approach

Interest in taking a norm approach to characterize culture emerged first in research on organizational climate, where researchers debated how to aggregate individuals' perceptions of climate as a property of the organization (e.g., Glick, 1988; Guion, 1973). Although some early work measured individual perception of culture as perceived social norms (Bierbrauer, Heyer, & Wolfradt, 1994), it is only in the last decade that researchers have turned systematically to normative processes to examine cross-cultural differences. This reorientation toward norms was spurred by increasing evidence that values have limited explanatory power for understanding cultural differences, as well as by observations that values and culturally typical practices may even be negatively related rather than aligned (Heine, Lehman, Peng, & Greenholtz, 2002; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Taras, Steel, & Kirkman, 2010). Norms provide additional insight into cultural differences above and beyond personal values and beliefs (Fischer, 2006; Fischer et al., 2009; Shteynberg, Gelfand, & Kim, 2009; Wan et al., 2007; Zou et al., 2010). Below, we distinguish between two general approaches to conceptualizing norms in cultural research: social norms and intersubjective representations.

Social Norms

One common option for measuring norms is to simply ask individuals how the majority of people in their culture think or behave in a specific domain (e.g., Fischer, 2006; House et al., 2004). Responses to such questions capture descriptive norms of the cultural group (Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991). Empirical analyses have compared the explanatory power of this descriptive

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norm account with the value account to explain cultural differences (Shteynberg et al., 2009; Zou et al., 2010). For example, Zou et al. (2010) measured both personal values and perceived descriptive norms of collectivism (vs. individualism) in an U.S. sample and a Polish sample. They found that perceived descriptive norms were more collectivistic for Poles than for Americans, whereas personal values did not differ across the two cultures. Moreover, when controlling for personal values, individuals' perceived descriptive norms significantly accounted for cross-cultural difference in social judgment.

In addition to descriptive norms, Cialdini et al. (1991) have also proposed the concept of injunctive norms, which refer to what in-group members approve of. Differences in injunctive norms often play a critical role in shaping cross-cultural differences in public, but not private, situations. For example, Yamagishi, Hashimoto, and Schug (2008) examined cultural differences in Japanese and U.S. consumers' preference for unique products (Kim & Markus, 1999). They found that Japanese participants favored uniqueness more in private than when they were observed, whereas they declined uniqueness after an experience of being monitored by other people. That is, Japanese and U.S. people hold similar values but behave differently, as the Japanese assume that seeking uniqueness will be disapproved by others. Although injunctive norms were not directly measured, this study nonetheless provides supportive evidence that this cultural difference arises because salient norms assume dominance over individuals' private preferences in Japan. Future research should directly examine descriptive versus injunctive norms as carriers of cultural differences.

Intersubjective Representations

Alternatively, Wan et al. (2007) developed a two-step approach that involves both individual perceptions and aggregated ratings of cultural norms. They first asked participants to rate the extent to which a cultural value was important to them as well as the extent to which they believed it to be important to an average member of the group. The latter rating is similar to the perceived descriptive norm approach. On the basis of a high intra-class correlation, they then identified the top 10 values with the highest perceived cultural importance by averaging participants' ratings. They found that participants who personally endorsed these 10 values showed higher identification with their group. In other words, the extent of internalizing intersubjectively important cultural values is predictive of the strength of individuals' cultural identification.

This measure speaks to an important distinction regarding whether norms reflect objective properties of the social system or individuals' subjective perceptions (see also Bond, 2013). As mentioned above, research on descriptive norms at the individual level captures people's subjectively perceived descriptive norms, whereas group-level research measures individuals' subjective perceptions of the descriptive norms of a collective (e.g., a team, an organization, or a nation) and aggregates them to represent norms of the group. Alternatively, group-level norms can also be captured by objective indicators (e.g., a country's political system, an organization's industry, or a group's demographic diversity). In the organizational climate literature, Chan (1998) provided a comprehensive typology of various ways in which individual subjective perceptions could be aggregated at the group level. It is also worth noting that the perceived descriptive norm approach generally focuses on a specific domain (e.g., compliance, attribution), whereas researchers on intersubjective beliefs have usually taken a domain-general approach (e.g., based on Schwarz's value items). Notably, perceived cultural norms may have a particularly strong impact on certain behaviors but not on others. We contend that the norm-based account is particularly well suited to explain domain-specific cultural differences, whereas intersubjective representations may be more capable of accounting for domain-general effects. This is because norms are representations of typical responses to specific situations, whereas intersubjective beliefs are representations of core values that are widely applicable to in-group members. Future studies

should examine the trade-offs between a domain-specific and a domain-general approach in characterizing cultural norms.

Emerging Issues

Next, we provide a brief overview of some emerging issues in the research on culture and norms. Our goal in this section is to set the context for appreciating the articles and commentaries that approach culture and norm research from different disciplines and theoretical traditions in this Special Issue.

Selection of the Target Groups

Much research on social norms has been conducted with well-defined groups or salient identities. Critically, norms are related to behavior only when they are aligned with the individuals' referent group (Kallgren, Reno, & Cialdini, 2000). In this regard, research on descriptive norms and cultural differences has assumed that a typical citizen is a salient and relevant representation of one's national culture and that people's perceptions of these typical citizens can represent the norms of the broader nation (see Shteynberg et al., 2009; Zou et al., 2010). It remains a challenge, however, to specify what group within a culture would be the most relevant to represent the culture, as many heterogeneous sub-cultures or niches exist within the same culture and multiple potentially relevant normative groups are available. For example, the U.S. cultural norms shared by Republicans stand in stark contrast to those shared by Democrats (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006). Future research should examine the relevance of different normative groups in representing cultural norms.

Nature of the Target Groups

Prior research on norms suggests that both the group size and the nature of the normative group can influence whether norms are related to behavior (Borsari & Carey, 2003). Norms, particularly injunctive norms, of more distal and smaller groups are less strongly related to behavior (Neighbors et al., 2008). Nations are probably the most distal and abstract groups to which individuals can relate, and national identities and stereotypical characteristics are often carefully constructed through political and historical narratives. For example, in his work on nationalism, Anderson defined a nation as an imagined community in which the images of nation and nationhood are largely shaped by the media rather than by meaningful interpersonal connections (Anderson, 1991). A direction for future studies is to examine how different target groups differ in terms of their abstractness and inclusiveness, as well as how such factors moderate the influence of norms.

Meaning Creation and Propagation

Thus far, research on norms has focused mainly on the impact of social representations on individuals. Consonant with the social representation theoretical tradition (see Moscovici, 1988), the norm approach assumes the joint construction and validation of the social reality by members of a cultural group, which leads to the creation of shared knowledge and norms (social representations) that interpret and guide behaviors (Wan et al., 2007). In this regard, research on cultural transmission (Kashima, 2000; Lyons & Kashima, 2003) has shown that people have a strong tendency to reproduce information that is consistent with perceived cultural stereotypes. Future research should systematically examine when and how shared norms are formed and how they change over time and across different social groups.

Themes of Core Articles

In this section, we highlight two broad themes that emerged from the six core articles presented in this Special Issue. We believe these articles have great potential to spur future research to advance the studies of culture and norms.

Psychological Processes Underlying the Emergence and Transmission of Norms

The ubiquity of norms raises interesting observations about the common psychological processes associated with them. First, to explain the psychological power of norms, Shteynberg (2015) discusses the importance of group attention in the emergence and functioning of descriptive norms. This work provides new insights on the cognitive foundation of descriptive norms and explains how a shared reality comes into being among cultural members. It also highlights the fact that behaviors can be considered not only consequences of social norms but also triggers of norm formation and change. For example, when the prevalence of a new behavior reaches a tipping point at which it is adopted by many more people, drastic changes in norms will ensue (Cohen, 2001).

Second, Gao, Qiu, Chiu, and Yang (2015) employ agent-based modeling, a new research tool in computational psychology, to explore the interpersonal processes that give rise to norms in social groups. These authors demonstrate that communication processes, including grounding and audience design, are critical in facilitating the reproduction of cultural information (Kashima, 2009). The cultural reproduction and transmission processes are also examined from a developmental perspective by Tam (2015), whose work focuses on intergenerational cultural transmission and highlights how value transmission between parents and children strategically fulfills important adaptation goals. Construing norm transmission as a social adaptation device also suggests new insights into acculturation research.

Psychological Functions of Norms

Other contributors to the core articles seek to provide a functionalist account of norms. Offering a nuanced understanding of the cultural identification process, Wan (2015) discusses the alignment of personal values and intersubjectively perceived cultural norms as the basis for developing a strong sense of cultural identification. More broadly, Gelfand and Harrington (2015) put into perspective the epistemic, identity, and social coordinative functions of cultural norms. Morris and Liu (2015) bring novel insights to understudied issues related to social norms by distinguishing peer versus aspirational reference groups and the respective functions served by norm adherence versus norm defiance. These contributions provide evolutionarily informed insights about the importance of norms for regulating cultural life.

Themes of Commentaries

As the six core articles have effectively established a common ground on the norm approach in the study of culture, we invited commentators to provide their constructive and critical perspectives to enrich the dialogue on the norm–culture relationship. In this Special Issue, we present these commentaries in four categories: (a) bridging the norm approach with other theoretical traditions, (2) importance of acknowledging cultural differences, (c) diversifying the meanings of norms; and (d) understanding the dynamic norm transmission process.

Conclusion

As the readers will see, the perspectives presented in the core articles and commentaries in this Special Issue are diverse in both scope and focus. We hope that the works presented here will

catalyze an exchange of ideas and discussions about the normative approach to the study of culture, which will prove to be as stimulating and exciting for the readers as it has been for the researchers who have contributed to this Special Issue.

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Authors' Note

We have crafted the Special Issue in an interactive dialogue format, as we want to encourage discussions that delve deeply into the challenges of studying culture from a norm perspective and stimulating new ideas.

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