

# Intersubjective Norms: Inviting a More Interdisciplinary Perspective

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cultural psychology, social cognition, values, attitudes, beliefs

Cross-cultural psychology takes account of—indeed is built upon—observations that individuals differ on cultural variables. A starting assumption, made in common with certain classic theories in cultural anthropology (e.g., Benedict, 1934), has been that the fault-lines run mainly *between* cultural groups, whereas *within* cultural groups considerable homogeneity would be found. Variation associated with *subcultures* within such groups, which may differentiate along ethnic or religious or generational lines, constitutes a problem for such an assumption. It is welcome news that authors of several articles in this special issue (Gao et al., Tam, Wan, and Morris & Liu) recognize this problem. They are to be congratulated not only for noticing the problem but also for exploring ways of thinking that might resolve it. However, in our view, such discussions could be better informed and extended by a greater challenge to compartmentalizing tendencies in academic disciplines, in this case by taking into account more recent theories within the field of cultural anthropology that can be a fertile source for new thinking in cross-cultural psychology. Our commentary focuses on core ideas in some such recent theories, namely, the distributive model of culture (Goodenough, 1981; Schwartz, 1978; Wallace, 1970), cultural consensus model (CCM; Romney, Weller, & Batchelder, 1986), and a cultural consonance approach (e.g., Dressler, Balieiro, & dos Santos, 2015), which have affected our own approach (e.g., Saucier et al., 2014). While focusing primarily on Gao et al.'s article, we make reference to several other articles in this special issue.

Gao et al. summarize two approaches to understanding communication and its role in the generation of culture: neo-diffusionism (Kashima, 2014) and complexity theory (Hatt, 2009). They note differences in these two approaches that make complexity theory more flexible than neo-diffusionism. For example, complexity theory focuses less on social integration and collaborative meaning-making as goals of interpersonal communication. It allows for individuals to have other preferences, for example, preferring to communicate predominantly with others who share their opinion or to modify the content of their communication to accommodate the opinion of their interlocutor. Despite these differences, both approaches presuppose a

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particular definition of culture, as a non-genetically transmitted body of knowledge that is distributed non-uniformly across individuals: Individuals hold different subsets of knowledge due to their histories, and individuals can retrieve different parts of their share of the knowledge from memory in different circumstances. This interpersonal and intrapersonal distribution of knowledge leads to some heterogeneity within a cultural system.

We note that similar propositions about the distribution of cultural knowledge among members of a cultural group were made earlier within a distributive model of culture (e.g., Schwartz, 1978). According to a distributive model of culture, culture is a complex pool of knowledge distributed variably within individual mind-sets, with some elements shared more or less widely (Rodseth, 1998). The degree and content of sharedness depends on characteristics such as group divisions by age cohorts or role specialization, and some individuals are better representatives than others of the central tendency in their cultural group. The distributive model of culture implies that there is a core of cultural knowledge that is particularly widely shared within each cultural group. This proposition is consistent with Gao et al.'s examination of the way shared beliefs, specifically descriptive norms, are disseminated through interpersonal communication, in scenarios derived from complexity theory. For an individual to modulate their communication based on their interlocutor and default to the beliefs that they perceive as most widely shared implies the existence of a cultural core and individual meta-knowledge of the content of the shared core.

Gao et al. present complexity theory as a counterpoint to neo-diffusionism's focus on collaborative meaning-making as the goal of communication. Surprisingly, under a complexity-theory approach, egocentric communication and a preference to communicate with dissimilar others may ultimately increase homogeneity. As Gao et al. point out, agent-based modeling (ABM) helps account for how consensus is produced, that is, how cultural/attitudinal clusters arise among individuals especially in physical proximity. There may be other predictable dynamics such as the divergence between peer norms and aspirational norms (noted by Morris and Liu, 2015), and their potential divergence from norms most directly associated with parent-child norm socialization (noted by Tam, 2015). The distributive model of culture, consonant with assertions by Tam, makes no assumptions that parenting within a cultural group is uniform with respect to which norms are transmitted, as parents differ in their histories and in their perceptions of what the general norms are; moreover, what is transmitted may depend upon overt choices of the parents.

As exemplified by the distributive model of culture, the approaches we present from the domain of cultural anthropology do not make strong assumptions about precisely how sharedness and differences in cultural knowledge are established. In contrast, neo-diffusionism and complexity theory propose interpersonal communication as a medium for the diffusion and change of cultural knowledge. However, cultural anthropology does provide a simple method of verifying degree of agreement (and thereby differentiating individuals with respect to their degree of convergence with intersubjective cultural norms, which should [as Wan, 2015, asserts] be associated with degree of identification with the culture) in the form of the CCM (Romney et al., 1986). When combined with a distributive model of culture, the CCM is generally compatible with the assumptions in neo-diffusionism and complexity theory and allows researchers actually to verify that there is some degree of agreement within a cultural group (as recommended by Fischer, 2009) rather than simply assuming consensus.

The CCM verifies agreement in a cultural group by factor analyzing Q-profiles (where variables are rows and individuals are columns). A large first factor indicates substantial agreement between individuals, and the factor loadings indicate how representative individuals are of the consensus. A cultural consonance approach (e.g., Dressler et al., 2015) takes this one step further

by analyzing residual matrices for further consensus between *subgroups*. In addition, applications of this approach have detected mental health and other benefits to personal congruence with the cultural consensus. For example (Dressler, 2012), cultural consonance is associated with better heart health and arterial blood pressure as well as lower levels of psychological distress, fewer depression symptoms, and a greater sense of control over one's life. Similar effects are found with person–group congruence at the level of personality (Fulmer et al., 2010). In a study based on 28 societies, when an individual's personality matched the prevalent personality tendency in the population, there was an added, amplifying positive effect on that individual's self-esteem and subjective well-being.

Descriptive norms are defined by Gao et al. as referring to “behaviors or opinions that are popular in the group.” In other words, descriptive norms are shared standards that constrain social behavior based on what other group members would do or believe in a similar situation. This is in contrast to injunctive norms (Cialdini & Trost, 1998), which prescribe appropriate or valued beliefs or behaviors. Both descriptive and injunctive norms are generally social norms, in the sense that violations are sanctioned by the social group rather than specifically by the legal system. Descriptive norms lend themselves well to measurement using a referent-shift frame, that is, asking individuals to indicate their agreement with items referencing the group (cf. Fischer, 2009). For example, items concerned with societal practices in the GLOBE survey (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004) generally took the form “In this society, most people . . .” This is an intuitively sensible format in which to measure descriptive norms.

Descriptive norms (and variables that can be measured using the referent-shift format in general) are well suited for use within a CCM and cultural consonance framework. In fact, most investigations on the link between consonance and health (e.g., Dressler et al., 2015; Maltseva, 2014) have framed consonance in terms of the agreement between an individual's descriptive norms and those of the group. Consonance with cultural descriptive norms serves as a protective factor for both physical and mental health outcomes.

In addition to providing novel ways of exploring the relationship between descriptive norms and various outcome variables, the anthropological models we describe provide a possible means of situating descriptive norms within cultural knowledge. Cultural content differs in its latent appeal, and thus, likelihood of being chosen for emphasis and greater sharedness. We refer not merely to the fact the normative content varies in its popularity (as emphasized by Tam, 2015). These tendencies may be qualified by the type of cultural knowledge in question. Some approaches (e.g., Rappaport, 1999) propose a hierarchical structure to cultural knowledge. Certain beliefs, which Rappaport calls ultimate sacred postulates and cosmological axioms, are considered fundamental undergirding assumptions and are discussed rarely if at all, much less debated. These beliefs are taken to be self-evident truths about the way the world is organized and the place of humanity in it. These beliefs, not prone to change easily, underlie norms (which Rappaport calls social rules). Norms are presumably more subject to change over time, responsive to temporary and local conditions. They may tend to be self-costly group-serving norms, as Morris and Liu suggest, particularly those norms represented in rituals, or they may have a much wider and apparently arbitrary array of content (including religious ideas not directly linked to altruism). Some descriptive norms (and other social norms) are derived from interpretations of fundamental beliefs, though subject to updates to reflect changing times.

Prime examples come from religious assumptions that are prime features of culture in many societies. The Nicene Creed persists as a profession of faith for virtually all of Christianity although the norms surrounding it have changed. The creed may now be ritually recited in the local tongue (e.g., not in Latin), and other aspects of ritual and doctrine are subject to change and amendment. The fundamental beliefs it represents remain unchanged across nearly 1,700 years.

The qualities of different types of cultural knowledge may interact with personal communication preferences to produce different patterns of diffusion. That is, if descriptive norms are less firmly grounded than fundamental beliefs, they should be less widely shared, more amenable to change, and more widely discussed and debated within cultural groups.

Gao et al. (and as we have noted, several other articles within this special issue) extend the trend of moving away from assuming cultural groups to be uniform and explicitly model the transmission process of cultural knowledge across a social network. The intersubjective norm approach so evident in this special issue is poised to make significant empirical as well as theoretical contributions. Our argument is that aspects of this approach have interesting parallels with other work over the past half century in cultural anthropology. This “other work” is rather more grounded in work with small-scale societies, and is less prone than cross-cultural psychology to exclude consideration of pertinent religious and political phenomena. So taking a more interdisciplinary perspective may enhance generalizability of an intersubjective-norms approach, and assist in bringing a slightly “bigger picture” into focus.

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## Intergenerational Cultural Transmission: Looking Beyond the Processes of Parent-to-Child Socialization—A Comment on Tam

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Tam's essay deals with one of the most hotly debated topics not only in psychology but also in philosophy and anthropology: How are cultural ideas transmitted from generation to generation? And why are some elements of culture transmitted and remain stable over time while others are not? What processes account for the stability and the change in the values, norms, and world views shared by cultural groups and societies?

Research addressing these questions has focused particularly on values as indicators of cultural influence because they represent the internalized normative and ethical systems of a social group (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2001; Schwartz, 1999), and studied the intergenerational transmission of values mainly by looking at parent-to-child socialization processes (Knafo & Galansky, 2008).

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