What does a priming perspective reveal about culture: culture-as-situated cognition

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'Between-group' comparison models of culture imply that adaptations to group living are not represented cross-culturally, but if people are either individualists who make sense of the world by separating out main issues and underlying rules or collectivists who make sense of the world by connecting and relating, how is it that people can do both? Culture-as-situated cognition theory explains how: Many seemingly fixed cultural differences can be traced to differences in the accessible constructs — cultural mindsets — that come to mind when situations render them accessible. Social priming paradigms demonstrate that people from ostensibly different cultures have more than their chronically accessible cultural mindset available for use, and that momentarily accessible mindset matters, influencing cognitive processing, judgment, reasoning, and performance.

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What does a priming perspective reveal about culture: culture as situated cognition

Do people first attend to focal objects or to the whole visual array? Are students better off if they focus on trying to learn or on avoiding incompetence? Is well-being more a function of personal efficacy or of fitting in? While superficially different, in each case, the answer seems to depend in part on whether one is a member of an individualistic 'go-your-own-way' culture or of a collectivistic 'pay-attention-to-your-social-location' culture [1–4]. The insight that culture matters leads to another puzzle, which is that minor contextual cues are sufficient to switch people from individualistic to collectivistic mindsets without need for lengthy socialization in a different culture [5]. Culture-as-situated-cognition theory [6–8] solves this puzzle by building on social cognition research on concept accessibility to integrate literature documenting what appear to be chronic cultural differences with literature documenting situated flexibility. In other words, this theory re-conceptualizes cultural differences: rather than being the result of fixed, between-group differences, the differences are a result of what mindset is chronically accessible.

In doing so, culture-as-situated cognition theory highlights two aspects of culture's consequences that otherwise escape attention and hence have been largely ignored in the larger cultural and cross-cultural psychology literature. First, it highlights that people have access to and can use more than one culturally grounded mental representation, depending on which is cued in context, and that this does not require bicultural or multicultural socialization [7]. Indeed, people typically do belong to more than one culture — they can be socialized into American individualistic culture, and at the same time into proximal cultures based in other social groups (gender, social class, race-ethnicity, 2, 8). Second, it highlights that people have a culturally grounded mental model of how situations should unfold, which when disturbed cues increased systematic reasoning (to examine whether something is wrong). Both of these processes have to do with what is accessible at the moment in the context of one's everyday life, outside the laboratory, as detailed next.

Situated cognition, accessible knowledge, and priming

Situated cognition focuses on the impact of social contexts on thinking and action, or, 'thinking in the world' [9–12]. Situated approaches suggest that 'thinking is for doing' with the implication that people are sensitive to their immediate environment, use the subset of all their knowledge that is accessible in the moment and interpret what comes to mind in light of contextual demands [10,13]. What comes to mind can be knowledge (semantic content, [14], goals, [15], and procedures, [6,11,16]) or metacognitive experiences of ease or difficulty while thinking about content, goals, and procedures [17]. Unless they have reason to exclude it, people tend to include accessible knowledge and metacognitive experience of ease ('fluency') or difficulty ('disfluency') in their judgments [17]. Each yields a signal as to how to process information to make sense of experience and hence how to respond. While people are sensitive to what comes to mind and to their experience of thinking about it, they are

not sensitive to the specific source of accessible information or accessible feelings of ease and difficulty [17,18]. Hence, information and feelings may carry over to inform judgment on subsequent tasks — even if the information or feelings on one's mind are not relevant to the task at hand [17,18].

Culture as situated cognition

Culture-as-situated cognition (CSC) theory connects the core premises of situated cognition theories with a broad formulation of what culture is and does [22,23••]. As a starting point, CSC assumes that human culture developed from the survival necessity of connecting with others and adapting to group living [24,25]. Living together requires that people coordinate and organize their relationships, clarify group boundaries, and notice and reward innovation so that it can be imitated or exploited [26,27]. Coordinating and organizing relationships and noticing and rewarding innovation requires sensitivity to others' perspectives ('social tuning') as well as ability to control one's own responses and focus ('self-regulation') [23••,28,29]. In each society, practices evolve to create 'good enough' practices to regulate relationships, specify group boundaries and what to do about them, and spotlight when innovation is accepted or valued [5,23••,26,27,30,31]. Though solutions are 'good enough' rather than optimal, once developed, they become 'sticky' because they become imbued with meaning as the ways 'we' do things [30]. Together these practices form 'culture'. A particular culture can be understood as a particular set of practices within a particular society, time and place; these practices do not need to be the best or most efficient solution; it suffices that they are better than no solution [30]. In this way, culture becomes the sense of a tacit operating code or meaning making framework through which people make sense of their world [32] and understand what people want and how they go about getting it [33]. Indeed, people are sensitive to cues about when to imitate (fit in) and when to innovate [34,35••] and when group boundaries matter [25,36].

This formulation of culture does not highlight the between-society differences in the core concern (connections, boundaries, innovation) on which individuals focus, even though cultural psychologists have often focused on these differences. In particular, cultural psychologists have typically highlighted the differences between individualism and collectivism and argued that these differences are due to differences in ecological niches (e.g. [37]). While interesting, such a between-society interpretation of cultural differences focuses attention on distal past contexts to the exclusion of present day contexts and implies that differences in niches create either a focus on individualism or on collectivism. Both of these assumptions result in predictions that differ from the predictions made by CSC as detailed next.

Cultural mindsets

A mindset is a knowledge structure including content, procedures, and goals. A first core prediction of CSC is that each society has practices linked to highlighting group boundaries and structuring relationships — doing things 'our way', fitting in, and belonging, as well as practices linked to innovation. These practices involve content, procedure, and goals that scaffold collectivistic, honor, and individualistic mindsets. This implies that in any society, each of these mindsets can be made accessible.

A second core prediction of CSC is that which cultural mindset is accessible in the moment matters. The accessible mindset includes content (one's own values, one's beliefs about what is normative, one's beliefs about what is right), goals (stick out, fit in, protect reputation), and procedures (separating, connecting, ranking). Part of the power of cuing a cultural mindset comes from cuing particular descriptive norms [29]. Descriptive norms have two possible channels of effect, one is to make accessible what people usually do and the other is to make accessible the idea of others more generally — that others are present, that others are watching [28]. People in different societies should be sensitive to cues to use individualistic, collectivistic, and honor mindsets [6]. While initially linked to particular practices, these mindsets, once activated, should induce a general disposition to process information in a particular way and influence judgments and behavior in much the same way that activating cultural identity influences them [7,38,39]. Whether a cued mindset helps or hinders performance depends on its fit to the task at hand [40]. Evidence for this flexibility abounds, and individualistic and collectivistic mindsets are easily activated across different modern [6] and traditional societies [41,42].

To test the effect of accessible cultural mindset on current judgment in the laboratory, structure priming methods are used so that the researcher has control over which mindset is accessible and can demonstrate its effects. Because the use of accessible mindsets should depend on features of the situation, priming procedures typically involve two ostensibly unrelated tasks. The first task is the priming task. Unless its relevance is undermined, the specific content, procedure, goal or metacognitive interpretation made temporarily accessible in the first task carries over to the next task, whether or not it would otherwise have come to mind (e.g. [11,14,17,21]). Importantly, features of situations can only bring to mind knowledge a person already has, thus priming a chronically collectivistic person with an individualistic mindset can shift accessible mindset only if that individualistic mindset is available for use. Otherwise, knowledge has to be learned and does not spring forth from brief exposure to a situation [19••,20].