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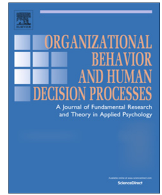

Normology: Integrating insights about social norms to understand cultural dynamics

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ABSTRACT

This paper integrates social norm constructs from different disciplines into an integrated model. Norms exist in the objective social environment in the form of behavioral regularities, patterns of sanctioning, and institutionalized practices and rules. They exist subjectively in perceived descriptive norms, perceived injunctive norms, and personal norms. We also distil and delineate three classic theories of why people adhere to norms: internalization, social identity, and rational choice. Additionally, we articulate an emerging theory of how perceived descriptive and injunctive norms function as two distinct navigational devices that guide thoughts and behavior in different ways, which we term "social autopilot" and "social radar." For each type of norms, we suggest how it may help to understand cultural dynamics at the micro level (the acquisition, variable influence and creative mutation of cultural knowledge) and the macro level (the transmission, diffusion and evolution of cultural practices). Having laid the groundwork for an integrated study of norm—normology, we then introduce the articles of this special issue contributing theoretical refinements and empirical evidence from different methods and levels of analysis. Managerial implications are discussed.

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Introduction

In this era of globalization, the models of culture in terms of value orientations (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1990) that have traditionally dominated organizational behavior research increasingly appear incomplete. These models portray culture as carried by traits—stable, general preferences—that reproduce themselves with the socialization of each new generation. But cultural influences on individual judgment and behavior are dynamic and situational rather than stable and general, especially as people increasingly span multiple cultures. Managers today switch between cultural codes from one interaction to the next to mesh with different audiences (Friedman, Liu, Chi, Hong, & Sung, 2012; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000), sometimes defy cultural expectations to be contrarian (Mok & Morris, 2010a, 2010b, 2013), and even combine elements from multiple cultures to generate creative solutions (Cheng, Sanchez-Burks, & Lee, 2008; Tadmor, Galinsky, & Maddux, 2012; Yagi & Kleinberg, 2011). Nor does the trait model of self-replicating cultural systems fully capture cultural phenomena at the macro level. Collective-level cultural patterns transform and spread across the decades (Grossmann & Varnum, 2015; Boyd & Richerson, 2004) in part because of inter-cultural interactions, which globalization has intensified (Appadurai, 1996; Finnemore, 1996; Griswold, 2012).

While value models served well to portray cultural differences, they do not serve as well to capture cultural dynamics. That is, neither micro-level cultural dynamics—the ways individuals acquire, utilize and mutate their cultural assumptions and habits—nor macro-level cultural dynamics—the ways in which cultural practices and institutions spread and change over time—lend themselves to explanations in terms of self-replicating systems of private value orientations (Morris, Chiu, & Liu, 2015; Weber & Dacin, 2011). Just as globalization has oriented academics toward questions of cultural dynamics, these questions have become equally pressing for practitioners—managers are called upon to acquire new cultural proficiencies and deploy them in contextually sensitive ways (Morris, Savani, Mor, & Cho, 2014) while leaders are challenged to understand and orchestrate collective-level changes in the cultures of corporations, industries and communities (Kotter & Heskett, 1992; O'Reilly, Caldwell, Chatman, & Doerr, 2014; Sturman, Shao, & Katz, 2012).

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An alternative model of culture centers on norms rather than values. Norm models hold that a community's characteristic patterns of thought and behavior emanate not from individuals' inner core selves but from their shared social context. Norms are social patterns that govern behavior. Because norms are conceptualized as context-specific regulators of behavior rather than as traits, they may offer more potential to understand how cultural patterns vary across situations and contexts both for individuals (Bagozzi, Wong, Abe, & Bergami, 2000; Henrich et al., 2005) and for teams (Gelfand, Brett, Imai, Tsai, & Huang, 2013). Models of behavior as hinging on social perceptions of other people offer more insights into how cultural patterns change, such as why some longstanding practices persist while others degrade or spread to new populations (e.g., Berger & Heath, 2008; Gelfand et al., 2011; Kuran & Sunstein, 1999; Richerson & Boyd, 2005).

However, the science of norms—normology—remains underdeveloped. Beyond the central feature that norms are social patterns that govern behavior, scholars disagree about how to define and study norms. Norms fall at the boundaries and interstices of the social sciences. Research is scattered across disparate literatures in sociology (Parsons & Shils, 1951), anthropology (Geertz, 1973), economics (Akerlof, 1976), political science (Axelrod, 1985), psychology (Ajzen, 1991; Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990), public health (Neighbors et al., 2008), organizational behavior (Pillutla & Chen, 1999), and marketing (Englis & Solomon, 1995). Some disciplines, such as economics, study norms in the objective patterns of behavior in a social environment. Other disciplines, such as psychology, equate norms with subjective beliefs, perceptions and expectations. Narrow disciplinary views of norms are unfortunate in our view, as normology requires understanding how objective and subjective elements work together. The first aim of this article is to integrate constructs from different literatures into a general framework that captures the important elements of norms and their links to historical and ecological antecedents and behavioral consequences.

While norm research has been scattered across different disciplines, many valuable insights have emerged about processes through which norms influence behavior. These proposals—some overlapping, some distinct—go under a wide array of labels, such as conformity, peer pressure, self-stereotyping, coordination, herding, social proof, and identity signaling (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Hechter & Opp, 2001). The second aim of this article is to distinguish major theories about why people adhere to norms—both classic accounts and emerging theories. As we shall see, there is evidence for multiple mechanisms that operate under different conditions. For each mechanism we suggest ways that it may elucidate the micro level dynamics of cultural acquisition and influence and the macro level dynamics of cultural transmission and change.

To motivate this integration of norm research for understanding cultural dynamics, we start by reviewing some evidentiary limitations of value models. We then review and integrate norm constructs from different literatures into a general framework. Next we make reference to this framework to distil and delineate basic accounts of why people adhere to norms, both classic theories and emerging accounts. Finally we preview the articles of this special issue on norms and cultural dynamics and some of the applied insights gained.

Limitations of value models

Value models posit that early socialization instills a general orientation to seek particular ends, "a broad tendency to prefer certain states of affairs over others" (Hofstede, 1980, p. 19). Value orientations such as individualism and egalitarianism are proposed to explain international variation in organizational behavior. However cross-national differences are moderated by many contexts and conditions. Compared to Chinese students, American students attribute outcomes in more individualistic, person-centered ways, but this divergence manifests when the task conditions demand a snap judgment, not when they afford deliberation (Briley & Aaker, 2006; Chiu, Morris, Hong, & Menon, 2000). On creativity tasks, the novelty of solutions is higher for Israelis than Singaporeans as predicted by individualism, but the difference appears when they work in teams, not when they work solo (as cited in Erez & Nouri, 2010). Likewise, Himalayan expeditions are more likely to summit if from more hierarchical cultures, but this is true only for team expeditions, not solo expeditions (Anicich, Swaab, & Galinsky, 2015). If cultural patterns were carried by broad inner values, one would expect them to manifest generally across task conditions and social contexts. If anything, values would be expressed *more* when a person acts solo, without potential influences from others, than when acting as a member of a team. While dimensions such as individualism and hierarchism are useful for explaining *ways cultures differ*, conceptualizing culture as values does not work well to explain *when cultures differ*.

Throughout the 1990s cross-cultural researchers refined value scales, grasping for a version that would mediate effects of national culture on organizational judgments and behaviors, but evidence has been mixed at best (see Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Morris & Leung, 2000). The GLOBE study, contrary to expectations, found negative associations between cultural values and cultural practices (see Taras, Steel, & Kirkman, 2010). Many important international differences in workplace behavior do not correlate substantially with values (Fischer & Smith, 2003; Kirkman, Lowe, & Gibson, 2006). Recent research suggests that cultural differences may be carried by values only in some behavior domains such as ethical decisions (Fischer, 2006) and under task conditions that focus attention inwards such as privacy and reflection (see Leung & Morris, 2014).

As for the macro question of how cultures reproduce, spread and evolve, value research has assumed a high degree of historical stability. Hofstede (1993, p. 92) proposed that "national cultures change only very slowly if at all." Huntington argued in *The Clash of Civilizations* (1993) that timeless cultural–religious values drive political conflicts: Islamic Terrorism in the Middle East in recent years reflects the same values that drove the conquest of Spain in the 700s. But empirical evidence challenges the premise that civilizations or even countries hold unchanging values. In World Value Survey data from the early 1980s until 1998, Inglehart and Baker (2000) found evidence that country-level values change with economic conditions. Economic growth precipitated a shift toward more individualist values (secularism and self-expression, in the Inglehart model), whereas economic decline especially in ex-Communist countries precipitated a shift toward more collectivist values (tradition and survival values). Content analyses of books (Michel et al., 2011) show a longer-term trend of rising individualism in the US. Twenge, Campbell, and Gentile (2013) found the increased frequency of individualist concepts (e.g., "independent," "individual," "unique"). Greenfield (2013) found that words reflecting a collectivist worldview ("obliged") declined from 1800 to 2000 whereas those reflecting an individualist lifestyle ("choose") increased, tracking the population's shift from agrarian to urban lifestyles. These findings challenge the premise that value orientations are homeostatic, self-replicating systems; individualist values arise from affluence and industrialized lifestyles. Grossmann and Varnum (2015) tracked US individualism over 150 years using a number of aggregate measures (book content, baby names, etc.) and investigating a wide array of antecedents—economic change, pathogen prevalence, urbanization—and time-lagged analyses found that changes in economic structure predicted changes in individualism. In sum, the premise of stable,

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