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From one mind to many: the emerging science of cultural norms

Michele J Gelfand and Joshua Conrad Jackson

Cultural norms permeate human existence. They shape our view of reality and the evolution of culture. In this review, we discuss the benefits of a cultural science that studies norms as well as values, and review research on (a) whether cultural norms are distinctly human, (b) when people will follow cultural norms, and (c) what factors shape the content and strength of cultural norms. We argue that studying cultural norms represents a critical cross-disciplinary, multi-level approach that is ideal for both understanding culture and tapping its potential for positive change.

Address
Department of Psychology, University of Maryland, USA

Corresponding author: Gelfand, Michele J (mjgelfand@gmail.com)

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Social life is profoundly affected by cultural norms, or shared standards for behavior among members of a community [1]. People look to cultural norms when they cooperate [2], conform [3], express prejudice attitudes [4], and drink too much on Friday night [5]. Cultural norms are responsible for both cultural endurance — such as the continued existence of gender typecasting in Hollywood blockbusters [6] — and for cultural change — such as the recent surge in Americans' preferences for unique baby names [7] and increased environmental conscientiousness, as some of the world 'goes green' [8]. In their original theories, scholars differentiated between injunctive norms, which correspond to people should do, and descriptive norms, which refer to what people actually do [9–11]. Yet both fundamentally correspond to intersubjective consensus, or 'common sense' [12,13••], and it is this mutually shared knowledge that systematically guides human decision-making [14–17].

Despite their ubiquity and importance, research in cross-cultural psychology has only recently begun to explore the etiology and function of cultural norms, in part due to the field's almost exclusive focus on cultural values in the past [17–20,21••]. Because norms are represented at both the cultural and individual level, this emerging science of cultural norms engages scholars from numerous disciplines who study people's individual social tendencies and also those that study cultural collectives. In this paper, we survey a broad set of literatures, sampling studies from developmental, social, and cross-cultural psychology — as well as biology, and anthropology — that have sought to answer three summative questions concerning cultural norms: First, are cultural norms distinctly human? Second, what factors influence when people will follow versus deviate from norms? And third, what shapes the content and strength of norms across cultures? As we will argue, studying cultural norms represents a critical cross-disciplinary, multi-level approach that is ideal for not only understanding culture but also tapping its potential for positive change.

Are cultural norms distinctly human?

Humans are not the only species to behave in normative ways. Stickleback fish conform to group foraging decisions [22], and rats follow normative eating patterns when determining whether food is safe or not [23]. Furthermore, a significant body of literature (e.g. [24••,25]) has documented similarities between human and chimpanzee communities, suggesting that chimpanzees share the evolutionary roots that enabled people to follow and enforce cultural norms. Chimpanzees show differences across geographical populations in their foraging [26] and eating behavior [27], and will even focus attention on video scenes that exhibit non-normative aggression [28]. Some scholars note these studies as evidence that chimps, like humans, have the cognitive mechanisms needed for norm construction [29]. However, others argue that humans' tendency to actively seek out and follow intersubjective consensus is unlike any other species, and that this uniqueness underlies the ability of human culture to evolve across generations [30,31]. In explaining this human uniqueness, Göckeritz *et al.* [32] contend that cognitive proclivities such as language and memory have allowed for humans to transmit cumulative culture unlike any other species.

But aside from documenting language and memory advantages, comparative research increasingly suggests that only humans actively construct cultural norms, showing a highly motivated tendency toward emulating others, even when the tangible payoffs from normative behavior are nebulous [33]. Before they have developed a theory of mind, infants prioritize joint activities over individual ones [34], and toddlers choose collaborative options of gathering food, even when it is less efficient than a solo

option [35]. Haun *et al.* [36] find that humans (but not chimps) alter behavior that had previously been individually rewarded to match a peer's (see also [37] for a review on conformist transmission in children and chimpanzees). Moreover, once children begin to participate in social institutions (e.g., begin schooling), they also show a motivation to *enforce* cultural norms [38]. Preschoolers punish puppets that incorrectly perform a culturally prescribed action [39] or misuse a block of wood that has a culturally prescribed purpose [40], and such punishment is especially severe when transgressors are ingroup members [41].

Social psychologists have similarly affirmed a human motivation to actively construct social norms. Even knowing that one is looking at the same object as someone else facilitates belief in shared goals [42], emotional states [43], and attitudes [44]. Similarly, conversations with close others significantly shape memories of major events like the 9–11 bombings [45], and large social networks will develop increasingly shared memory as a function of selective communication [46••]. It is not surprising then that audience tuning, in which actors will tune their behaviors to be congruent with group norms [47], has been widely documented, and many studies have shown that people often rely on intersubjective consensus to a greater extent than objective information: Whether it is voting for members of an all-star baseball team [48] or judging the quality of an actor [15], we tend to draw from normative information to make decisions. Presumably, it is this active norm construction that has enabled humans to evolve cumulative culture [49], wherein individuals will emulate, interpret, and transmit cultural patterns of behavior and belief.

When will people follow cultural norms?

Humans might be unique in their active construction of cultural norms, but people's normative behavior is critically moderated by social and epistemic factors. Norms are critical for helping individuals coordinate their social action and to achieve favorable evaluations from others and avoid sanctions [17,50]. Accordingly, norm compliance is much higher in contexts where reputational concerns and group identity are salient, such as in public as compared to anonymous conditions [51], when there is mutual knowledge of shared group membership [52], and when individuals are embedded in densely connected networks [50]. Though diverse in their source, these factors all serve to increase *felt accountab*ility [19], where individuals feel subject to monitoring and evaluation. This sense of felt accountability serves as a general norm enforcement mechanism, and influences people's behavior according to dominant cultural values [53,54]. Yamagishi and Suzuki [55], for example, show that Japanese are much more likely to behave in line with their culture's interdependent descriptive norms when they are told that reputational information could be shared with others (see also [56]). The tendency to tune to the normative expetations of one's audience affects the behavior of biculturals — who use norms in American culture as behavior guides when identifying with Americans and norms common in Chinese culture when identifying with Chinese [16,18]. Children will also show peer conformity to a greater extent when that peer is present [36, Study 2]. Beyond human audiences, research shows that when people are primed with supernatural monitoring, they follow cooperation norms at a greater extent than at baseline [57,58].

Apart from norms' array of social functions, they are also epistemic tools. Humans are meaning-makers who are motivated to resolve ambiguity through simple analytic principles [59••,60]. Norms, which come with epistemic authority and communicative ease, serve as perfect solutions to our need for cognitive closure (NFC; [61]). As such, we appear to rely most on norms when we are in need of this closure. Studies have found that people demonstrate more shared attention and in-group bias when they are primed with uncertainty [18] and have a greater tendency to make culture-conformist decisions after these primes [62]. Livi and colleagues [61] also find that experimentally increasing the need for cognitive closure will lead people to transmit already-held norms from previous generations at a greater rate. NFC even affects the normative audience to which bicultural tune, with those high on NFC increasingly adhering to norms of the culture with whom they are interacting [16,63].

However, despite the general symbolic and pragmatic benefits of cultural norms, not all norms are created equal, and the influence of norms on behavior sometimes extends only as far as their subjective functionality. Kendal *et al.* [64] show that unsuccessful social learning, where socially learned behavior repeatedly has a low payoff, can result in 'anti-conformism' (i.e., a subsequent refusal to follow group norms), and others find conformist decision-making to be less popular in the context of stable environmental conditions and easy tasks [65]. This subjective functionality also includes the extent to which norms help people coordinate with their group and gain social approval, and as such, norm-inconsistent behavior is most likely in contexts of low accountability [53] and among indiviudals who have high power and low dependence on others [66,67], although the latter relationship is significantly weaker amongst members of collectivist cultures [68].

Norms' subjective functionality also depends on people's motivation to simultaneously feel individually distinctive and also identified with a favorable group [69••,70]. Consistent with these claims, individuals tend to abandon a norm after an unpopular group adopts it [71], and people who are motivated to be personally distinct will act in consistently anti-conformist ways (see [72]). It is also