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The implicit activation mechanism of culture: A survey experiment on associations with childbearing

Hana Shepherd^{a,*}, Emily A. Marshall^b

^a Rutgers University, United States

^b Franklin and Marshall College, United States

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a mechanism by which exposure to forms of culture “in the world” activates individuals’ cognitive associations beneath conscious awareness, making certain behaviors more likely. A survey experiment illustrates part of the proposed mechanism, testing whether cues that make salient a shared cultural representation affect the activation of individuals’ associations with childbearing. Drawing on cultural beliefs regarding the ostensible contradiction between close relations and monetary exchange, we expect that making one of these spheres salient would inhibit activation of associations with the other sphere. As predicted, respondents randomly assigned to a cue regarding family have fewer associations between childbearing and finances. We demonstrate the relevance of these findings to respondents’ fertility desires, a measure connected to behavior. We discuss the conditions under which this mechanism may exert the most influence on behavior and outline key future research questions that the proposed model introduces.

1. Introduction

One of the most important debates in cultural sociology in the last several decades concerns the nature of the relationship between elements of culture located and assessed at the individual level—such as attitudes, beliefs, values, schemas, mental models, repertoires, and toolkits—and action (see [Patterson, 2014](#); [Swidler, 1986, 2001](#); [Vaisey, 2009](#)). Most of this literature has focused on those aspects of culture located within individuals and has paid less attention to those aspects of culture that exist and are assessed at the supraindividual level ([DiMaggio, 1997](#)). There is analytical value to considering the concept we refer to as culture at both the individual, cognitive level and at the supraindividual level (e.g., [D’Andrade, 1995](#); [DiMaggio, 1997](#); [Strauss & Quinn, 1997](#)); [Lizardo \(2017\)](#) refers to this distinction as one between personal and public culture.

At the individual level, culture is encoded as cognitive structures that store information about previous experiences; individual-level (or personal) culture draws on cognitive processes involved in building and using those stored representations (e.g., attention, interpretation, inference). At the supraindividual (or public) level, culture includes representations that can exist independent of their articulation or display by specific individuals, such as narratives, symbols, signs, widely available messages, discourses, and ideologies. Understanding culture, according to [DiMaggio \(1997\)](#), requires attention not only to how shared information is stored in individuals’ memory or to the external symbolic environment, but to the interaction between them. Most research on culture examines either one form of culture or the other, but relatively little work directly addresses the interaction between the two.

Work in cognitive psychology helps illustrate one possible mechanism by which public or supraindividual forms of culture

* Corresponding author at: 26 Nichol Ave., New Brunswick, NJ, 08901, United States.

E-mail address: hshepherd@sociology.rutgers.edu (H. Shepherd).

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interface with personal cultural forms to make certain behaviors more likely. We propose that this mechanism operates largely through forms of individual culture that individuals often cannot explicitly articulate, or what Lizardo (2017) refers to as non-declarative personal culture. We call this the *implicit activation mechanism* of culture. This paper develops an empirical application of this theoretical approach to the study of childbearing, using an experimental survey design.

We use experimental methods to bring to mind widely circulating cultural beliefs about a perceived contradiction between intimate relations and economic transactions and then observe how those cues influence cognition about childbearing. We illustrate the implications of this interaction for a measure of fertility-related behavioral desires—preferences about tradeoffs between work and family size. While we do not provide empirical evidence for all elements of the proposed mechanism, the evidence here indicates the value of additional empirical research into this mechanism and we provide suggestions regarding the direction of that research in the discussion. By applying the proposed mechanism to the domain of childbearing, we contribute to a growing literature that calls for building more realistic models of cognitive processes into the study of demographic behavior (Bachrach & Morgan, 2013; Bachrach, 2014; Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan, & Kohler, 2011; Thornton et al., 2012).

2. Implicit activation mechanism and the interaction of cultural forms

Culture scholars have drawn on current work in social and cognitive psychology to improve our understanding of the relationship between individual cognition, conceptualized as a key element of culture, and supraindividual forms of culture (e.g. Cerulo, 2002; Lizardo, 2004; Martin, 2010; Miles, 2014; Vaisey, 2009). In linking these two levels of analysis of culture, most scholars have focused on the processes by which supraindividual culture is learned and stored cognitively at the individual level; how supraindividual culture becomes “internalized.” As Collett and Lizardo (2014) note, this research “...argues that culture is powerful in social life because it becomes internalized as highly accessible schemas: cognitive structures used for categorization and interpretation of events, objects, situations, and persons” (p. 97). One way in which culture is shared is that individuals learn similar patterns and associations, stored at the individual level as sets of cognitive associations. This process, which occurs over time and depends on repeated exposures in order to consolidate learning, is how individuals acquire forms of supraindividual culture.

The implicit activation mechanism differs from most existing studies by providing an account of how supraindividual culture and the cultural environment interact with culture stored at the individual level *after* individuals learn and store cognitive associations. This proposed mechanism addresses how supraindividual forms of culture *activate* culture stored at the individual level in everyday life, in a manner that operates beneath the conscious awareness of individuals. We illustrate the mechanism, and its contrast to other accounts of the interaction between supraindividual forms of culture and individual level forms of culture, in Fig. 1, which presents the conceptual model and our study design.

The implicit activation mechanism (arrow A) is based on short-term exposures to supraindividual elements of culture, in contrast to the mechanism represented by arrow B, which relies on long-term or repeated exposure that shapes the learning of cognitive associations.¹ Frequently encountered elements of supraindividual culture can make certain cognitive associations salient to individuals exposed to those elements. The effects of activating cognitive concepts through the implicit activation mechanism are short-lived and context-dependent. The effects of supraindividual elements of culture occur regardless of an individual’s endorsement of the meaning of that element of culture. For example, Alter and Kwan (2009) find that exposing white Americans to symbols associated with East Asia (e.g., the yin-yang symbol) affects subsequent evaluations of the likelihood of change, a meaning generally associated with those symbols.

We contend that this mechanism is important for two reasons. First, because different supraindividual elements of culture are unevenly distributed (e.g., there are more Christian crosses in certain neighborhoods or in certain states than others, corresponding to the distribution of Christian-identified organizations or how frequently individuals display the cross in jewelry and clothing, or around their houses), some individuals are repeatedly exposed to some primes more than others. The repeated activation of particular cognitive associations makes those cognitive associations more chronically accessible (e.g., Hall, 2003), increasing the frequency of their use across situations. Differential exposure to supraindividual elements of culture may map onto different social categories and thus constitute one way in which these categories become meaningful in shaping behavior. Second, while the proposed mechanism may not play a large role in shaping behavior most of the time, it may be particularly influential at specific decision moments in life. We elaborate on this point below.

The “study design” layer of Fig. 1 describes the relationship between the conceptual model and our empirical evidence. We use an experimental method to illustrate arrow A of this mechanism. We randomly assign respondents to conditions where they are exposed to certain cues (regarding family or finances) meant to introduce widely shared cultural beliefs about intimate relations or economic transactions, or to a control group exposed to no framework. The cues make shared cultural beliefs about families or money psychologically salient to individuals. We then ask respondents to generate a list of words that come to mind when they think about the decision to have children, which we refer to as keywords. We assess how the cues, which bring to mind supraindividual cultural beliefs, affect the activation or inhibition of individual cognitive concepts, represented by keywords.

Finally, we conduct a validity check that demonstrates the relevance of activated cognitive concepts to an outcome measure. We analyze the relationship between respondent-generated keywords and reported desired work-family size tradeoffs, a measure of

¹ Connectionist models of cognition — where cognition emerges from the activation of interconnected networks of neurons — elide the distinction between the storage of representations (memory) and the activation of associations. Learning, or long-term storage of representations, is a result of repeated activation in these models (e.g., Conrey & Smith, 2007; Rumelhart, Hinton, & McClelland, 1986; Smith, 1998).

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