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FlashReport

Are social prediction errors universal? Predicting compliance with a direct request across cultures

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ABSTRACT

Previous research conducted in the United States has demonstrated that help-seekers fail to appreciate the embarrassment and awkwardness (i.e., social costs) targets would experience by saying "no" to a request for help. Underestimation of such social costs leads help-seekers to underestimate the likelihood that others will comply with their requests. We hypothesized that this error would be attenuated in a collectivistic culture. We conducted a naturalistic help-seeking study in the U.S. and China and found that Chinese help-seekers were more accurate than American help-seekers at predicting compliance. A supplementary scenario study in which we measured individual differences in collectivistic and individualistic orientations within a single culture provided converging evidence for the association between collectivism and expectations of compliance. In both cases, the association between collectivism (culturally defined or measured) and predicted compliance was mediated by participants' ratings of the social costs of saying "no".

Politeness in responding to others' requests is considered a universal norm (Goffman, 1967; Grice, 1975). The likelihood that a request for help will be met with rudeness or refusal is slim, regardless of where one is in the world. However, research conducted in the United States has shown that people tend not to realize this fact when they are in the position of needing help (Flynn & Lake (Bohns), 2008). Help-seekers focus on their own concerns rather than the social costs of saying "no" (how uncomfortable their targets would feel refusing a request). Thus, help-seekers typically underestimate the likelihood that others will comply with their requests.

We examined whether this egocentrically derived social prediction error would be attenuated in a more collectivistic culture. Previous research has demonstrated that help-seekers in collectivistic cultures tend to be more attuned than help-seekers in individualistic cultures to the instrumental costs helpers incur by saying "yes" to a request (i.e., the burden placed on helpers; e.g., Kim, Sherman, Ko, & Taylor, 2006). We hypothesized that collectivistic help-seekers would similarly be more attuned to the social costs of saying "no" (the embarrassment targets would experience by saying "no"). Thus, we hypothesized that help-seekers in a more collectivistic culture would more accurately predict compliance than help-seekers in a more individualistic culture.

An important characteristic of individualistic cultures is an assumption that each individual is uniquely responsible for looking after his own personal needs and desires (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Members of individualistic cultures are believed to act largely of their own volition – doing something only if it is consistent with their own personal wishes – rather than out of a sense of obligation or social pressure. Importantly, however, this assumption is often incorrect. Many studies have illustrated the ways in which members of individualistic cultures (usually Americans) can be compelled to engage in behaviors they do not personally enjoy or condone out of social pressures and/or fear of embarrassment (e.g., Asch, 1956; Milgram, 1963). Yet the general belief that others are acting out of personal volition persists, even when a person's behavior seems odd or questionable to outside observers (e.g., administering excessive electric shocks). In general, observers in individualistic cultures tend to discount face-saving concerns and social pressures as an explanation for others' behavior (Bohns & Flynn, 2010; Sabini, Siepmann, & Stein, 2001; Van Boven, Loewenstein, & Dunning, 2005).

Within the context of helping, the assumption that an individual's behavior is independently motivated implies that when a person is asked for help, she will decide whether or not to help of her own free will, not out of any sense of obligation or coercion (Kim et al., 2006). Despite this assumption, social pressures and face-saving concerns do indeed drive the behavior of helpers, compelling them to comply with requests rather than suffer the awkwardness of saying "no." Yet, again, this fact seems to be lost on outside observers: help-seekers in

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individualistic cultures tend to neglect the face-saving concerns of potential helpers and consequently underestimate compliance (Flynn & Lake (Bohns), 2008).

Conversely, a central tenet of collectivistic cultures is an assumption of interdependence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Individuals are expected to place relational and group needs above personal needs (Kim & Markus, 1999; Triandis, 1995). The corresponding assumption in helping contexts is that potential helpers are, in fact, generally obligated to say "yes." Members of collectivistic cultures are expected to help others even if helping is not in line with their own personal interests. Consequently, in collectivistic cultures it is the *help-seeker's* (not the *potential helper's*) responsibility to decide whether a particular request is worthwhile or whether he will unnecessarily burden a potential helper by asking (Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008). This expectation means that in addition to managing their own concerns, help-seekers in collectivistic cultures must also take into account the concerns of potential helpers.

We hypothesized that because help-seekers in collectivistic cultures are more attuned to the perspectives of potential helpers, in addition to rating the instrumental costs potential helpers would incur by *agreeing* to a request to be greater, they would also rate the social costs potential helpers would incur by *refusing* a request to be greater. That is, we predicted that help-seekers in more collectivistic cultures would be more attuned to the social pressures and face-saving concerns (the discomfort of saying "no") that would compel a target to agree to a request. Accordingly, help-seekers in more collectivistic cultures should be more accurate at predicting (i.e., less likely to underestimate) compliance than help-seekers in more individualistic cultures.

We initially tested this hypothesis by conducting a naturalistic help request study in two cultures that have been shown to vary in the extent to which collectivistic orientations predominate: China and the United States. To garner greater confidence that our findings were indeed driven by differences in the prevalence of collectivism between these two cultures, we conducted a supplementary scenario study in which we measured individualistic and collectivistic orientations within a single culture and looked at associations between these orientations and expectations of compliance.

Study 1

Study 1 was conducted at two large, renowned, cosmopolitan universities with comparable campuses and student bodies: Renmin University of China in Beijing ($N = 97$; 70 female), and Columbia University in New York City ($N = 82$; 53 female). Participants at each site made requests of passers-by after first predicting the likelihood that their targets would comply with their requests. All participants were recruited and compensated via standard procedures for each site, and no participants elected to withdraw from the study.

Participants initially received the following instructions, administered in the appropriate language for each site (English or Mandarin): "In this study, you will ask strangers (in person) for a favor. The favor you will be asking them to do is to fill out a paper-and-pen questionnaire that takes approximately 5–10 min to complete." After reviewing the questionnaire their targets would complete (which included filler items from several scales), participants received guidelines for making their requests. They had to obtain compliance from five different people, could approach only strangers, and had to follow a script ("Will you fill out a questionnaire?"), which was provided to them before they made their predictions. They were to record on a tally sheet the response ("yes" or "no") of every person they approached. The reliability of this procedure was vetted extensively by Flynn and Lake (Bohns) (2008) who found that participants consistently followed the instructed procedures.

Predicted and actual compliance measures

After reviewing the instructions, participants were asked, "How many people do you think you will have to approach before five people agree to fill out a questionnaire?" They were then sent outside and asked to return once they had accomplished their task. Participants' predictions were compared to the actual number of people they reported approaching as our measure of prediction accuracy.

Perceived social costs of saying "no"

After making their predictions but before making their actual requests, participants completed a 4-item, 7-point scale measuring the perceived social costs of saying "no" to a request. Specifically, participants reported how *difficult* they thought it would be for targets to say "no" to their requests, and how *bad*, *awkward*, and *embarrassed* they thought potential helpers would feel saying "no" to their requests ($\alpha = .80$).

Perceived instrumental costs of saying "yes"

Following previous work by Kim et al. (2006), we also included a proxy for the instrumental costs (the burden) of saying "yes" to this request. Participants rated on a 7-point scale how *easy* targets would find filling out a questionnaire.

Results

We expected to find that our Chinese help-seekers were more accurate at predicting compliance than our American help-seekers. Further, we hypothesized that any differences in prediction accuracy between the two samples would be mediated by their differential ratings of the social costs of saying "no" to a request for help. To test these predictions, we first conducted a mixed-model ANOVA with sample (China, U.S.) as the between-subjects factor and predicted versus actual compliance as repeated measures.

Main effects

We replicated the original underestimation of compliance effect. Across the two samples combined, the number of people participants predicted they would need to ask ($M = 13.4$, $SD = 8.5$) was greater than the actual number of people they needed to ask ($M = 7.5$, $SD = 3.0$), $F(1, 177) = 92.7$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .34$.

There were also main effects of culture on both actual and predicted compliance. Not surprisingly, our Chinese help-seekers *actually* had to ask fewer people for help to successfully get five people to comply ($M = 6.7$, $SD = 1.8$) than did our American help-seekers ($M = 8.3$, $SD = 3.7$), $F(1, 177) = 14.07$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$. Our Chinese help-seekers also *predicted* that they would have to ask fewer people ($M = 10.8$, $SD = 5.8$) than did our American help-seekers ($M = 16.1$, $SD = 10.1$), $F(1, 177) = 19.28$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$. Importantly, this latter finding persisted when controlling for actual compliance, $F(1, 176) = 14.5$, $p < .001$.

Sample × accuracy interaction

As hypothesized, there was a significant interaction of sample with the predicted × actual compliance repeated-measure term, $F(1, 177) = 9.24$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, indicating that our Chinese help-seekers more accurately predicted compliance than our American help-seekers (Fig. 1). While our American help-seekers overestimated the number of people they would have to approach by an average of 7.8 people (48.5%), $F(1, 177) = 74.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .30$, our Chinese help-seekers overestimated by only 4.1 people (38.0%), $F(1, 177) = 23.69$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$.

To ensure that these findings were driven by differences in egocentric social prediction between the two samples, rather than real cultural differences in how normatively difficult it is for helpers to say "no," we re-ran the same mixed-model ANOVA [sample × (predicted × actual