

Descriptive Norms as Carriers of Culture in Negotiation¹

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Abstract

Research on culture and negotiation is critical for expanding theories of negotiation beyond Western cultures and for helping people to manage their interdependence in a world of increasing global threats and opportunities. Despite progress of understanding cultural influences on negotiation, research is limited in that it portrays a static and decontextualized view of culture and ignores cultural dynamics. The almost exclusive focus on main effects of culture in negotiation has its roots in a subjectivist approach to culture which has prioritized the study of values, or trans-situational goals. In this article, we discuss the descriptive norms approach to culture and its promise for the study of culture and negotiation. A descriptive norms approach highlights the dynamics of culture in negotiation (i.e., the conditions under which culture effects become amplified, reduced, or even reversed), it identifies new empirical mediating mechanisms for cultural effects, and it sheds new light into understanding cultural competence in intercultural negotiations.

Keywords

culture, negotiation, descriptive norms

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As many articles in this volume attest, culture and negotiation research is beginning to thrive. Once an area largely atheoretical in its approach and segmented from the mainstream of negotiation literature (Gelfand and Dyer, 2000), research on culture and negotiation is beginning to broaden its empirical scope and to illuminate universality and culture-specificity of negotiators' psychological states, communication patterns, and negotiated outcomes (see Brett and Gelfand, 2006; and Gelfand, Fulmer and Severance, 2010 for reviews). Research on culture and negotiation is critical for developing theories that are applicable beyond Western negotiators, and is a mandate in a world of increasing global opportunities and global threats. Whether it is diplomats, global managers, immigrants, students, or travelers alike, the need to understand cultural influences on negotiation and all its nuances is a critical skill among anyone who needs to manage their interdependence with people from different cultures.

Despite its progress, research on culture and negotiation is not without its limitations. To date, cultural research on negotiation has been highly decontextualized – focusing on main effects of culture on negotiation without sufficient attention to *cultural dynamics* – or in other words, the conditions under which cultural effects are amplified, reduced, or even reversed in negotiation. This is problematic for both theoretical and practical reasons. From a theoretical point of view, negotiations, whether they are in the U.S. or abroad, never take place in a vacuum; they are always situated in a particular social context. Yet research has portrayed a very static view of cultural differences in negotiation and has generally ignored how cultural effects change based on the situational context and/or individuals' unique personalities (Gelfand and Cai, 2004; Morris and Gelfand, 2004). The neglect of cultural dynamics in research is surprising given the intellectual traditions of both negotiation and culture fields. Research on negotiation has long argued that the situation is a powerful moderator of negotiators' cognitions and behavior (Kramer and Messick, 1995). Likewise, scholars in cross-cultural psychology have also increasingly advocated a dynamic view of culture in psychology (Gelfand and Realo, 1999; Hong, Morris, Chiu and Martinez, 2000; Morris and Gelfand, 2004). Culture and negotiation research, accordingly, would benefit from moving beyond just the question of "Are there cultural differences" to a more dynamic perspective which asks the question "What are the contingencies of cultural differences" in order to provide a more nuanced perspective on culture and negotiation. A static view of culture in negotiation research is also problematic for practice, as it holds the risk of propagating cultural stereotypes and fails to prepare managers for navigating cultural differences in the wide variety of situations in which they will be negotiating that might change the cultural playing field.

We suspect that one of the reasons why research on culture and negotiation has tended to portray a very static view of culture is because the field has relied on a *subjectivist* approach to culture as its dominant paradigm, a perspective which

mainly focuses on how personal values, or trans-situational goals (Schwartz, 1994) explain cultural differences in negotiations. The use of values to explain cultural differences, to be sure, has intuitive appeal. Values are broad constructs that psychologists have been examining for decades, and thus, their use has enabled researchers to understand the complexity of culture in familiar psychological territory (Bond, 1997). Values also lend themselves easily to measurement at the individual level, where much of the research on culture resides (Morris, Polodny and Ariel, 2000). However, a focus on values tends to reinforce a static view of culture. In the values approach, culture is typically reduced to individual difference or ‘personality’ like variables (Gabrenya, 1999; Morris et al., 2000). This focus on cross-cultural differences in internal values has taken place in the absence of a concomitant focus on *external* influences on behavior, such as cultural norms and constraints and components of the larger social structure, or what can be called a *structuralist approach* (Gabrenya, 1999; Morris et al., 2000). Moreover, because values are conceptualized to be trans-situational goals (Schwartz, 1994), research has tended to assume that cultural effects are quite stable across situations, and as a result, cultural dynamics in negotiation have been largely ignored.

In this article, we discuss an alternative but complimentary perspective, the descriptive norm approach, and its promise for the study of culture and negotiation. At its core, this approach prioritizes constraints and affordances of negotiation behavior derived from different descriptive norms across cultures. Because norms in different situations can change dramatically, the descriptive norm approach highlights potential dynamics of culture and negotiation that are not as evident in the personal values approach. In what follows, we first review the central tenets of the descriptive norm approach and growing evidence for its capacity to explain cross-cultural differences across a wide range of phenomena. We then turn to the implications of this approach for the study of culture and negotiation, with particular attention to how this approach raises new insight into the dynamics of culture in negotiation, suggests different ways of measuring culture as mediators in negotiation, and sheds new light into understanding cultural competence in intercultural negotiations. Our intent is not to discredit personal values and beliefs as important explanatory constructs in the field, but rather to show the promise that the descriptive norm approach offers on the cultural psychology of negotiation behavior.

Descriptive Norms as Carriers of Culture

Although cross-cultural psychologists have long held that behavioral differences across cultures are due to differences in individuals’ personal preferences (e.g., values, attitudes), a recent surge of scholarship offers a new perspective, proposing

that behavioral differences across cultures can be accounted by differences in descriptive norms (Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi, Shteynberg and Wan, 2010; Fischer et al., 2009; Shteynberg, Gelfand and Kim, 2009; Wan, Chiu, Tam et al., 2007; Zou et al., 2009). Descriptive norms are defined as individually-held perceptions of commonplace beliefs, values and behaviors of one's cultural group (Shteynberg et al., 2009). Notably, a descriptive norm does not refer to the perception of what *must be* felt, thought and done according to the dictates of a given cultural group. Rather, it is a perception of *what is* typically or ubiquitously felt, thought and done in a cultural group (for further discussion, see Cialdini and Trost, 1998).

The cognitive construct of a descriptive norm has been discussed in a number of social psychological theories (for a review, see Cialdini and Trost, 1998). Indeed, a plethora of social cognitive theory (e.g., Hardin and Higgins, 1996; Hogg and Abrams, 1993; Latané, 1996) and laboratory and field evidence (e.g., Aarts and Dijksterhuis, 2003; Lowery, Hardin and Sinclair, 2001; Sechrist and Stangor, 2001) support the notion that people's cognitive and behavioral reactions are partly shaped by cognitions about important others' attitudes and behaviors (Cialdini and Trost, 1998).

Nevertheless, research on descriptive norms across cultures has only recently received empirical attention, perhaps because of the dominance of values in the study of culture. While psychologists have focused on individuals' perceptions of what is typical, descriptive norms become a *collective* construct to the extent that they are shared across individuals. Because within cultures individuals are often exposed to *common* political and educational systems, media, markets, dominant language, and national symbols, this can indeed produce substantial sharing of what is perceived to be typical behavior, values, and characteristics in one's culture. Accordingly, descriptive norms are important carriers of cultural differences (Chiu et al., 2010; Shteynberg et al., 2009; Yamagishi, 2010; Zou et al., 2009).

Key Assumptions of the Descriptive Norm Approach

The descriptive norm approach to culture rests on a number of theoretical assumptions (Chiu et al., 2010; Shteynberg et al., 2009; Zou et al., 2009): (1) Individuals assess the values, beliefs, and behaviors that are widespread in their socio-cultural context, and these perceptions are distinct from personal values and beliefs; (2) individuals *act* on behalf of their perceptions of the descriptive norms at times even more than on their personal values and beliefs, and they change their behavior when situational contingencies change; and (3) individuals, through their actions, reinforce and sustain descriptive norms over time.²

² The descriptive norm approach has also been referred to as *intersubjective consensus* (Chiu et al., 2010; Zou et al., 2009). Each focus on the perceptions of the values, beliefs, and behaviors that are widespread in one's group.

Distinction of descriptive norms from values. Descriptive norms, or perceptions of commonplace beliefs, values and behaviors of one's cultural group (how one looks *outward* toward one's cultural environments) are distinct from one's own personal values (how one looks inward; Chiu et al., 2010). Accordingly, measures of descriptive norms differ from personal values measures in that the referent of question is not the self, but the cultural group of interest (e.g., nation). That is, instead of asking the participants about their own preferences (e.g., *Do you respect people who are modest about themselves?*), descriptive norm questions ask participants to reflect on their cultural group's preferences (e.g., *Do most Americans respect people who are modest about themselves?*). Like personal preference measures, descriptive norms can vary in their content. For instance, descriptive norm measures have been used to capture cultural group consensus surrounding collectivism (Shteynberg et al., 2009), causal beliefs (Zou et al., 2009) and regulatory focus (Zou et al., 2009). In addition, descriptive norm measures can inquire about the perceived consensus across distinct cultural groups, such as work groups, religious groups, community groups and nuclear families (Fischer et al., 2009).

Research using such measures has indeed shown that perceptions of descriptive norms vary reliably across groups. Fischer et al. (2009) found that individuals across eleven cultures (i.e., Argentina, Brazil, Germany, India, Lebanon, New Zealand, Peru, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, United Kingdom and United States) differed reliably in their perceptions of collectivistic descriptive norms. Shteynberg et al. (2009) found that as compared to Americans, South Koreans rated their national cultural group as more typically collectivistic. Wan, Chiu, Tam et al. (2007) found similar differences in perceived norms across American and Chinese respondents. Finally, Zou et al. (2009) found that compared to Americans, Poles perceived higher collectivistic norms in their national group and that Asians perceived lower dispositionist causality norms in their national group. There is also growing evidence for the dissociation between prevalence of individual-level values or practices in a culture and the perceptions of what is typical in a culture. For example, Hashimoto and Yamagishi (2009) showed that while Japanese perceived that most individuals in their country endorse interdependent values, when asked their own personal preferences, most Japanese reported that they personally expressed a stronger desire to be independent rather than interdependent. Shteynberg et al. (2009) also found that South Koreans viewed themselves as less collectivistic than others in their country while Americans viewed themselves as less individualistic than others in their country (see also Zou et al., 2009). Notably, other research has shown that the correlations between personal values and descriptive norms at the individual level range from small and non-significant (e.g., Shteynberg et al., 2009) to moderate (e.g., Wan, Chiu, Peng and Tam, 2007; Wan, Chiu, and Tam et al., 2007).

Descriptive norms as motivators of cultural actions. A second assumption of the descriptive norm approach is that such perceptions have considerable influence

on individual behavior over and above personal preferences. That is to say, what people personally value does not always channel psychological processes; rather, people sometimes act on the beliefs and values they *perceive to be widespread in their culture*. A number of studies have shown evidence for this proposition. Fischer (2006; Fischer et al., 2009) found that perceived collectivistic norms predict self-reported behavior. Shteynberg et al. (2009) showed that Americans and Koreans differed in their perceptions of collectivistic descriptive norms. Further, differences in perceived descriptive (collectivistic) norms between Americans and South Koreans explained Americans' tendency to put greater weight on actor intentionality when attributing blame, as compared to South Koreans. By contrast, personal differences in collectivism did not differentiate the groups and were not mediators of cultural differences in attributions. Likewise, Koreans' tendency to perceive duty violations (versus right violations) as particularly harmful was mediated by differences in descriptive norms for collectivism as compared to personal values. Zou et al. (2009) found that variance in perceived collectivistic norms explained the tendency for individuals to find a consensus appeal more persuasive than a consistency appeal. Additionally, perceptions of dispositionist norms mediated cultural differences in internal attributions, with higher perceptions of dispositionist norms leading to greater internal attributions. Zou et al. (2009) also found that perceptions of prevention focus norms explained cultural variations in regret. Heine, Buchtel and Norenzayan (2008) found that aggregate perceptions of perceived conscientiousness of one's compatriots predicted cultural differences in conscientiousness-related behaviors (e.g., postal workers' speed and clock accuracy) more than self-reported and observer ratings of conscientiousness in nations. Notably, in all of the above studies descriptive norms were better able to mediate cross-cultural differences as compared to personal values (see also Wan Chiu, and Peng et al., 2007; Wan, Chiu, Tam et al., 2007), a point to which we return to below.

Functions of descriptive norms. Descriptive norms are theorized to have an important function in coordinating social behavior. That is, they are posited to predict individual behavior because actions based in perceptions of cultural consensus increase the likelihood of successful social coordination and enhance favorable outcomes for the self (Hardin and Higgins, 1996; Yamagishi, 2011). As noted by Chiu et al. (2010), "Intersubjective knowledge of what people in one's group believe affords useful heuristics for anticipating the normative responses of others... people who have learned to apply such knowledge can more accurately anticipate others' reactions to their actions, and hence, will behave more wisely when navigating the complicated interpersonal terrain" (p. 4). Given that an individual's successful goal accomplishment is exceedingly rare without some involvement of other cultural actors, social coordination, and thus, norm-based behavior, is essential to the accomplishment of one's goals. Put simply, acting on one's perceptions of descriptive norms, rather than one's values, is critical in being "socially wise" in order to achieve desirable outcomes (Yamagishi and Suzuki, 2009). In

this respect, the use of descriptive norms becomes a ‘*default strategy*’ used in various situations without conscious calculation in order to avoid making errors which can result in negative evaluations (Yamagishi, 2010; Yamagishi, Hashimoto and Schug, 2008).³ Moreover, when people collectively act on the descriptive norms they perceive in their environment, descriptive norms become self-sustaining (Aoki, 2001; Yamagishi, 2010).

Importantly, according to the descriptive norm approach, cultural behaviors are *goal-directed*, *adaptive* and *malleable*, rather than inflexible manifestations of internalized cultural traits. Although people use descriptive norms generally as a default strategy because such strategies are ‘ecologically adaptive’ to majority of situations in one’s cultural milieu (Yamagishi, 2010), the descriptive norm account argues that because of the adaptive nature of cultural behaviors, when situational contingencies change, cultural behaviors change correspondingly (Chiu et al., 2010). This assumption differs widely from the trans-situational goal approach that is inherent to values research.

In sum, research has illustrated that descriptive norms – perceptions of commonplace beliefs, values and behaviors of one’s cultural group – are distinct from personal values, motivate behavior across a wide range of contexts, serve a variety of functions for individuals and groups, and are adaptable to different situational contingencies. Now that we have reviewed the descriptive norm approach, we discuss its implications for culture and negotiation research in the sections below.

Descriptive Norms: Implications for Culture and Negotiation Research

Like other areas in psychology and organizational behavior, much of the research on culture and negotiation has taken a subjectivist, personal values approach. This approach itself was an important shift from earlier work that was largely descriptive and atheoretical, relying mainly on country as the source of cultural explanation (Gelfand and Dyer, 2000). Below we expand the ‘cultural toolkit’ in culture and negotiation research and highlight how the descriptive norm approach helps to a) better align the theory and measurement of culture in negotiation; b) capture dynamics of culture and negotiation, and c) offer insight into cultural competence in intercultural negotiations.

Theoretical and Methodological Alignment in the Study of Culture and Negotiation

From a conceptual point of view, reducing culture to individual differences in values and beliefs runs a reductionist risk; that is, it reduces culture – a collective

³ The function of descriptive norms need not be only regulated by purely strategic considerations, however. The quest to understand the values, beliefs, and practices that are widespread in one’s group can also be motivated by wanting to do the right thing, as well as to do it with others, thus serving important epistemic and identity needs, respectively (Hardin and Higgins, 1996).

construct – to individual differences, a practice that is referred to as methodological individualism (Chiu et al., 2010; Durkheim, 1897/1997). Culture, however, is fundamentally about the shared reality of individuals. Accordingly, perceptions of what are widespread values, belief, and behaviors in one's group are in better *theoretical* alignment with research seeking to understand cultural influences on negotiation.

Aside from having better theoretical alignment, descriptive norm measurements may provide better insight into the mediating mechanisms in cross-cultural negotiation research. The empirical ideal in cross-cultural negotiation research has always been to not only demonstrate cultural differences, but explain why they occur. As Bond and Van de Vijver (2007) admonish us, "... we must organize our findings theoretically before we drown in a welter of differences, we must dispel the thickening fog of culture" (p. 9). To date, values have received mixed support as mediating mechanisms in research (Bond, 1997; Ip and Bond, 1995; Leung, Bond and Schwartz, 1995; Tinsley, 1998) and assessment of individual values (as compared to descriptive norms) produce findings opposite to what one would expect based on extant theorizing and research. For example, Shteynberg et al. (2009) showed that when individuals were asked about their personal values, Americans reported they were much more collectivistic than Koreans. However, when asked about the *cultural* context, American reported that most people in the United States emphasized individualism. Accordingly, the descriptive norm approach highlights a new empirical mediator of cultural differences in negotiation behavior, namely perceptions of the *values, practices, and beliefs that are widespread in one's group*. Numerous studies have illustrated that descriptive norms are better able to 'unpackage' cultural differences as compared to personal values (Shteynberg et al., 2009; Wan, Chiu, and Peng et al., 2007; Wan Chiu, and Tam et al., 2007; Zou et al., 2009). Thus, by incorporating descriptive norm measures into research on culture and negotiation, we may be better able to "unpack" cultural effects.

Importantly, descriptive norms are *agnostic* about their content; scales can be developed to match the theory being advanced. Research on psychological processes in negotiation in Western cultures might arguably reflect descriptive norms of individualism – perceptions that most members of their cultural group see themselves as independent from others and are motivated to maintain and cultivate a view of one's self as a unique set of traits and characteristics that is better than others (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Individuals with high independent descriptive norms may exhibit greater competitive biases, a focus on economic gains for the self, and greater sensitivity to personal rights and individual agency, all of which are 'socially wise' strategies based on the descriptive norms in the cultural context. By contrast, in Non-Western cultures, negotiation behavior in general may be more reflective of descriptive norms of interdependence –

perceptions that most members of their culture define themselves in terms of their collective identities (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). People with high collective self descriptive norms are likely to focus on fulfilling social obligations and to engage in behavior that doesn't harm their reputation in the group (which could cause ostracism) in order to be 'socially wise'. Put differently, independent and interdependent descriptive norms afford different negotiation strategies that are 'rational' in their own ecological contexts (Gelfand et al., in press).

Importantly, descriptive norm measures are not limited to these cultural constructs; new measures can be developed to unpack cultural effects in negotiation. For example, relational descriptive norms are an interesting theoretical territory for negotiation research (Gelfand, Brett, Imai, Gunia, Tsai and Huang, 2011). Consistent with research on the relational self, individuals with high relational descriptive norms perceive that most others in their cultural group define themselves in terms of their close relationships wherein empathy and a sense of dyadic connection is critical to maintain (i.e., parent-child, teacher-student, or supervisor-subordinate) (Brewer and Gardner, 1996; Gelfand, Major, Raver, Nishii and O'Brien, 2006). Given the scholarship on the relational self (e.g., Johnson, Selenta and Lord, 2006; Gelfand et al., 2006), individuals with high relational self descriptive norms are likely to place a great emphasis on positive interpersonal interactions, exhibit great interpersonal empathy, as well as have high concern for outcomes that benefit the dyadic relationship. Relational descriptive norms afford negotiation behavior that is aimed at maximizing relational gains (trust, commitment), and they can also afford relational biases wherein individuals sacrifice for the benefit of the relationship (Amanatullah and Morris and Curhan, 2008; Curhan, Neale, Ross and Rosencranz-Engelmann, 2008; Gelfand et al., 2006).

Descriptive norms for honor also have great potential for research on negotiation. Miller (1993) captures the essence of honor as "above all, the keen sensitivity to the experience of humiliation and shame, a sensitivity manifested by the desire to be envied by others and the propensity to envy the successes of others" (p. 116). In honor cultures, individuals are expected to go to great lengths to uphold the reputation of oneself and one's family, and norms prescribe projecting strength and power to men and modesty, shame, and caution to women (Vandello and Cohen, 2003). The United States South and West have been identified by many as quintessential cultures of honor (Nisbett and Cohen, 1996), as is much of the Middle East (Lun, Gelfand, Bruss, Al-Dabbagh, Aycan, Daghir, et al., 2011), where honor can be gained or stolen. It stands to reason that honor descriptive norms would produce distinct conflict and negotiation dynamics.

In all, a descriptive norm approach highlights new ways to assess culture in negotiation that are theoretically aligned with the concept of culture as a shared reality as compared to an individual difference variable, and offers new ways to 'unpack' cultural differences in negotiation through alternative mechanisms.

Modeling Cultural Dynamics in Negotiation: Beyond Main Effects

As noted above, the descriptive norm approach suggests that cultural behaviors are goal-directed, adaptive and malleable and are sensitive to situational contingencies. Thus, although people use descriptive norms generally as a default strategy because such strategies are ‘ecologically adaptive’ to many situations in one’s cultural milieu (Yamagishi, 2011), a central assumption of the descriptive norm account is that when situational contingencies change, cultural behaviors would change correspondingly (Chiu et al., 2010). Cultural behaviors, in this view, are seen as adaptive to a particular ecological niche (Gelfand et al., in press; Yamagishi, 2011). Put simply, we suggest that negotiators refer to the salient norms of their group when negotiating. Because there are many situational and individual factors that activate when such norms are more or less salient, the conditions under which cultural effects are more or less pronounced is a key question for research on culture and negotiation.

Accordingly, below we discuss situational contingencies that could be expected to affect cultural dynamics in negotiation. Some situations are argued to *amplify* the use of the default (descriptive norm) strategies, while others are argued to *reverse* or *suppress* the default strategy. In all, such considerations shift the emphasis from a static to a more dynamic view of culture and negotiation.

Cultural amplifiers. The descriptive norm account helps to illuminate the contextual factors that might serve as culture amplifiers, or in other words, might strengthen or exacerbate cultural differences. A descriptive norm account suggests that cross-cultural differences may be amplified in a number of ways. First, elements of the context may activate the salience of the descriptive norms of one’s group and therefore allow the expression of culture (cf., Tett and Burnett, 2003). For example, research has found that accountability to constituents enhances the propensity for collectivists to be cooperative and for individualists to be competitive in negotiation (Gelfand and Realo, 1999). Accountability in this respect serves as a norm enforcement mechanism in any particular culture and exacerbates cultural differences. Likewise, when the individuals are held responsible to an ingroup audience for their behavioral choices their behavior is more culturally normative (Briley et al., 2000). Situations in which reputational concerns are salient also exacerbate the influence of descriptive norms on behavior, as deviating from descriptive norms can cause ostracism from the group when reputational concerns are high. For example, Yamagishi and Suzuki (2009) showed that when individuals expect that others can share reputational information about each other, Japanese were much more likely to report being interdependent (see also Chen, Chiu and Chan, 2009). Like the accountability results discussed above, what ‘gives’ a good reputation, will vary across cultural groups, thus, the same situation can activate highly different descriptive norms across cultures. For example, making reputational concerns salient among Americans might make

them become much more independent given this is generally the descriptive norm cultivated in the U.S.

Descriptive norms are also more likely activated when individuals are interacting with culturally similar others, thus exacerbating the use of descriptive norms that are relevant in a particular culture. For example, Chan (1992) found that collectivists were much more cooperative with ingroup members than outgroup members. Likewise, Li, Friedman and Hong (2011) found that Chinese became highly cooperative when they interacted with ingroup members, particularly under high accountability. Cultural values and norms may also be activated at the negotiation table itself through the presence of cultural artifacts that activate widely shared cultural values with similar others (e.g., the national flag, language, dress). Furthermore, when the cultural identity of the interaction partner changes, people can adapt their behavioral choices accordingly. For example, research illustrates that biculturals use the intersubjective (descriptive) norms in American culture as behavior guides when interacting with an American and switch to the intersubjective norms in Chinese culture when interacting with a Chinese (Chao, Zhang and Chiu, 2010; Zou et al., 2009). Accordingly a descriptive norm approach helps to explain and predict dynamics that change negotiation behavior given different situational contingencies.

People also use descriptive norms as behavior guides because it serves important epistemic functions. Thus, they are more likely to display descriptive norm-consistent behaviors when these functions are salient, as in situations when there is high uncertainty and/or a need for firm answers. Put differently, in situations of high uncertainty, individuals are more likely to identify with groups as epistemic authorities and conform to group norms (Kruglanski et al., 2005; Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti and De Grada, 2006), and research has shown that cultural differences are exacerbated in situations of high ambiguity (Morris, Leung and Iyengar, 2004). Likewise, in contexts where there high time pressure and/or a high need for closure – defined as a desire to reduce ambiguity in the social context – individuals will utilize cultural knowledge as an easily available cue to guide information processing to a much greater extent than when under low time pressure. Indeed, research has also shown that high need for closure amplifies cultural differences (Fu et al., 2007; Morris and Fu, 2001). For example, American disputants who are high in need for closure prefer relationally unconnected mediators, whereas Chinese disputants who are high in need for closure tend to seek relationally connected mediators, illustrating a positive relationship of need for closure with conformity to cultural norms (Fu et al., 2007). Chiu, Morris, Hong and Menon (2000) found that the tendency for individualists to make internal attributions and collectivists to make external attributions was more extreme among individuals with a high need for cognitive closure (e.g., Webster and Kruglanski, 1994). Direct manipulations of uncertainty salience – such as belongingness uncertainty – can bolster cultural norms and values (De Cremer, Brebels and

Sedikides, 2008; Van den Bos et al., 2005). In all, conditions activating epistemic needs can exacerbate descriptive-norm consistent behaviors and thus can moderate effects of culture in negotiation.

Finally, people use descriptive norms as behavior guides because it serves important identity functions. Accordingly, we would predict that situations in which there is high threat, activating strong needs for group identification, individuals will be likely to display descriptive norm-consistent behaviors, thereby amplifying cultural differences in negotiation. Research has indeed shown that when people face a high degree of threat, they strongly hold on to their cultural group identities to reduce anxiety (e.g., Terror Management Theory, Greenberg, Solomon and Pyszczynski, 1997). For example, Kashima, Halloran, Yuki and Kashima, (2004) found that mortality salience and self-esteem exacerbated maintenance of cultural values among Japanese and Australians. Other stressful situations can provoke people to cling to their cultural worldviews. For example, Landau and colleagues (2004) found that reminders of 9/11 led American students to become more supportive of President Bush, even when their political attitudes were incongruent with the current administration. Jetten, Postmes and McAuliffe (2002) also found that culturally stereotypical behavior increases when identity threat is high. For example, when psychology students received bogus information that their school's department was either individualist or collectivist and then were given false information that their students were better or worse than psychology students at other universities, they found that they were more likely to endorse culturally stereotypical behavior following the threat that their group was worse than other groups. This suggests that cultural effects will be amplified in negotiation in situations of high threat.

Related to the above, descriptive norms are also more likely to have influence in situations in which there is a high need for social coordination. For example, tight cultures have much more social coordination needs, higher social monitoring, and greater reputational pressures as compared to loose cultures (Gelfand, Raver, Nishii, Leslie, Lun, Lim, et al., 2011) and thus individuals should be more likely to act on descriptive norms for the functions discussed previously. This would suggest, by extension, that the reliance on personal value measures might be more predictive of negotiation behavior in loose cultures, whereas the reliance of descriptive norms might be more predictive of negotiation behavior in tight cultures.

Cultural Reversers. The descriptive norm account also helps to illuminate situations in which cultural members might exhibit opposite patterns. Although people are generally aware of the dominant values in their culture some may identify with and internalize these values, and as a result, have high levels of cultural identification (Guan et al., 2009; Wan, Chiu, and Peng et al., 2007; Wan, Chiu, and Tam et al., 2007), whereas others may not identify with these values and may even dissent from them. They can construct descriptive norm representations of their culture, reflect on the strengths and liabilities of their cultural tradition, and

decide whether to identify or dis-identify with it (Chiu and Chen, 2004). For example, individuals whom are high on anti-conformity are likely to resist cultural descriptive norms in guiding their behavior and behave in ways that are opposite to the cultural norm (cf. Leung and Cohen, 2011).

Situational factors, particularly those that *release actors from the constraints of following descriptive norms*, also can produce behavior that is counter normative. For example, low accountability situations free individuals from pressures to abide by cultural norms. As discussed above, research has found that collectivists are more likely to cooperate than individualists (Triandis, 1994). Research has supported this general maxim in monitored contexts; however, in unmonitored contexts, in which actors are not accountable for their decisions, and therefore freed from cultural constraints, the effect is reversed such that individualists cooperate while collectivists compete (Gelfand and Realo, 1999; Yamagishi, 1988). Gelfand and Realo (1999) for example, found that in unaccountable conditions, collectivists were more competitive and achieved lower negotiation outcomes, as compared to individualists, who were more cooperative and achieved higher negotiation outcomes. Yamagishi (1988) found that when Japanese were not being monitored, they became highly competitive in social dilemma contexts. Situations also release people from behaving according to descriptive norms when there is no common knowledge about one's group membership. For example, Yamagishi and Mifune (2008) found that when group membership is not made public, Japanese are more motivated to behave in a self-serving way; rather, it is the *mutual knowledge* of shared group membership that was required to ensure that group members treated each other altruistically. Likewise, Yamagishi et al. (2008) found that Japanese patterns of conformity were drastically reduced when they were in situations in which they did not need to take others' evaluations into consideration. The communication medium can also enable individuals to be released from the constraints of culture. For example, Rosette, Brett, Barsness and Lytle (2006) found that Hong Kong Chinese were more aggressive in lean media such as email where there is less constraint as compared to face to face negotiations.

Culture suppressors. Finally, a descriptive norm account also helps to understand situations wherein cultural effects are suppressed altogether and replaced with new norms for behavior. Culture suppressors are context factors that override general cultural differences and therefore weaken the culture-outcome relationship. Suppressing contexts will affect outcomes of culture by deactivating the salience of societal cultural norms and values and therefore disallowing the expression of culture (cf., Tett and Burnett, 2003). In other words, culture suppressors are situations that provide alternative cues for behavior and therefore negate the effect of societal culture on the outcome of interest. We note that cultural reversers qualitatively differ from culture suppressors. Culture suppressors provide strong situations that negate the effects of culture. Thus, in a suppressing situation that provides strong cues for cooperation (e.g., interdependent rewards)

individuals are expected to cooperate, regardless of culture. In general, strong situations, which invoke invariant expectations for behavior (Mischel, 1977), will tend to override cultural differences. The organizational context, including both organizational culture and the structure of organizational rewards, can provide a situation strong enough to override cultural effects. For example, societal culture is unlikely to have a strong effect on outcomes in a multinational organization with a strong organizational culture. More generally, factors that orient and reward individuals toward a new descriptive norm derived from any level of analysis, might serve to suppress cross-cultural variation in negotiations.

Understanding the Cross-Cultural Interface

The descriptive norm approach can also provide new perspectives on intercultural negotiation effectiveness. To date, as with other areas within organizational psychology and behavior (Gelfand, Erez and Aycan, 2007), there has been little attention to negotiation at the cultural interface – in other words, the processes and outcomes, and situational conditions that affect *intercultural negotiations*. Research that does exist on intercultural negotiations has found intercultural dyads are less cooperative (Graham, 1985) and achieve lower joint profits as compared to intracultural dyads (Brett and Okumura, 1998; Natlandsmyr and Rognes, 1995). As with other areas of culture and negotiation research, problems in intercultural negotiations are often attributed to differences in values that parties bring to the table and research has tended to take a static approach to cultural dynamics in intercultural negotiations.

A descriptive norm perspective offers a number of interesting avenues for understanding intercultural negotiation effectiveness. As with the previous section, descriptive norms in intercultural negotiations are presumed to be dynamic. For example, a descriptive norm approach suggests that individuals at the intercultural negotiation table might not necessarily utilize the same scripts as they use when negotiating with similar others. We could expect that those people whom identify with their cultural descriptive norms might exhibit culturally consistent behavior in intercultural negotiations. However, not all individuals will identify necessarily with their own norms, thus the connection between intracultural negotiation and intercultural negotiation behavior need not always be strong.

Situational features of intercultural negotiations will also be important to consider in making predictions about cultural differences. For example, in situations in which intercultural contact causes *intergroup anxiety* (Stephan and Stephan, 1985), descriptive norms of one's own culture, will be highly salient (see discussion of threat in the previous section) thus exaggerating cultural differences in intercultural negotiation. Situations that enhance cultural identification can also motivate individuals to act more closely by their cultural norms (Hogg, 2006;

Terry and Hogg, 1996). For example, cultural identification is likely to be high when negotiators represent their cultural groups or when the negotiators' in-group status is contingent on the outcome. Behavioral adherence to one's cultural descriptive norms can also be motivated by the meta-perception of being viewed as a typical member of a cultural group (Frey and Tropp, 2006; Judd, Park, Yzerbyt, Gordijn and Muller, 2005).

A descriptive norm approach offers a perspective on what it means to be culturally intelligent in negotiation. As Keesing (1974) points out, a culturally competent person can also be someone who possesses nuanced knowledge of the descriptive norms, regardless of whether this person identifies with the culture. Indeed, there is consistent evidence that knowledge of the descriptive norms is at the heart of cultural competence, particularly for living in non-native cultures. For example, immigrants who possess nuanced knowledge of the host culture have been shown to have better sociocultural adaptation (Kurman and Ronen-Eilson, 2004) and more socially competent interactions (in terms of personal goal attainments and relationship quality) with members of the host culture (Li and Hong, 2001). From the descriptive norm perspective, understanding the descriptive norms "in use" by one's counterpart takes on new importance in intercultural negotiations. Unlike values, that are theoretically constant, perceived descriptive norms are malleable and can change according to the social context, including one's counterparts' perspective on what is culturally appropriate. As such, understanding the descriptive norms associated with one's negotiation counterpart *and* the descriptive norms that one's counterpart assumes one to be using may bridge the descriptive norm gulf in inter-cultural negotiations. In these cases, more accurate knowledge of one's partner's cultural norms that are activated is likely to improve social coordination.

An interesting area for future research drawn from the descriptive norm approach relates to bi-culturalists who have multiple identities, and how they adapt their behavior in intercultural negotiations. Mok and Morris (2009) found that people who are able to navigate between their cultural identities (have high *bicultural identity integration*, BII) can shift their personality in culturally assimilative ways, but biculturalists with conflicting identities have more trouble doing so. In another study, Asian Americans who were high on BII gave more weight to employees' situational conditions in an Asian setting, but less so when in an American setting. Conversely, those low on BII demonstrated the reverse pattern, mismatching cultural norms (Mok, Cheng and Morris, 2010). In all, these studies suggest important cultural dynamics that involve situational and person interactions in the adaptation to descriptive norms.

Finally, the descriptive norm approach also has implications for mediation of intercultural disputes. It suggests that an important function for mediators is to be able to assess the descriptive norms in use of the disputing parties and to facilitate and create a 'third culture' that dictates the norms in use in order to help

organize social action. This ‘third culture’ must rise above each party’s cultural scripts, not through simple abandonment of cultural frames, but through the reconciliation and integration of conflicting cultural norms to form new behavioral descriptive norms that have broader acceptance. Evoking the normativeness of such integrative cultural norms to a respected third party, the international community or even, to the human species in general, may enhance their adoption and influence.

Conclusion

Negotiation and culture research is thriving, yet nonetheless it has been guided by a dominant paradigm that focuses on subjectivist approaches to culture. In this article, we described the descriptive norms approach and its potential to provide new insight into the study of culture and negotiation. While personal values and beliefs are still important explanatory constructs in the field, the descriptive norm approach offers a new perspective on the psychology of cultural behaviors in negotiations. In the descriptive norm account of culture and negotiation, negotiators are cultural agents who are dynamically adapting their behavior to descriptive norms that exist in the social context. The approach highlights new theoretical and empirical mediators of cultural differences, suggests a number of factors that amplify, reduce, or reverse cultural differences, and opens up new questions about behavior in intercultural negotiations. In this world of increasing global interdependence, adding new approaches to the ‘cultural toolkit’ in negotiation research is important to capture the very complex phenomenon of culture and its impact on negotiations.

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