Beyond whom and when: A Revisit of the Influences of Social Norms on Behavior

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Beyond Whom and When: A Revisit of the Influences of Social Norms on Behavior

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Abstract
In the target article, Gelfand and Harrington have outlined three important motivations concerning when and for whom descriptive norms (i.e., personal cognition about what people do) guide behavior. The effects of these motivations likely vary substantially across and even within cultures, as informed by research in cultural psychology. In this commentary, we will discuss how power and residential mobility may moderate the effects of norms on social behaviors, within and across cultures.

Keywords
cultural psychology, group processes, social cognition, social norms

In the target article, Gelfand and Harrington (IN PRESS) have outlined three underlying motives to explain when and for whom descriptive norms guide behavior. Following their advocate on exploring cultural, situational, and individual factors influencing these motivational forces of descriptive norms, we will discuss how power and residential mobility may moderate the effects of descriptive (what people do) and injunctive (what one should do) norms on guiding social behaviors.

Gelfand and Harrington (IN PRESS) noted that the moderating effects of power on how descriptive norms guide people’s behavior likely differ across cultures. We want to further elaborate on this point. Cultures differ in how power is understood and interpreted (Menon, Sim, Fu, Chiu, & Hong, 2010; Torelli & Shavitt, 2010; Zhong, Magee, Maddux, & Galinsky, 2006). These different understandings of power can foster different cultural norms of power based on the intersubjective view of norms (Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi, Shteynberg, & Wan, 2010; Wan, IN PRESS; Wan, Chiu, Peng, & Tam, 2007). Specifically, priming power increases the accessibility of responsibility-related (e.g., duty, obligation) and restraint-related (e.g., withhold, stay) words among East Asians, yet increases the accessibility of entitlement-related (e.g., deserve, entitlement) and assertive action–related (e.g., change, move) words among Americans (Zhong et al., 2006). Along the same line, Miyamoto and Wilken (2010) found that influencing others fosters analytical perceptual style among European Americans, affording them to focus on their own goals and avoid being distracted by others; however, the effect was not observed among Japanese. Indeed, power construed as opportunity for advancing one’s own goals is perceived as more

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attractive than power construed as responsibility for others, especially among promotion-oriented Westerners (Sassenberg, Ellemers, & Scheepers, 2012).

As perceived personal responsibility increases people’s adherence to social norms (Dwyer, Maki, & Rothman, 2015), different intersubjective norms of power should lead to culturally divergent effects of social norms on behavior. Specifically, because power makes the obligation of fulfilling one’s socially prescribed responsibilities more salient among East Asians, we expect power to increase East Asians’ reliance on social norms. In contrast, given that power frees people from the influence of others, reduces conformity (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008), decreases perception of threat (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002) and self-monitoring (Smith, Jostman, Galinsky, & Van Kijk, 2008), and increases assertive actions among Westerners (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), it should decrease European North Americans’ adherence to social norms. This should be especially true when the motive for reputation management is heightened, as in public settings (Dunning, Anderson, Schlsser, Ehlebracht, & Fetchenhauer, 2014; Gelfand & Harrington, IN PRESS). For East Asians, the salience of reputation concerns will have an additive effect on the socially prescribed effects of power, resulting in increased likelihood of following social norms. For European North Americans, however, the reputation management and power motives will work against each other, and the final outcome in terms of driving norm-consistent behavior will depend on which motive wins in a given situation.

These culturally divergent effects of power on people’s likelihood to follow norms, however, should particularly be observed for norms pertaining to socially prescribed roles and responsibilities associated with power. We also believe that the effects should be more pronounced for adhering to injunctive norms—what powerful people should do in a certain situation, than for adhering to descriptive norms, because the former is more aligned with responsibilities and duties. In the meantime, based on the bidirectional association between descriptive and injunctive norms (Eriksson, Strimling, & Coults, 2015) and the “norm moralization” process connecting descriptive and injunctive norms (Morris & Liu, IN PRESS), we expect that these culturally divergent effects of power on people’s likelihood to follow norms apply to descriptive norms as well, although the effects may be weaker.

How power moderates the effects of descriptive and injunctive norms on people’s behavior also depends on the temporal dynamics of power—whether people are in the process of gaining power or are already in possession of power. Gelfand and Harrington (IN PRESS) point out that people who want to gain power are more likely to follow descriptive norms (Hogg, 1996, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000) and that following descriptive norms can help people to gain power (see also Morris & Liu, IN PRESS). Likewise, Tyler and Lind (1992) have shown that marginal group members display a higher level of norm adherence to increase their ingroup status and acceptance. However, recent research indicates that people who violate norms (especially for prosocial reasons, for example, ignoring prohibition to tilt a bus chair to help another passenger) are perceived as more powerful than those who do not violate norms (Van Kleeft, Homan, Finkenauer, Blaker, & Heerdink, 2012; Van Kleeft, Homan, Finkenauer, Gündemir, & Stamkou, 2011). In other words, violating norms can help people gain power. It is worthwhile to examine the conditions under which people will and will not follow norms during the power acquisition process. Once in possession of power, people may be less likely to follow descriptive norms because they are less sensitive to situational constraints and other people’s perspectives (Galinsky et al., 2008; Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006), at least in the West. Due to the interpersonal nature of power (Smith & Magee, 2015) and its contingency on others’ conferral (Blader & Chen, 2014), however, the powerful may be more likely to follow injunctive norms in order not to risk losing power in the long run (for review, see Anderson & Brion, 2014). More research is needed to further investigate how the temporal processes of power moderate the effects of norms on guiding people’s behavior.
Besides the culturally divergent effects of power, changes in social network may also moderate the impact of descriptive and injunctive norms on behavior. Gelfand and Harrington (IN PRESS) note that low social mobility (e.g., job mobility) could increase norm-consistent behaviors due to the strong social pressures and difficulty of exiting the relationship ensued from low social mobility (Chen, Chiu, & Chan, 2009). However, the situation for high social mobility would be more complex as it could induce conflicts between the motive for independence and the motive for uncertainty management. Taking residential mobility (Oishi, 2010) as an example, on one hand, residential mobility fosters (a) independence, (b) a focus on personal goals, and (c) the formation of “duty-free” friendships or group memberships (Oishi, Ishii, & Lun, 2009; Oishi, Lun, & Sherman, 2007; see Oishi, 2010, for review), which should decrease the influences of descriptive and injunctive norms on people’s behavior. On the other hand, residential mobility also puts people into novel contexts, increases their motivation to manage threat or uncertainty, and consequentially should increase their adherence to descriptive and injunctive norms. Thus, future research is needed to investigate how the two competing motivational forces (independence and uncertainty management) induced by residential mobility interact with each other in steering the effects of social norms on guiding people’s behavior.

The competition between the motives for independence and for uncertainty and threat management induced by residential mobility may also depend on temporal factors. When people first move into a new neighborhood, their motive for uncertainty management likely outweighs their motive for independence, resulting in increased likelihood for people to follow descriptive and injunctive norms. After people have settled in the new neighborhood, however, the motive for uncertainty management will wane and other motivational forces (e.g., independence) can become more salient, resulting in people’s less adherence to social norms. Another temporal factor to consider is whether people are staying in the new neighborhood for a short or long period of time. If people are going to stay in a new neighborhood for a short period of time only (e.g., sojourners), the motive to be independent may outweigh the motive to manage uncertainty or the motive to fit in, resulting in lower likelihood to follow social norms in the new neighborhood. In contrast, those who plan to stay for long term may be more motivated to fit in and follow the norms.

The effects of residential mobility on people’s likelihood of following social norms may depend on social-cultural factors, such as characteristics of the community/culture one moves from and into. Cultures and communities differ in how tight or loose they are (Gelfand et al., 2011), such that tight cultures have strong social norms and little tolerance for norm violations. Therefore, people should be more likely to follow social norms when moving from a loose culture (community) to a tight culture (community) than moving from a tight culture to a loose culture. Future research should investigate how the dynamic and temporal patterns of different motivational forces may interact with social-cultural and individual factors in affecting people’s adherence to social norms.

In conclusion, Gelfand and Harrington (IN PRESS) make a timely call for exploring the motivational forces of descriptive norms. Built on their propositions, we argue that exploring the dynamic interactions between motivational forces (such as power, independence, reputation management, and threat or uncertainty management) by taking cultural, situational, temporal, and individual factors into account will be valuable in providing insights into the predictive power of descriptive and injunctive norms on guiding social behavior.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
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