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The Discovery of the Other in Social and Cultural Psychology

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Keywords

cultural psychology, group processes, norms, social identity

In 1972, the historian Colin Morris wrote a marvelous book titled *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050-1200*. It describes how, during Europe's middle ages, an understanding of self was discovered that made, as Morris claims, a "new psychology" possible. The discovery was something that modern humans take for granted: Individual actions are determined by people's *psychological* makeup. The present special issue in some sense challenges this new psychology and its inherent individualism. Human behavior is not merely shaped by what is *in* the mind, but also by processes that occur *between* minds. All articles in this special issue advance the idea that human social behavior is shaped by knowledge structures which are intersubjective. This may take various forms: Human behavior and cognition is shaped by subjective representations of "us" as well as by various other properties of "us," such as social norms.

The breadth of the empirical evidence to support this approach, as reviewed in this special issue, illustrates the major steps forward being made. In this commentary, we argue that this new perspective offers a real and tangible opportunity for the integration of literatures about culture, social identity (SI), social networks, and small-group processes. This integration, as we argue, is much needed. It paves the way for the formulation of alternatives to cognitive-individualist conceptions of culture and identity: an approach in which the *other* is more than a mere stimulus.

Finding a Place for the Other: New Concepts and New Methods

The cornerstone of the new approach advanced in this special issue is that other people play an active role in shaping the behavior and thoughts of individuals. The phenomenon itself is well known. When friends regularly write emails to each other, they regulate the content and style of their messages: *Norms* appear to develop (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2000). When two people jointly carry a table, they coordinate their actions in a way that suggests they have a *collective intention* (Tuomela, 2000). Others need not even be physically present: When an alleyway is

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littered, this influences people's behavior in that location, suggesting that norms are induced from traces of past behavior (Keizer, Lindenberg, & Steg, 2008). In sum, humans coordinate their actions with others that share the same social space, especially others with whom long-lasting relationships exist and/or others who are similar in key respects.

To account for this coordination between multiple actors, scholars often use concepts such as norms, we-intentions, shared identity, or culture. We believe, like the authors of this special issue, that these concepts have merits: They constitute a *social reality* that regulates behavior (e.g., Searle, 1995). But in most theories, these concepts are assumed to exist inside the minds of individuals: They are *depopulated* in the sense that they are conceived of as existing independently from the actions of others. The net result is that the actions of other people play no active part in many of psychology's theories about groups and society, and social interactions have become marginalized in our research methods. This problem affects both meta-theories of classical cross-cultural (CC) research and those of research on intergroup relations and SI. In these theories, concepts such as norms, culture, and SI are *not* collaborative projects embedded in social relations: They simply exist. For a new psychology of culture (as well as for a new psychology of groups), this presents a conceptual and a pragmatic challenge.

The conceptual challenge is the one that this special issue makes important advances on. Particular kinds of processes, such as the inference of group norms, play a key role in the transmission of cultural practice and beliefs (e.g., Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi, Shteynberg, & Wan, 2010; Fischer, 2006; Yamagishi & Suzuki, 2010). As Morris and Liu (2015) point out, the individual's actions are clearly limited by group processes: "[s]ocieties, communities and organizations need to encourage some behaviors and discourage others to maintain order, coordination and collective action" (p. 1281). Moreover, such social constraints and encouragements are "not context free; they specify guidelines for behavior toward specific targets within a particular context" (Fischer et al., 2009, p. 189). Therefore, this new perspective on culture points the way to a different level of analysis in which concrete others play a central role in regulating individual behavior, thereby ensuring that shared ideas of "us" (whether it be tribe, clan, community, or any other form of group) materialize into concrete actions.

The pragmatic challenge stems from the fact that many psychologists still assume that culture (and groups) can *only* exist inside the individual's mind (cf. Allport, 1924). While the current issue shows that a lot of progress can be made by devoting attention to what people *think* about others, it also foreshadows the limitations one encounters when studying this in the stimulus-response tradition. After all, if there is anything of value that emerges *between* individuals, then at some point, one needs to study this phenomenon itself rather than trace the echoes of it in the minds of individuals in splendid isolation. So the challenge for this budding field is to go beyond the psychology of keypresses and checkboxes. The rewards of doing this are demonstrated by Gao, Qiu, Chiu, and Yang (2015). This contribution shows the importance of studying the emergence of descriptive norms via interpersonal communication. Their agent-based models point the way to empirical research that studies norm development as an ongoing social-interactive process.

So how can one overcome this pragmatic challenge? This is not an easy question to answer, because cultures and social identities can be developed and maintained in so many different ways: They are not just situated in relationships, groups, and communities, but they are embodied and connected with material places and objects. As a consequence, CC (like group research) could adopt a wide range of methodologies to study how people "do" culture in various settings. Making a choice between these methods is easier if researchers are clear about what processes are involved and in what situations these occur. We can only provide some global pointers here.

A logical starting point would be to use methodologies for studying human behavior in natural contexts. The need for observations as a cornerstone of empirical enquiry is self-evident, and yet mainstream psychologists are rarely explicit about the observations upon which their theories

and hypotheses are based. A variety of observational methods would be suitable (from observational methods of behavioral ecology, through content analysis to various forms of thematic or discourse analysis).

Methods that offer more structure and control can be found in sociology. One can study behaviors, cognitions, and relational structures in conjunction using longitudinal network analysis (Snijders, 2005). Observations for such analyses are typically surveys of multiple (or ideally all) network members, or behavioral data obtained (for example) via social media. These methods enable one to study emergent intersubjectivity. In cases where the structure is not a network, but a clearly delineated group, multilevel analyses can be used for the same effect. In one recent article, we used this approach to study how a sense of shared identity emerges in small groups over time, or not (Jans, Leach, Garcia, & Postmes, 2015).

If researchers feel that even more control is required, it is possible to conduct field experiments or laboratory experiments in which social interaction takes center stage. Many of the classic studies in social psychology (e.g., Asch's conformity studies, Lewin's research on leadership, Sherif's boy camp studies) are of this nature. But in recent decades, these kinds of methods have been sidelined (Wittenbaum & Moreland, 2008), even though online communications make it easier for researchers to study social interaction than ever before (e.g., Spears & Postmes, 2015).

Finally, psychologists have developed a range of methods to study phenomena such as social interaction and grounding using traditional experimental methodologies (e.g., Echterhoff, Higgins, & Levine, 2009; Kashima, Klein, & Clark, 2007). These approaches essentially simulate features of social communication in an experimental setting and seek to isolate those elements of the process that the researcher deems of particular interest. While these are exceptionally powerful methods, there is a risk of losing focus on the interactive dynamic between individuals.

Communities, Norms, and the Cultural Dynamic: A Concrete Example

As mentioned, the methodological choices when studying intersubjectivity and norms depend first and foremost on the social entities within which actors might influence each other. Are we influenced by family members, by random strangers in the street, or by any person we encounter on the Internet? Being able to delineate and predict in what context norms will emerge, and in what context they will not, is clearly important to better understanding the influence processes involved (see also Gelfand & Harrington, 2015). To illustrate, we can use an example from our own recent research, which has attempted to integrate culture into our knowledge about processes of SI formation.

Briefly, the SI approach argues that influence will depend among other things on whether self and other are seen as "me and you," as "us" or as "us and them" (e.g., Turner, 1991). In our own research, we have argued that in many cases, group norms and social identities are formed through social interaction within groups (e.g., Postmes, Haslam, & Swaab, 2005). We recently extended this approach to studying how intersubjective cultural norms are formed (Akkus, Postmes, & Stroebe, under review).

The starting point of this work was to ask at what level of abstraction culture is "done"? As we were interested in norms and values of individualism/collectivism, we reasoned that the most likely place for this would be within tight-knit groups that have regular contact: Within communities such as these, the tension between individual agency and collective solidarity is most acute.

What kinds of group norms would be likely to emerge in such communities? Our approach here was to build on what we already know about group dynamics. We looked for value

dimensions that are “universal” in the sense that they can be found in all communities, most likely because they function to conserve and regulate the group itself. Our analysis was that these values should perform three functions: (a) Groups provide social support and love, through the loyalty of its members; (b) groups divide labor and responsibilities, because group members know their roles and position in the hierarchy; and (c) groups enforce norms and expectations, because group members live up to what is honorable and shameful.

So far, we have confirmed that values of loyalty, honor, and hierarchy form reliable scales that differentiate between cultural and ethnic groups really well. We have also shown that at the individual level, these three dimensions are clearly distinct, but at the intersubjective level, they are very strongly related to one another (which is consistent with them referring to a shared, collective representation of the group). But clearly, future research also requires that we study the intersubjective *process* within these communities more closely. This can be done in multiple ways: By adopting a multilevel approach in which commonalities within and differences between communities are assessed (cf. Jans et al., 2015). A straightforward experimental approach would be to organize small-group discussions in which community members (vs. non-members) discuss a range of topics related to individualism and collectivism (e.g., Smith & Postmes, 2011). Finally, one can think of all manner of natural observations of social behavior that would confirm the prediction that cultural values are enacted especially in the visible presence of other community members. Although this is clearly not an exhaustive list, it does illustrate how future research might overcome the pragmatic obstacle of studying intersubjectivity and normative influence in action.

Conclusion

The present special issue makes bold steps toward a concept of culture as a dynamic social process, structured intersubjectively. Our commentary highlights the importance and benefits of such an approach. We point out that to do justice to this, we need a shift in who and what we study. A dynamic and intersubjective approach needs to go beyond studying “the self.” Our theories and our research should accommodate a central place, instead, for the other.

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Understanding the Dynamic Norm Transmission Processes

A number of commentaries shed light on the dynamic process of norm transmission, highlighting the reciprocal roles between the value transmitters and value recipients, as well as the adaptive motives underlying cultural transmission (Bon Malham & Saucier, this issue; Hasenfrazt & Liat, this issue; Huff & Lee, this issue; Leung, this issue; Livi et al., this issue).