

# Intersubjective Culture: The Role of Intersubjective Perceptions in Cross-Cultural Research

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## Abstract

Intersubjective perceptions refer to shared perceptions of the psychological characteristics that are widespread within a culture. In this article, we propose the intersubjective approach as a new approach to understanding the role that culture plays in human behavior. In this approach, intersubjective perceptions, which are distinct from personal values and beliefs, mediate the effect of the ecology on individuals' responses and adaptations. We review evidence that attests to the validity and utility of the intersubjective approach in explicating culture's influence on human behaviors and discuss the implications of this approach for understanding the interaction between the individual, ecology, and culture; the nature of cultural competence; management of multicultural identities; cultural change; and measurement of culture.

## Keywords

culture, intersubjective norms, cultural influence, cultural change

Culture is an evolved constellation of loosely organized ideas and practices that are shared (albeit imperfectly) among a collection of interdependent individuals and transmitted across generations for the purpose of coordinating individual goal pursuits in collective living (Chiu, Leung, & Hong, in press). Cultural ideas and practices are represented at multiple levels (Chiu & Hong, 2006). At the supra-individual level, culture exists in the form of tangible, public representations that are accessible to all members of the culture and embodied in the culture's instituted social relations (Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008). At the individual level, culture exists in the form of internalized individual-level characteristics, such as individualist-versus-collectivist (IC) self-conceptions (e.g., Triandis, 1989). At the intermediate level, culture is represented in the form of intersubjective perceptions of culture—beliefs and values that members of a culture perceive to be widespread in their culture.

In (cross-) cultural psychology, behavioral differences across cultures have been explained in terms of internalized individual-level characteristics or public representations. In the present article, we aim to direct culture scientists' attention to

intersubjective perceptions of culture, which is an equally important but relatively overlooked facet of culture. We will review recent evidence for the capacity of intersubjective perceptions to explain individual-level actions that are situated in supra-individual level contexts (Shteynberg, Gelfand, & Kim, 2009; Wan & Chiu, 2009; Zou et al., 2009).

The approach we take, hereafter referred to as the *intersubjective approach*, consists of several basic premises. First, rather than acting on their personal beliefs and values, people sometimes act on the beliefs and values they perceive to be widespread in their culture. That is, what individuals see inside themselves (internalized cultural beliefs and values) does not always channel psychological processes; what the individuals

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see when looking outward at their social environments can also direct behaviors.

Second, the intersubjective approach acknowledges that ecological locale plays an important role in shaping the cultures of a region. However, people are not captive recipients of ecological influences. Rather, individuals in the same culture actively construct and negotiate theories of the cultural code in the shared ecology. Hence, not every individual in the culture shares precisely the same cultural theories (Keesing, 1974). Moreover, a culturally competent individual is someone who can act on the “theory of what his fellows know, believe, and mean, his theory of the code being followed, the game being played, in the society into which he was born” (Keesing, 1974, p. 89)—not someone who mindlessly performs culturally scripted behaviors. Accordingly, individuals do not mindlessly act on the implicit cultural scripts evolved from their interactions with the shared ecology, and human–ecology interactions would not lead to homogenization of the mind. Instead, individuals participate actively in the construction and reproduction of the intersubjective reality through their perceptions and actions.

Finally, intersubjective perceptions of the cultural code are sometimes divorced from the popular personal beliefs and values in the culture. That is, the values and beliefs that are perceived to be widespread in a culture are not necessarily the same values and beliefs that people in the culture endorse and vice versa. Moreover, individuals may act on behalf of the intersubjective reality even more than they act on their personal values and beliefs. In the present article, we will begin by describing the intellectual history of the intersubjective approach. Next, we will elaborate on the major propositions and review the supportive evidence. Finally, we will discuss the ramifications of this approach for understanding and measuring culture and its evolution.

## The Intersubjective Approach

### *Intellectual History*

Although the intersubjective approach may seem novel in (cross-) cultural psychology, key propositions in diverse areas of scholarships can be considered its intellectual precursors. Examples include the nonreductionist thesis in collective and social representation theories, which asserts that social behaviors cannot be reduced to individual psychology (Durkheim, 1897/1997). Instead, social behaviors invariably take place in relational contexts and should be understood as responses to socially constructed meanings (Ho & Chiu, 1998). Structural symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 2007), a contemporary variant of symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934), also holds that individual actions are critically shaped by shared meanings developing out of social interactions. Some theories in anthropology also define culture in terms of the shared beliefs about existing social contingencies in a collectivity of individuals (Barth, 2002; Keesing, 1974). Within psychology, the shared reality theory also emphasizes that “When people establish a

shared reality with another person, they can trust the other’s view of things, allowing them to predicate their own judgments and actions” (Echterhoff, Higgins, & Groll, 2005, p. 259).

### **Basic Premises and Supportive Evidence**

Table 1 summarizes the distinctive features of the intersubjective approach vis-à-vis the typical approach of measuring culture via personal values and beliefs, which has often been referred to as the *subjectivist approach*. As mentioned, the intersubjective approach is predicated on three premises: (a) Individuals assess and form perceptions of the intersubjective reality in their sociocultural contexts, and some of these perceptions are different from personal values and beliefs; (b) individuals act on behalf of their perceptions of the intersubjective reality—at times, more often than they act on their personal values and beliefs; and (c) individuals inadvertently reinforce and sustain the intersubjective reality through their perceptions and actions (however valid or invalid).

*Nature of the perceived intersubjective reality.* An intersubjective reality emerges when there is social consensus in the culture that a certain set of values and beliefs is widely shared (Shteynberg et al., 2009; Zou et al., 2009). For example, a value becomes an intersubjectively important one when it is perceived as a widely shared value in the group. Moreover, members of the group typically agree on the assumed sharedness of the value’s importance in the group. That is, group members’ perceptions of intersubjective reality typically align. Accordingly, investigators can ask group members to estimate the extent to which most group members or a representative member of the group would endorse a certain value to determine whether that value is an intersubjectively important one. Intersubjectively important values are those that have high mean estimates (Wan, Chiu, Tam, et al., 2007). Note that this measurement approach can be applied to measure intersubjective perceptions of different cultural contents and of different cultural mileus.

It is important to note that intersubjective culture does not necessarily include the popular personal values or beliefs in a culture. A common research practice in cross-cultural psychology is to survey respondents’ personal values and use values that have high means to characterize the culture’s cultural orientations. However, a value that most people in the culture endorse may not be the value that most people in the culture perceive others to hold (Wan, Chiu, Tam, et al., 2007). Indeed, there is consistent evidence for the dissociation between prevalence of individual-level characteristics in a culture and intersubjective perceptions of these characteristics (e.g., Fischer, 2006; Hashimoto & Yamagishi, 2009; Shteynberg et al., 2009; Terracciano et al., 2005; Wan, Chiu, Tam, et al., 2007; Zou et al., 2009). As shown in a recent survey (Hashimoto & Yamagishi, 2009), when asked to describe their cultural fellows’ values, most Japanese expect other Japanese to hold stronger interdependent values than independent values. However, when asked to describe their preferences (their ideal self), most Japanese express a stronger desire to be independent

**Table 1.** Complementary Differences Between the Intersubjective and Subjectivist Approach

Measure	Intersubjective approach	Subjectivist approach
Major explanatory construct	Intersubjective perceptions of cultural contents	Individual level characteristics such as internalized values and beliefs
Measurement of culture	Based on mean perceived endorsement of cultural contents in the pertinent cultural community	Based on mean self-endorsement of cultural contents among individuals in the pertinent cultural community
Nature of cultural behaviors	Cultural behaviors are goal-directed strategic responses to opportunities and constraints in the ecology	Cultural behaviors are acquired and internalized cultural dispositions
Focus of analysis	Both group differences in default strategies and adaptations of these strategies to changing situational contingencies	Stable group differences in behaviors
Nature of culturally competent behavior	Learning and application of nuanced knowledge of the intersubjective reality	Enactment of automated cultural scripts

(vs. interdependent). Zou et al. (2009) reported similar results. For example, Poles and Americans endorse individualist and collectivist values to the same extent. Nonetheless, Poles expect other Poles to endorse collectivist (vs. individualist) values more, and Americans expect other Americans to endorse individualist (vs. collectivist) values more. Similarly, Shteynberg et al. (2009) found that South Koreans view themselves as less collectivistic than others in their country, whereas Americans see themselves as less individualistic than others in their country. Zou et al. (2009) found that Asians and Americans do not differ from each other in their causal beliefs. Nevertheless, both Asians and Americans expect Americans (vs. Asians) to hold stronger dispositionist beliefs about behavioral causality.

Several conclusions can be drawn from these results. First, researchers have found that country differences in personal values/beliefs are largely inconsistent and small, which is consistent with previous meta-analysis results (e.g., Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Second, cultural differences in intersubjective measures of values and beliefs are coherent and sizable. This indicates that intersubjective perceptions are grounded on external social reality: Cultural differences in intersubjective perceptions typically agree with cultural differences in the values embodied in instituted social relations. For example, people from cultures with strong individualistic institutions perceive their cultural fellows to be individualistic, and people in cultures with strong collectivistic institutions perceive their cultural fellows to be collectivistic. This evidence also assuages the concern that intersubjective perceptions and their measures are merely cultural stereotypes (Smith, 2006) or “collective fallacies” (Terracciano & McCrae, 2006).

Finally, the correlations between personal values and beliefs and intersubjective perceptions range from moderate (e.g., Wan, Chiu, Peng, & Tam, 2007; Wan, Chiu, Tam, et al., 2007) to small and nonsignificant (e.g., Shteynberg et al., 2009). In short, intersubjective perceptions do not always correspond to popular individual-level characteristics in a culture. In addition, people are not oblivious to the values and beliefs

embodied in the institutions of their culture. Rather, as we submit in the next section, people often act on behalf of their intersubjective perceptions.

*Behavioral influence of intersubjective perceptions.* Intersubjective perceptions can influence behaviors because these perceptions serve important epistemic functions for the individual (Chiu, Morris, Hong, & Menon, 2000; Fu et al., 2007) and social coordination functions for the collective (Wan, Torelli, & Chiu, in press). Intersubjective knowledge possesses certain properties. First, it is perceived to be widely shared. Second, a body of intersubjective knowledge is one that has survived the test of evolution; the ideas expressed in it have been selected for social transmission and are widely accepted (Heylighen, 1997). These properties confer consensual validity and interpretive authority (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Thus, people are inclined to predicate their behavioral choices on intersubjective knowledge, particularly when they need firm answers (Chiu et al., 2000; Fu et al., 2007) or when they feel accountable to an ingroup audience for their actions (Briley, Morris, & Simonson, 2000; Gelfand & Realo, 1999). Furthermore, they are also likely to recruit intersubjective knowledge to coordinate perspectives in social interactions (Fast, Heath, & Wu, 2009).

Indeed, supportive evidence for the behavioral influences of intersubjective perceptions abounds. For example, theoretically, collectivists making blame assignment should be less influenced by actor intentionality. Intersubjective perceptions of collectivism explain cultural differences in the effect of actor intentionality on blame assignment, whereas personal collectivism does not (Shteynberg et al., 2009). Theoretically, collectivists should perceive duty violations to be more hurtful and rights violations to be less hurtful. Again, intersubjective perceptions of collectivism explain cultural differences in the perceived hurtfulness of duty and rights violations, but personal collectivism does not (Shteynberg et al., 2009). Collectivists should find a consensus appeal to be more persuasive and a consistency appeal to be less persuasive. Only intersubjective

perceptions of collectivism explain these cultural variations in persuasion (Zou et al., 2009). Subscription to a dispositionist theory of causality should be related to the inclination to make internal attributions. Intersubjective perceptions of dispositionism mediate cultural variations in internal attributions, but personal endorsements of dispositionism do not (Zou et al., 2009). A focus on preventing losses should be related to a greater likelihood of having regrets over actions that have brought negative outcomes. Again, only intersubjective perceptions of prevention focus mediate cultural variations in regret (Zou et al., 2009). Intersubjective perceptions of conscientiousness predict cultural differences in conscientiousness-related behaviors (e.g., postal workers' speed and clock accuracy), whereas self-report and observer ratings of conscientiousness do not (Heine, Buchtel, & Norenzayan, 2008). Finally, evidence for the causal role of intersubjective perceptions on judgments has been reported in experiments that manipulated the salience and applicability of intersubjective perceptions (Wan, Chiu, Tam, et al., 2007; Wan, Torelli, & Chiu, in press) and the perceived sharedness of specific belief in the culture (Wan, Torelli, & Chiu, in press).

The effects of intersubjective perceptions are not restricted to explicit judgments; several recent studies show that intersubjective perceptions also predict implicit cognitions. For example, in the 2004 Presidential Election in the United States, Wan and her associates (Wan, Tam, & Chiu, in press) measured prospective voters' agreement with the political attitudes that were intersubjectively perceived to be important to the voters' political party and the personal political attitudes that were popular among the Republicans and Democrats. Wan et al. also measured the participants' implicit attitudes toward the presidential candidates (John Kerry and George W. Bush) using the implicit association test before the election and asked which candidate the participants voted for. The results showed that agreement with the intersubjectively important attitudes in the participants' party predicted (a) favorable implicit attitudes toward that party's candidate and (b) voting for the party's candidate, whereas agreement with popular personal political attitudes in the voters' party did not. Another study (Kwan, Chiu, & Leung, 2010) showed that American undergraduates intersubjectively perceived affective autonomy and hierarchy to be the core values in the United States. These values were also intersubjectively perceived to be associated with iconic U.S. brands (e.g., Coca-Cola, Nike). It is interesting to note that despite their more favorable personal attitudes toward Obama when compared with Bush, American undergraduates also perceived stronger association between Bush and affective autonomy and hierarchy than between Obama and these values. Results from a separate priming study showed that priming Bush (vs. Obama) increased American undergraduates' liking for iconic national brands via their common associations with intersubjectively important American values. These results show that intersubjective perceptions can override personal attitudes in the transfer of evaluation on implicit cognition tasks.

Finally, other studies have shown that intersubjective perceptions and personal values predict different types of behaviors. For example, consistent with the assumption that intersubjective knowledge confers consensual validity, Fischer (2006; Fischer et al., 2009) found that intersubjective perceptions of values predict conformity and traditional behaviors, whereas personal values predict prosocial, universalistic, and self-directed behaviors. In summary, what people see when they look outward at their social environments can significantly influence behaviors.

*Functions and self-perpetuation of intersubjective perceptions.* How do intersubjective perceptions emerge? How are they maintained? Possible answers to this question can be derived from the functions of intersubjective perceptions. First, intersubjective perceptions provide conventionalized solutions to recurrent coordination problems in the society (Kashima, 1999). Kluckhohn (1954) submits that culture is to society as memory is to individuals. Intersubjective perceptions encode collective memories of schematized approaches to solving coordination problems and allow the individuals to respond effectively to the incentives and constraints in their environments (Yamagishi & Suzuki, 2009). These conventionalized solutions are widely accepted solutions in the community. Competent members of the culture can retrieve such conventionalized solutions to solve emergent coordination problems.

This idea resonates with the institutional perspective to culture (Yamagishi & Suzuki, 2009). From this perspective, intersubjective knowledge functions like the society's crystallized intelligence—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. To elaborate, intersubjective knowledge of what people in one's group believe affords useful heuristics for anticipating the normative responses of others. As people living in a shared social ecology learn to apply the conventional wisdom embodied in the shared knowledge, they display culturally prescribed behaviors and act in concert with social expectations. Consider, for example, the shared belief externalized in the Japanese proverb "Nails that stick up get pounded down." The proverb cautions against conspicuous display of one's success and is predicated on the shared assumption that people are envious of the success of others and enjoy hurting the successful. Individuals with insider knowledge of Japanese culture refrain from conspicuous display of their achievements to avoid evoking envy among others, particularly when others have control over these individuals' outcomes.

Instituted social relations and social contingencies vary considerably across societies. Accordingly, societies also differ systematically in what constitute socially wise behaviors and hence the contents of intersubjective perceptions. Thus, intersubjective perceptions are an "evolved" adaptation to the instituted social relations in the society. For instance, in a traditional rice growing community, sparking social animosity in the community and being denied access to vital communal resources (e.g., irrigation channel) could have deadly

consequences. Driven by the motives to protect their self-interests, individuals in this community must learn to avoid conspicuous display of success that could invite ostracism. Representations of such knowledge in the forms of words, symbols, gestures, and actions are instantiated in various media (e.g., clichés, proverbs, songs, folk stories) and are transmitted within a series of instituted social relations.

The institutional approach also explains why intersubjective perceptions can have greater authority than personal values and beliefs over behavioral choices. Using game theoretic terminology, socially wise behaviors as prescribed in the intersubjective norms collectively constitute a Nash equilibrium in which one receives less desirable outcome if one behaves differently (Cohen, 2001). Through this mechanism, consensual beliefs become self-sustained (Aoki, 2001): People act in concert with the behavioral implications of the consensual beliefs despite their personal dislike of such actions (Vandello, Cohen, & Ransom, 2008).

Research that attempted to simulate cultural effects of instituted social relations in the laboratory has provided clear evidence for the idea that intersubjective perceptions encode collective memories of schematized approaches to solving coordination problems. In one study (Yamagishi & Suzuki, 2009), Japanese participants played a trading game in small groups before responding to a measure of self-construal. In one condition, the players in the game could share information with each other about the reputation of the players. That is, a social control mechanism through exchange of reputation information was instituted. In the second condition, players were not given the opportunity to engage in exchange reputation information. An intersubjective reality that privileged the interdependent self emerged in the condition with instituted reputation control, whereas an intersubjective reality that privileged the independent self emerged in the other condition. Similar results were obtained in other studies (Chen, Chiu, & Chan, 2009) that examined American college students' conformity to personal expectations in occupational roles as a function of the extent of job mobility in a simulated job market. An intersubjective reality that supported role conformity emerged more quickly among participants who had played in a job search game in a simulated society with low levels of job mobility than among those who had played the game in a simulated society with high levels of job mobility. In fact, the results show that merely simulating the experience of living in a low mobility society can foster the development of an intersubjective reality that champions role conformance. Other studies also found that constraints due to low residential mobility in some regions in the United States contribute to the development of a collectivist intersubjective reality (Oishi et al., 2007).

A 35 nation study provides further support for the view that situational constraints and latitude arise from the ecological and historical context, and in turn, create psychological affordances for conformity that hold these constraints in place. In this study, Gelfand and the Co-Country Investigators (2008) showed that although all countries have strong and weak situations (Mischel, 1977), situational constraint vary widely around

the globe, with some nations (e.g., Japan, Singapore, China) having very high situational constraint and some (e.g., New Zealand, U.S., Brazil) having very low situational constraint across many situations. The amount of situational constraints has cross-level influences on psychological tendencies: High constraint is positively associated with prevention orientation, impulse control, self-monitoring ability, and need for closure. These results suggest that evolved psychological tendencies are functionally adaptive to the constraints and affordances in the culture's characteristic structure of situations. The study also showed that situational constraint is functionally related to ecological and historical conditions (e.g., high population density, as far back as 1500; history of territorial conflict; natural disasters) and socio-political conditions (e.g., openness of the media, autocracy). Taken together, these results explain the close correspondence between intersubjective perceptions and the values/beliefs embodied in a culture's instituted social relations.

Second, compared to idiosyncratic knowledge, intersubjective knowledge is more communicable (Heylighen, 1997) and hence more useful for coordinating perspectives with conversation partners in everyday communications (Fussell & Krauss, 1992). There is consistent evidence from communication research that people tend to include shared (vs. idiosyncratic) knowledge in communicative messages (Lau, Chiu, & Hong, 2001). Furthermore, commonly shared ideas in a group are discussed more and given more weight in the group's decision than are unshared ideas (Stasser & Stewart, 1992). Also, in a communication chain, information that is consistent with the consensual beliefs often perpetuates through information transmission, whereas information that is inconsistent with it tends to drop out in the process (Kashima, 2000). Research has shown that familiar baseball players are discussed more often than lesser-known players in natural discussions on the Internet, regardless of player performance. In addition, baseball players who are discussed more often (again, regardless of performance) on the Internet receive more All-Star votes, an institutionalized measure of cultural prominence (Fast et al., 2009). This result concurs with the idea that the tendency to use shared knowledge to establish common ground with conversation partners explains why well-known ideas, practices, and people maintain their cultural prominence in the presence of equally good or better alternatives. Given these results, it is not surprising that many contemporary theories of culture have emphasized the importance of intersubjective knowledge and its role in communication in shaping cultural processes (see Lau, Chiu, & Lee, 2001). For example, Sperber (1996) suggests that the best way to study how culture spreads and evolves is by examining how shared representations "are cognized by individuals and how they are communicated within a group" (p. 97). Likewise, Bruner (1990) submits, "our culturally adapted way of life depends upon shared meanings and shared concepts and depends as well upon shared modes of discourse for negotiating differences in meaning and interpretation" (pp. 12–13).

Third, values and beliefs that are collectively perceived to be important to the group provide a frame of reference for

constructing group identities. For example, Wan and her colleagues (Wan, Chiu, Peng, & Tam, 2007; Wan, Chiu, Tam, et al., 2007) have shown that group identification is stronger when an individual's personal values are in alignment with the intersubjectively important values in the group. Furthermore, group identification is more strongly associated with the similarity between personal values and intersubjectively important values than with the similarity between personal values and the values that are widely endorsed in the group. Given the central role of intersubjectively important values in the culture, people would have an inclination to maintain the popularity and prominence of these values in the culture. For example, a recent survey (Tam & Lee, 2010) shows that parents are motivated to transmit not only their personal values to their offspring, but also intersubjectively important values. Other studies have shown that people give highly favorable evaluations to cultural celebrities (well-known symbols of the culture) whose behaviors personify intersubjectively important values (Wan, Torelli, & Chiu, in press). Furthermore, people who are led to speak against the importance of intersubjectively important values in the experiment often feel guilty of abandoning and betraying their culture; they react to this feeling by subsequently reaffirming their allegiance to the culture through elevating their evaluations of the culture's language (Wan, Chiu, Tam, et al., 2007) and international accomplishments (Wan, Torelli, & Chiu, in press). In summary, the adaptive, communicative, and identity functions of intersubjective knowledge and the social psychological processes people engage in to exploit these functions give rise to a widespread and self-sustained intersubjective reality.

## Implications

We have reviewed the evidence that intersubjective perceptions, which serve important psychological and social functions, can affect behaviors above and beyond the influence of personal values and beliefs. In this section, we will discuss the implications of the intersubjective approach on understanding and measuring culture and its evolution.

## Understanding Culture

*An interactionist perspective on culture.* When cultural differences in behaviors are explained solely in terms of internalized cultural values and beliefs, researchers risk reducing culture to group aggregate of measures of individual-level characteristics (Chiu & Chao, 2009). This form of reductionism, often refers to as methodological individualism (Durkheim, 1897/1997), seeks to understand culture—a collective construct—in terms of the values and beliefs of human individuals. As noted, contemporary reviews of the research literature that have found inconsistent and small country differences in personal values and beliefs provide little support for this reductionist thesis. Taking a nonreductionist perspective, some researchers submit that culture does not reside in the individual's head. Rather, culture exists primarily in the form of public representations

embodied in the culture's instituted social relations and major life tasks, and individuals display culturally characteristic behaviors without conscious reflections on the dominant values in the culture (Kitayama, Park, Sevincer, Karasawa, & Uskul, 2009). Because cultural scripts are implicit and can affect behaviors without conscious deliberations, self-report measures of individual-level characteristics do not always reflect the culture's characteristics and hence do not mediate cultural differences in behaviors.

The intersubjective approach takes a person–situation interaction perspective on culture. It assumes that culture exists at multiple levels. A distinctive emphasis in the intersubjective approach is the collective consensus-building processes members of a culture engage in to manage the ecology. Thus, our analysis complements current perspectives on culture and psychology by focusing on how cultural behaviors are mediated by what individuals in the society agree to be the prominent ideas in the culture. Instead of treating cultural behaviors as symptoms of acquired dispositions or learned responses to the local environment, the intersubjective approach views cultural behaviors as goal-directed behaviors resulting from strategic use of culturally prescribed scripts (encoded in the culture's intersubjective knowledge) among individuals who are mindful of the different constraints and affordances in the local environments for the purpose of attaining valued goals (e.g., epistemic, identity and communicative goals).

*Malleability of cultural influence.* This new understanding of culture afforded by the intersubjective approach has important implications for conceptualizing the nature of cultural behaviors and cultural influence. According to the intersubjective approach, cultural behaviors are goal-directed, adaptive, and malleable, rather than inflexible manifestations of internalized cultural traits or reflexive responses to local environmental requirements. Because of the adaptive nature of cultural behaviors, when the situational contingencies change, cultural behaviors would change correspondingly.

For example, when one's behaviors have little social implications or cannot be subject under social scrutiny, the pressure to conform to intersubjective norms would be weakened (Yamagishi & Suzuki, 2009). As an illustration, a well-documented cultural difference is that East Asians tend to self-efface when estimating their performance whereas European Americans tend to self-enhance. This difference has been attributed to different cultural mandates in Eastern and Western cultures, with Western cultures privileging the independent self and Eastern cultures privileging the interdependent self. However, recent research findings have shown that the classical East–West difference in self-effacement and self-enhancement is obtained only when the social implications of one's actions are vague and unspecified. In such a situation, East Asians assume that it is prudent that they self-efface, whereas Westerners do not pay much attention to the need for self-effacement. When East Asians are given a legitimate reason not to be concerned with implications of their actions (as when they are given a monetary incentive to make accurate performance estimates), their tendency to self-efface

disappears (Suzuki & Yamagishi, 2004). Similarly, Yamagishi and colleagues (Yamagishi, Hashimoto, & Schug, 2008) found that Japanese participants' preference for conformity to the majority disappeared when it was made salient that their actions would have no social consequences (cf. Kim, Chiu, Peng, Cai, & Tov, 2010).

In addition, people use intersubjective knowledge as behavior guides because it serves important epistemic, communication, and identity functions. Thus, people are more likely to display intersubjective norm-consistent behaviors when these functions are salient, as when there is a need for firm answers (Chao, Zhang, & Chiu, 2010; Chiu et al., 2001; Fu et al., 2007) or when the individuals are held responsible to an ingroup audience for their behavioral choices (Briley et al., 2000; Gelfand & Realo, 1999). In Gelfand and Realo (1999), holding individuals accountable to their constituents for their behavioral decisions in a negotiation setting increases cooperation in negotiations among Estonians, whereas the same accountability manipulation increases Americans' competitiveness. Furthermore, when the cultural identity of the interaction partner changes, people adapt their behavioral choices to the perceived norms in the new interaction partner's culture. Thus, American-Chinese bicultural individuals use the intersubjective 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 et al., 2010; Zou et al., 2009).

**Dissociation from personal values and beliefs.** The dissociation of intersubjectively important values and personal values may seem counterintuitive because it is at odd with the entrenched assumption in cultural psychology that individuals have internalized the values of their culture through acculturation. However, as mentioned, people are not captive recipients of cultural influence. Rather, people can turn culture into an object of reflection. They construct intersubjective representations of their culture, reflect on the strengths and liabilities of their cultural tradition, and decide whether to identify or disidentify with it (Chiu & Chen, 2004). Although people are generally aware of the dominant values in their culture, some may identify with and internalize these values and have high levels of cultural identification as a result (Guan et al., 2009; Wan, Chiu, Peng, & Tam, 2007; Wan, Chiu, Tam, et al., 2007). Others may not identify with these values and some may even dissent from them.

Indeed, from our perspective, the dissociation of intersubjectively important values and personal values is not surprising because the criteria individuals use to select their personal values are not the same as those the society uses to select its intersubjectively important values. Specifically, individuals select personal values based on the values' personal utility, whereas the society selects intersubjectively important values based on the values' collective utility and communicability (Heylighen, 1997).

**Explaining cultural behaviors.** Another seemingly counterintuitive conclusion from our analysis is that intersubjective perceptions explain cultural behaviors even when they are dissociated

from personal values. For example, although most individuals in the society may privately prefer individualist values, they assume that others in the culture generally prefer collectivism. Moreover, people could act on their shared perceptions instead of their own values. Although this phenomenon may seem counterintuitive to (cross-) cultural psychologists, it should not surprise social psychologists. Katz and Allport (1931) noticed this phenomenon almost 80 years ago and referred to it as *pluralistic ignorance*, which is "a situation where a majority of group members privately reject a norm, but assume (incorrectly) that most others accept it" (p. 152). There are many empirical demonstrations of pluralistic ignorance; the most well-known one in social psychology is probably Prentice and Miller's (1993) finding that, on average, private levels of comfort with excessive drinking on campus were much lower than the perceived average among college men at Princeton University. Nonetheless, college men at Princeton acted on the perceived norms and gradually shifted their private attitudes toward the perceived norms.

Nonetheless, it is not our intention to undermine the explanatory power of internalized cultural values and beliefs. In fact, it is conceivable that those who have internalized the core values and beliefs in the culture are inclined to use these values and beliefs as behavior guides. As mentioned, there is evidence that personal values predict self-initiated, universalistic behaviors, whereas intersubjective perceptions predict conformity and traditional behaviors (Fischer, 2006; Fischer et al., 2009). There is some evidence that some individual-level characteristics predict what types of self-presentational behaviors will be seen as culturally normative (Lalwani, Shrum, & Chiu, 2009). In short, we believe that internalized personal values and beliefs are important explanatory constructs in (cross-) cultural psychology. Our contention is that the intersubjective approach offers a new perspective on the social psychology of cultural behaviors.

**Cultural competence.** The intersubjective approach also provides a new perspective on cultural competence. Admittedly, individuals who have internalized the core values or beliefs in their culture or have developed automated cultural scripts as behavior guides are competent members of the culture. However, as Keesing (1974) points out, a culturally competent person can also be someone who possesses nuanced knowledge of the intersubjective reality, regardless of whether this person identifies with the culture. Indeed, there is consistent evidence that knowledge of the intersubjective reality is at the heart of cultural competence, particularly for living in nonnative cultures. For example, immigrants who possess nuanced knowledge of the host culture have been shown to have better sociocultural adaptation (Kurman & Ronen-Eilson, 2004) and more socially competent interactions (in terms of personal goal attainments and relationship quality) with members of the host culture (Li & Hong, 2001).

**Managing multicultural identities.** Most people belong to multiple cultures, and the intersubjective approach is particularly valuable for studying relative identification with multiple cultures. Wan, Chiu, Peng, and Tam (2007) have shown that

people with experiences in multiple cultures have representations about the relative importance of different values in each of these cultures. They also have representations regarding the similarities and differences in the relative importance of different values among the multiple cultures. Furthermore, endorsement of values intersubjectively believed to differentiate two cultures predicts people's relative identification with the two cultures. For example, a group of Singaporean Chinese have shared representations of both Singaporean culture and Chinese culture. They also have shared representations of the values that an average Chinese (but not an average Singaporean) endorses and the values that an average Singaporean (but not an average Chinese) endorses. Singaporean Chinese who endorse the former values would have stronger Chinese identification, whereas those who endorse the latter values would have stronger Singaporean identification. When managing two cultural group identities, individuals may first retrieve values that are generally believed to be the values that distinguish the two cultural groups and then decide their relative allegiance to the two groups based on their own endorsement of these values.

### **Measuring Culture**

The failure to find coherent cross-cultural differences in individual-level characteristics has led some researchers to question the validity of self-report measures of cultural values and beliefs, as well as the viability of understanding cultural behaviors in terms of such characteristics (Oyserman, Sorensen, Reber, & Chen, 2009). For example, Oyserman and colleagues have put forward a situated cognition model of culture, arguing that people do not have coherent representations of their culture. Instead, they have acquired a diverse set of overlapping and contradictory cognitive tools for sensemaking. In response to situational cueing, people selectively retrieve a set of these tools in situ to make sense of the current experience (Oyserman & Lee, 2008).

We agree with the situated cognition model that activation of cultural knowledge is situation dependent, as evident in the malleability of cultural behaviors. We also agree that environmental cueing can call out a set of cognitive and behavioral outputs that resemble a cultural syndrome, as shown in the simulated culture studies reviewed above. However, we submit that individuals of a local culture have developed coherent representations of the culture through direct and vicarious experiences with a shared cultural ecology. They have conscious access to these representations. Indeed, there is consistent evidence that self-reported intersubjective perceptions mediate well-documented cultural differences in judgments and behaviors (Shteynberg et al., 2009; Zou et al., 2009).

This raises the possibility that intersubjective perceptions can be measured with self-reports. Indeed, some cultural psychologists have incorporated intersubjective perceptions in the measurement of cultural values. These researchers find that asking respondents to rate their personal values in relation to the perceived norms in the culture can enhance the validity of the personal values measures (Heine, Lehman, Peng, & Greenholtz,

2002). Direct interests in measuring intersubjective perceptions per se first emerged in research of organizational climate, when Glick (1985) argued that organizational climate should be measured by asking key informants in the organization to describe the organizational characteristics. Early work by Bierbrauer, Heyer, and Wolfradt (1994) used an intersubjective measure to assess culture. Intersubjective measures started to receive attention in cross-cultural psychology following the publication of two large-scale cross-national surveys of cultural values (House, Hanges, Havidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004) and personality traits (Terracciano et al., 2005). However, researchers were generally skeptical of the validity of these measures (Hofstede, 2006; Terracciano & McCrae, 2006; Smith, 2006). Evidence for the explanatory utility of measures of intersubjective perceptions beyond and above measures of individual-level characteristics began to surface after 2006 in the domains of cultural values (Fischer, 2006; Fischer et al., 2009; Shteynberg et al., 2009; Wan, Chiu, Peng, & Tam, 2007; Wan, Chiu, Tam, et al., 2007), cultural beliefs (Zou et al., 2009), motivational predilections (Zou et al., 2009), self-conceptions (Shteynberg et al., 2009), and personality traits (Heine et al., 2008). Although a considerable amount of effort is still needed to create standardized measures of intersubjective perceptions, the initial success of the extant measures in explaining cultural behaviors should restore researchers' confidence in the viability of measuring cultures in terms of shared representations of culture that are accessible to consciousness.

### **Cultural Change**

Culture and intersubjective perceptions influence each other. Intersubjective perceptions change when the social ecology changes. Individuals acquire intersubjective knowledge partly through implicit learning: a process whereby the learner absorbs subtle patterns and learns about the world as they go about their daily business without giving conscious attention to memorizing and learning per se (Segers, 1994). When individuals incidentally encounter a certain idea in the environment, they form a memory trace of it. Without deliberate effort, the mind registers the frequency of encountering the same idea. When asked to infer how widely shared the idea is in one's community, perceivers use the frequency of personal experiences with the idea as the basis for making the inference—a frequently encountered idea is deemed as a more widely shared one (Hintzman, 1988). Consistent with this view, research has shown that an opinion repeated three times in a group discussion is judged to be more representative of the group's opinion than the same argument that surfaced once only in the discussion (Weaver, Garcia, Schwarz, & Miller, 2007). In addition, when the strength of an argument is weak, mere repetitions of it can increase its persuasiveness (Moons, Mackie, & Gracia-Marques, 2009), probably because the argument is perceived to have many supporters in the community. This analysis suggests that individuals constantly update their intersubjective perceptions in light of new interactions with the environment and that they often do so without conscious



awareness. Thus, although individuals are aware of the contents of intersubjective perceptions, they may not be aware of how they acquire and update their intersubjective knowledge.

Intersubjective perceptions play an important role in cultural change. When intersubjective perceptions have changed in response to the changing ecology, behaviors that are mediated by intersubjective perceptions would also change accordingly. For example, Paluck (2009) has obtained some interesting evidence of this in the effect of the media on cultural change in Rwanda, which was largely mediated by shifts in the shared perceptions of typical or prescribed behaviors and not personal values.

Intercultural contacts also change the cultural ecology. Frequent intercultural contacts can change relatively homogeneous cultural space into multicultural space, where symbolic elements of local and foreign cultures coexist (Giddens, 1985). On the one hand, perceptions of cultural differences can increase the perceived benefits of learning from foreign cultures—potentially more can be learned from a dissimilar culture than from a similar culture, and research has found consistent positive effects of simultaneously activating intersubjective representations of two dissimilar cultures (Leung & Chiu, in press). On the other hand, following simultaneous activation of intersubjective representations of two dissimilar cultures, if the individuals are led to evaluate the local culture more favorably than the foreign culture, they are inclined to react negatively to the foreign culture and resist its influence (Chiu & Cheng, 2007).

## Conclusion

In this article, we illustrate the value of studying cultural differences through individuals' perceptions of and adaptations to the normative context—what we refer to as intersubjective perceptions—in comparison with studying culture through individuals' internalized personal values or beliefs. This view, which is often taken in evolutionary theories (Heylighen & Campbell, 1995; Yamagishi & Suzuki, 2009), sees individuals as quasi-rational actors who are calculated to the different constraints and affordances in their local environments and behave in ways that match the situational requirements for personal fitness. According to this perspective, cultural differences need not be a function of internal preferences per se, but should be understood as rational adaptations to incentives in the environment to attain one's valued goals (Chiu, Kim, & Chaturvedi, 2009; Gelfand & Realo, 1999; Yamagishi & Suzuki, 2009). As such, cultural behaviors are not merely scripted responses to the individuals' cultural ecology. In summary, humans are cultural beings not only because they are different personal beings in different cultural contexts or because they have learned to respond to their environments in a characteristic manner, but also because they are social beings managing their selves in different social ecologies. Because the requirements of the immediate social context can change, cultural differences at the individual level are highly dynamic.

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