

The Norms that Drive Behavior: Implications for Cultural Mismatch Theory

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In press, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*

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### The Norms that Drive Behavior: Implications for Cultural Mismatch Theory

In this commentary, we draw on two articles featured in this special volume to highlight the psychological and behavioral implications of the study of norms for underrepresented groups' experience of fit and belonging in organizations. In particular, we discuss these implications with respect to our cultural mismatch theory of inequality. In the sections below, we first outline key tenets of cultural mismatch theory. Second, drawing on Gelfand & Harrington's (this volume) discussion of the factors that increase the motivational force of norms, we argue that these same factors characterize underrepresented groups' experiences of cultural mismatches, which should increase their reliance on norms. Third, drawing on Morris and Liu's (this volume) distinction between peer and aspirational norms, we argue that consequences of the increased reliance on norms for experiences of cultural mismatch depend on whether underrepresented groups rely on peer versus aspirational norms.

### **Cultural Mismatch Theory of Inequality**

Broadly, cultural mismatch theory asserts that inequality is produced when the cultural norms in mainstream institutions do not match the norms prevalent among social groups who are underrepresented in those institutions (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). Specifically, this theory consists of two key tenets: (1) U.S. American institutions tend to promote mainstream, independent cultural norms, and exclude interdependent cultural norms that are common among underrepresented groups; (2) when institutions promote only mainstream norms, they inadvertently fuel inequality by creating barriers to the performance of underrepresented groups. For example, the cultural mismatch between

university norms of independence and first-generation students' norms of interdependence serves to decrease these students' comfort, increase their stress, and undermine their performance (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012; Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2012). While additional research is needed to examine cultural mismatch theory across different cultural and institutional contexts, we argue that the same general principles apply across contexts—when institutions reflect the norms of mainstream groups, they disadvantage members of underrepresented groups who adhere to different norms.

### **The Motivational Force of Norms**

Gelfand and Harrington describe three conditions under which norms are most likely to exert motivational force and drive behavior. Specifically, norm-consistent behavior is most likely to occur in situations in which people (a) experience high uncertainty, ambiguity, or threat, (b) are concerned with favorable evaluations from others, or (c) have low power. Importantly, these conditions mirror the very conditions that underrepresented groups are likely to confront when they transition to new mainstream institutions (e.g., schools and workplaces) and experience cultural mismatches between their background norms and the norms of the new setting. In such situations, members of underrepresented groups are likely to be relatively low in power and to experience threat and uncertainty about the right way to behave (e.g., Croizet & Claire, 1998; Townsend, Eliezer, Major, & Mendes, 2014). They are also likely to be concerned with being positively evaluated by others in the environment (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002).

These conditions, therefore, carry important implications for the degree to which underrepresented groups' are likely to experience cultural mismatches. That is, the

common experiences (e.g., low power, uncertainty) associated with cultural mismatches are likely to amplify underrepresented groups' tendency to follow norms.

### **Dimensions of Norms: Peer versus Aspirational**

An open question, however, remains about which norms (e.g., background or mainstream) underrepresented groups will be more likely to follow when they confront the conditions present during experiences of cultural mismatch. Drawing on Morris and Liu's (this volume) distinction between peer and aspirational norms, we argue that the degree to which underrepresented groups' experience cultural mismatches in organizations will depend on whether they adhere to peer or aspirational norms.

If the conditions associated with cultural mismatch increase adherence to peer groups' norms, rather than the aspirational or mainstream norms of their organization, then this pattern of behavior is likely to exacerbate and maintain the negative consequences of cultural mismatch. For example, when first-generation students transition to college and experience cultural mismatch, they may respond by showing an increased reliance on the norms from their working-class backgrounds. Morris and Liu (this volume) describe the potential advantages and disadvantages of this pattern of behavior. They suggest that increased reliance on peer norms may give members of underrepresented groups a sense of solidarity with the social groups that are central to their identities. However, in the long run, adherence to these norms rather than mainstream or aspirational norms is likely to hinder the ability members of underrepresented groups to transition to new social roles that would afford them higher status and power. Ultimately, this would amplify the experience of cultural mismatch and, thereby, maintain and perpetuate inequality.

Conversely, if the conditions associated with cultural mismatch increase underrepresented groups' adherence to the mainstream norms of an organization rather than peer groups' norms, then the experiences of cultural mismatch are likely to be attenuated. For example, when first-generation students transition to college and experience cultural mismatch, they may respond by showing an increased reliance on middle-class or mainstream norms. Morris and Liu (this volume) suggest that such behavior could help them to find a sense of meaning, gain status in the eyes of others, and be more likely to adjust to the new mainstream settings and find a path to success. To the extent that people's enactment of these norms leads to acculturation, people may also be less likely to experience cultural mismatch in the long run. However, in the short run, distancing oneself from peer norms may lead to conflicts with one's family or friends from home.

Theoretical and empirical work on norms informs our cultural mismatch theory of inequality by illuminating the conditions under which cultural mismatches are most likely to contribute to inequality, and indicating how these processes may unfold. Future research should consider the conditions that influence when members of underrepresented groups are most likely to adhere to peer versus aspirational norms. Although we suspect that common experiences of cultural mismatch lead underrepresented groups to rely on peer than aspirational norms, factors such as levels of peer identification are likely to moderate this tendency. Understanding these conditions and processes can provide the tools to better understand the sources of and solutions to inequality in organizations.

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