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Different Ways to Resolve Discrepancy Between Descriptive and Injunctive Norms Across Cultures

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Gelfand and Harrington (2015) define descriptive norms as personal cognitions concerning the dominant beliefs, values, and behaviors of a particular reference group, and discussed how different motivational factors may mediate the cross-cultural differences in compliance to the

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descriptive norms. Although Gelfand and Harrington do not explicitly differentiate descriptive norms (what *is* done or not done) and injunctive norms (what *should or should not* be done), they comment that "descriptive and injunctive norms need not be fully overlapping" and "future research should examine what factors uniquely explain their motivational force" (pp. 1273-1278). Indeed, research has suggested that injunctive norms provide moral guidance and anticipation of social sanctioning or acceptance, and thus play an important role to maintain social control of individual members' behaviors (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Yamagishi, Hashimoto, & Schug, 2008).

Based on Gelfand and Harrington (2015), because individuals in collectivist (interdependent, and often Eastern) cultures have a higher motivation to secure favorable impression, they should be more strongly and more readily affected by injunctive norms than individuals in individualist (independent, and often Western) cultures. Indeed, Jacobson, Mortensen, and Cialdini (2011) have showed that depleting the self-control resources of their participants, mainly Westerners, increases conformity to a descriptive norm but decreases conformity to an injunctive norm, suggesting that injunctive norms are less focal than descriptive norms in Western culture. By contrast, Savani, Morris, and Naidu (2012) have found that Indians are more likely than Americans to conform to the norm of deferring to salient authorities' expectations (an injunctive norm). However, the authors argued that it is not just because Indians want to avoid social sanctions but also because they believe that bowing to legitimate social pressures is the "right" way of being a person (Derné, 1992).

Given the seemingly strong influence of injunctive norm in collectivist cultures, how to explain collective violation of rules and laws observed in those cultures? For example, in China, it is common to see groups of pedestrians violating traffic laws together (which has been famously coined as "Chinese style of crossing street" "中国式过马路," see http://english.people.com.cn/90882/8073796.html). Here, although violation of traffic rules is socially disapproved, the violation is a commonly observed behavior. Bribery in China poses another example. Bribery is socially condemned in China, but bribery is perceived as common and prevalent in Chinese society (Liu et al., 2015). (This perception in fact corresponds to objective indicators—China ranked 27 out of 28 countries according to the Bribe Payer Index reported by Transparency International.) These examples illustrated a discrepancy between injunctive norms and descriptive norms, and Chinese seem to follow descriptive norms more than injunctive norms. The goal of the present commentary is to extend Gelfand and Harrington's (2015) discussion to address the discrepancy between injunctive and descriptive norms.

We argue that such a discrepancy is not necessarily problematic in Chinese culture because of the widely shared collective (vs. individual) agency beliefs. Previous research find cross-cultural differences in implicit agency beliefs—people's preconceptions about the autonomy, intentionality, and entitativity of individuals versus groups (Menon, Morris, Chiu, & Hong, 1999). It has been shown that individual agency belief is popular in individualistic cultures in which individuals are believed to be the agentic source of actions, to bear free will, and to be autonomous from environmental constraints. By contrast, group agency belief is popular in collectivist cultures in which groups are perceived to be the agentic source of actions, and to exert strong control on the individuals embedded within the groups (see Morris, Menon, & Ames, 2001, for a review). American perceivers, endorsing individual (vs. collective) agency belief, were more likely than Chinese perceivers to make dispositional (e.g., values, attitudes, traits) than external (e.g., social pressure) inferences from actor's behaviors (Chiu, Morris, Hong, & Menon, 2000; Menon et al., 1999).

Extrapolating to norms, it is possible that Westerners (e.g., American perceivers) are more likely than Easterners (e.g., Chinese perceivers) to infer values and attitudes of the actors from descriptive norms. This inference would promote stronger naturalistic fallacy (i.e., the tendency to infer injunctive norms from descriptive norms, cf. Eriksson, Strimling, & Coultas, 2015) among Americans than among Chinese. By the same token, because Americans are more likely than Chinese to infer

others holding private attitudes and judgments consistent with their overt behaviors, they would be more likely to experience pluralistic ignorance—a psychological state characterized by a belief that one's private attitudes and judgments are different from those of others, even though one's public behavior is identical (Miller & McFarland, 1991; Prentice & Miller, 1993).

These tendencies would create discomfort (dissonance) among Americans when the descriptive and injunctive norms are in conflict because it implies hypocrisy. Indeed, conflict between injunctive and descriptive norms about energy conservation has been found to weaken behavioral intentions among American participants (Smith et al., 2012). By contrast, Chinese, endorsing collective (vs. individual) agency belief, would understand that people's behaviors are often constrained by social pressure, and thus are less bothered by the discrepancy between descriptive and injunctive norms. Instead, they use the descriptive norms as heuristics to formulate their own behaviors, and strategically conform to the descriptive norms instead of injunctive norms when social monitoring and sanctioning is low (e.g., when one is in a socially mobile community). In those situations, people are willing to engage in socially condemned behaviors as long as the behaviors have high utility to achieve one's self-interests. For example, in three studies, Chen, Liu, Lan, and Hong (2015) found that Chinese participants were more willing to bribe and indeed bribe more under a high residential mobility condition than a low residential mobility condition when the bribe is instrumental to achieve their personal goals.

In addition, by the same token, when many (in comparison to few) people are engaging in a socially disapproved behavior (e.g., traffic rule violation), Chinese may also show less moral engagement; it is easier to attribute the behaviors to social pressure rather than personal morality, thereby reducing personal responsibility (cf. Mazar & Aggarwal, 2011). Moreover, when many others are performing the illicit acts as well, individuals may perceive a lower personal risk of being penalized. This again would result in more conformity with the descriptive norms than the injunctive norms.

In sum, because of the differential beliefs in individual agency versus collective agency, the discrepancy between descriptive norms and injunctive norms may have different meanings across cultures. Information about other's behaviors (descriptive norms) and approvals/disapprovals (injunctive norms) help us better adapt and deal with the implicit bargain of social life—the pervasive tension between humans' naturally selfish impulses on one hand, and cooperative, group-oriented behaviors that offer significant long-term survival advantages on the other (Baumeister, 2005). Gelfand and Harrington (2015) have contributed greatly to our understanding of the topic by focusing on the motivational factors underlying compliance to descriptive norms. We tried to extend their discussion in this article to include injunctive norms.

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

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In the target article, Gelfand and Harrington (2015) 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