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What moves people to action? Culture and motivation

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The study of motivation answers the question: what moves people to action in particular situations. A large volume of research provides compelling evidence that the answer to this question depends on the cultural context. In the individualist West, particularly in middle-class, college educated North America, the motivation for 'good' actions such as persistent productive performance is commonly understood to come from preferences and values inside the person. Yet in most contexts (those of the majority world), motivation takes form as being receptive to specific others, realizing expectations, and following culturally inscribed norms. Explaining the actions of people with a mismatched model of motivation can lead to inferences of irrationality, deficiency or immorality and is a barrier to intercultural communication.

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Motivation is theorized as that which moves people to action. The study of motivation asks and answers the question: Why do people initiate, terminate, and persist in specific actions in particular situations (e.g., [1,2])? The answers matter for teaching, management, marketing, health and well-being, as well for promoting peace and justice. Motivation is shaped by the multiple intersecting cultures, those of national origin but also those of gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, workplace, sexual orientation, etc. that people engage each day and across their lives [3]. Cultures are systems of ideas, interactions, institutions that guide the actions of individuals [4,5]. The first contribution of a culturally comparative approach to motivation is that the answers to the question of 'why a particular action' depend on the cultural context in which they are asked.

Even when the answer to the why of behavior is the same across cultures (e.g., God), what the answer means and

what it implies for behavior can be strikingly different [6–13]. Current research focuses on how cultural contexts can give rise to different styles of motivation [14], on understanding these different styles and how to leverage them [15], and with demonstrating that motivations and cultures are dynamic systems that change with conditions and contexts [16,17]. One distinction that organizes much of this burgeoning literature and that is the focus of this review is the relative balance between the cultural attention and elaboration accorded to the *internal attributes of the self* and that accorded to *others and their expectations* as the source of meaningful action. In other words, what is the relative balance between self-regulation and other-regulation in explaining what moves people to action.

Why does it matter?

Consider the following example. Anne is a high school student with a European American background in San Francisco. She applies herself in school and studies hard because she *wants* to do well. Annie is a student in the same school with Taiwanese American background. She applies herself in school and studies hard because her parents *expect her* to become well-educated. Whose motivation is more powerful or more authentic? Amy Chua, the author of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* [18] created a furor when she declared that a child's successful performance required parental pressure and oversight and that Asian-style parenting produced superior performance. A study comparing European and Asian American high school students addressed this question [19]. At the point of failure on a difficult test, high school students were asked to write about their mothers or to write about themselves before taking a second test. Compared to European Americans, the Asian American students attempted and solved more items after thinking and writing about their mothers. European Americans solved more problems after thinking and writing about themselves. Amy Chua was right — for Asian Americans, not for European Americans.

Other studies revealing a strong cultural difference in the motivational force of what one wants versus the force of what others and society in general expect are now plentiful (e.g., [20,21]). People in Asian contexts tend to underscore the motivational power of others; those in European contexts stress the force of individual thoughts and feelings. When making career decisions, for example, Chinese students are more likely to seek the advice of others than American students [22]. For marriage decisions in China, high social status, high earning potential and good family background drive spouse selection, but

in the U.S. it is individual attributes of honesty, sense of humor and intelligence [23]. For Indian employees, decisions about leaving their jobs depend more on their connections with others in the organization; for Americans, job turnover decisions depend more on how well their jobs fit them personally [24]. Indians are also more likely than Americans to make choices consistent with what is expected by authority [25] and less likely to purchase products based on their personal preferences [26]. Together, the research on culture and motivation (or *agency* as it is often called) makes the case for multiple systems of motivation and underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive understanding of the ‘why of action’ question. Explaining the actions of others with a mismatched model of motivation — that is, an interpretive structure that includes assumptions about the nature and source of behavior that are not normative in a given setting — is a barrier to intercultural communication and understanding. Behavioral incentives or strategies that motivate action in one setting can fall completely flat in another. Moreover, actions that are responsive to motivational forces that are different from one’s own can appear irrational, deficient, or even immoral [5].

Where does it come from? Inside or out, self or others?

In the individualist West, particularly in middle-class, college educated North America the motivation for ‘good’ actions, such as persistent productive performance, is commonly understood to come from inside the person. Such motivation is the result of the expression of intrinsic forces — individually rooted psychic forces, personal needs, preferences, attitudes, values, goals, and motives — to belong, to enhance self-esteem, to achieve, and to maintain cognitive consistency [8,27]. These values and motives initiate regulatory processes of self-expression, self-affirmation, self-validation, self-verification, etc. Regulatory forces that emanate from others or incentives such as grades or money are commonly believed to be extrinsic to the self and to undermine individual volition and initiative and to reduce agency. In contexts that cultural psychologists [28] call WEIRD (an acronym for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic), the best answers to the why of behavior are ‘I chose to do that because I wanted to, I needed to, it mattered to me.’ The empirical support for the positive effects of autonomous motivation on a wide range of behavior outcomes is robust (e.g., [29–31]).

Yet seventy-five percent of the world’s population is *not* WEIRD and in this, the majority world, the best answer to the why of behavior question takes a different form. That which moves people to action stems directly from their relationships to others and their concern with these others and with what is commonly thought to be the appropriate or right way to behave. These relational forces that explain behavior take shape as being receptive

to specific important others and as the reassuring feeling that accompanies realizing the expectations of generalized others, or meeting culturally inscribed norms for particular situations. They give rise to behavioral regulation that requires tuning and adjusting one’s behavior to others and matching it to standards. Such other-regulation is not conformity as it is commonly understood in the West or superficial compliance or the behavior of codependent people with weak egos [32]. Nor is pressure from or scrutiny by significant others necessarily experienced as extrinsic or aversive. In many cultural contexts, referencing or implicating the ‘right’ others, fulfilling role-related duties and obligations, and maintaining face, honor, and status are associated with good outcomes. The best answers to the why of behavior are ‘I did that because I should, because it is what people do, or because it was right or proper or expected of me.’ Doing what is expected or required is not at odds with individual autonomy or choice but often supports it and co-occurs [10,33–35,36**].

Diversity in models of agency

One source of these differences in the location of agency is historically derived commitments from religion, politics and philosophy about what is a person and what is good or moral behavior. When a person is understood as *independent* — as a separate, stable, autonomous, free entity possessing a set of defining attributes that guide behavior [12,37,38], actions are thought to emanate from the expression of these attributes. Acting independently is the most pervasive, promoted, valued, and psychologically beneficial style of behavior in mainstream European American sociocultural contexts [39–41]. These culturally grounded ideas about agency are reflected and promoted in textbooks, magazines, media coverage, ads, Internet sites, song lyrics, and architecture [42]. They are further promoted and enforced in daily social interactions as well as in more formal institutional practices and policies.

From an *independent* perspective ‘good’ behavior is acting autonomously, feeling in control, and determining one’s own outcomes free from others’ influence. European American students perform relatively poorly after referencing their mothers because in these contexts, normatively appropriate people should be separate from others, even from their mothers (e.g., [9,43**,44]). A signature of becoming a successful individual is the ability to confront challenges and to motivate one’s self without undue reliance on others [45].

When a person is instead understood as *interdependent* — a connected, flexible, committed being, defined by relations to others and is not fully separate from the social context [8,37], other people are not extrinsic to the self. Instead actions are thought to stem from paying attention to and adjusting to close others. Behavioral regulation by others and acting interdependently is the most valued and

promoted style of behavior in the majority world [5,28]. In these contexts, ‘good’ behavior requires maintaining relationships, explicitly acknowledging shared fate, and coordinating one’s own behavior to accommodate the needs and perspectives of in-group others and the conditions of the context [9]. Asian American students performed well on the test after referencing their mothers because normatively appropriate people should be connected with close others, especially their mother. Thus, in many contexts other than the middle class West, parents direct their children to recognize their fundamental connectedness to others, and to fulfill their obligations to them and to meet explicit norms [45–51].

The culturally assumed location of the energy to act and the specific role of others in this agency — whether it is constructed as an internal need or motive or instead as meeting the expectations of others is a difference that makes a difference for action. As an example, when European Americans were primed (both implicitly and explicitly) to think about independence (influencing others, taking charge) or instead about interdependence (adjusting to others, working together), they performed better on cognitive and physical tasks following the independence primes. For the Asian Americans, whose background gave them experience with multiple models of agency, both primes produced strong performance [52**]. The implication of such studies is that while an interdependent or ‘we’ mindset can energize behavior in some situations (e.g., [53]), sustained motivation for middle class European Americans is likely to require a simultaneous attention to the role of individual choice and autonomy, even if the task or goal is a collective one that requires interdependence.

Another powerful source of differences in the location of agency is the immediate conditions of everyday lived existence. Contexts stratified by social class and race, and/or that vary substantially in their resources are also likely to differ in their prevalent models of agency [9,54]. The material and social conditions of the thirty-five percent of Americans with a college education (often called the middle class) include access to economic capital, geographic mobility, and ample opportunities for choice, control and influence. These conditions tend to foster and promote the independent agency so highly valued in North American contexts [55**]. By contrast, the conditions of life common in working class contexts — even within the U.S. — such as limited access to economic capital, environmental constraints, and few opportunities for choice, control and influence [56,57] require and promote interdependent agency. North American working class interdependence has different roots than Asian interdependence, but there is a shared emphasis on regulation by others — on social responsiveness, adjusting to the situation, seeing one’s self as connected to others, and relying on family and friends for support. This

interdependent agency will influence what moves people to action.

For example, first generation students in North America and in Europe, that is, students from working class backgrounds who are the first in their family to attend college, often struggle. They earn low grades, develop few relationships, and often drop out because the interdependence that is more practiced and familiar in their home contexts is a clash with the independent ideas and practices that structure the practices and policies of most universities. By contrast, middle class students, whose familiar models of agency match the independent ideas and practices built into the university, are relatively advantaged. A series of studies with working class and middle class students that framed the university terms of interdependence (an opportunity to be part of a community, to collaborate) or instead in terms of independence (an opportunity to chart one’s own course, to be unique) revealed the significance of such a mismatch. When the university was represented as a site that includes interdependence, as opposed to only one of independence, academic tasks were construed as less difficult, students were less stressed and performance improved [58,59].

People often unwittingly use their most familiar model of agency to make sense of the behavior of others whose contexts differ from their own. A study of Hurricane Katrina survivors found that those who left as the storm hit described their actions in terms of independent agency, that is, in terms of their preferences, choices and personal control [60]. In sharp contrast, those who stayed lacked the resources to evacuate and to effectively enact an independent model of agency. They described their actions in terms of interdependent agency, that is, connecting with others, needing to stay strong, and having faith so as to care for others. Observers and first responders blind to this alternate model of agency described the stayers as without motivation. Research across a variety of cultural contexts reveals that those with more power or status are likely to have a sense of themselves as independent from others and as influencing and controlling social interactions, while those with less power or status will experience themselves as interdependent with others and as adjusting and deferring to others in interaction [61,62].

Conclusions and directions for future research

When theorists and practitioners assume that action is driven primarily by entities inside people — motives, personal interests, mindsets, attitudes, values, needs and goals, measurement, as well as efforts to incentivize or change behavior will focus on these entities. This emphasis, itself a consequence of a culture that reflects and promotes the individual as the source of all thought, feeling, and action, has worked well for explaining why

people initiate or terminate actions in WEIRD contexts. Yet as outlined here, in many contexts, including many within North America, agency is located in relationships, in obligations and expectations of others, in situational constraints and in the unspoken norms about the right way to behave. Much less is known about action in these contexts [63**]. Self-regulation of behavior is the culturally sanctioned form of regulation and as such it is reasonably well-measured. By contrast, other-regulation (i.e., regulation of behavior through the goals of relationship partners (e.g., [64]), by obligations or duties to groups, or by generalized societal expectations and norms is not equally well assessed. Recent analyses that classify nations [65] and states [66**] by the tightness or looseness of norms are examples of tools that focus on other-regulation and that are potentially powerful in predicting and explaining cultural variation in action. The assessment of norms, along with the systematic tracking of other elements of cultural systems such as patterns of interactions, social networks, institutional practices, and pervasive ideas can provide further insight into what moves people to action. A focus on other-regulation along with the current dominant focus on self-regulation will benefit basic motivational theory as well as behavioral change efforts in all domains.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors wish to confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest.

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