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Collective Responsibility Attribution**

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CT Culture as Norm Representations: The Case of Collective Responsibility Attribution

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Norms, spoken or implicit, regulate much of our social life. They are social control devices evolved to coordinate human activities in collective living ([Fiske, 2000](#); [Heylighen & Campbell, 1995](#)). In this chapter, focusing on the social regulatory functions of cultural norms and using collective responsibility attribution as an example, we will discuss the role of norms, which are major components of knowledge tradition, in cultural processes.

A CULTURE AS SHARED REPRESENTATIONS

Similar to other forms of knowledge representations (such as lay theories, see Chapter 2, this volume; and intersubjective values, see Chapter 3, this volume), social norms are knowledge representations that are shared among individuals within a collective. They provide premises in normative social inferences (e.g., inferences about whether a certain action should be carried out) and define the normative standards of behavior (e.g., determine whether a certain behavior is punishable or forgivable in the eyes of the public).

Social norms, together with their antecedent and consequent conditions, produce a normative representation (Chiu & Hong, 2006). An antecedent condition

refers to the circumstances under which the norm can be activated and applied (e.g., the causes of a car accident, say, speeding). A consequent condition refers to the behavioral implications of the norm (e.g., punishing the speeding driver will deter reoccurrence of the same behavior. Normative representations are knowledge structures; and, like other knowledge structures, their use is governed by three basic principles of knowledge activation (Higgins, 1996): The principles of availability, accessibility, and applicability.

B Availability

Certain cultural knowledge is available to an individual if that individual has acquired the knowledge and has a representation of it in memory. People acquire knowledge of cultural norms through learning, and individuals who have extensive experiences in several cultures might have acquired the knowledge in all of these cultures (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; see Chapter 2, this volume).

Norms are external to the individual. They are products of collective negotiations over what constitute acceptable and unacceptable behaviors in the society, and are externalized in institutions (e.g., the law), organizational rules and regulations, idioms, and other cultural artifacts. Norm representations are not only available in an individual's memory as private cognitions, they are also shared among others in the society. For a given norm representation, an individual would be aware of the extent to which the norm is shared in the society (e.g., the extent to

which members in the collective agree that drivers should be punished for speeding; [Lau, Chiu, & Hong, 2001](#); also see Chapter 3, this volume). In fact, the regulatory power of norms over individual behaviors is derived from the shared knowledge that the norm is available to the others in the society as well. Thus, when norms regarding a certain behavior are activated, the anticipated collective responses to the behavior are also activated. Therefore, rather than experiencing a behavioral choice as a personal choice, the individuals would feel that they are making a choice in the limelight and are answerable to the society for their action.

B Accessibility

According to the principle of knowledge activation, accessibility refers to the activation potential of available knowledge. A norm can influence behaviors when it becomes cognitively accessible. Situational cues that increase the accessibility of a norm include direct reminders of the contents and the social regulatory functions of the norm, as well as situational primes that reinforce one's accountability to an external audience, which could be a real or an imagined one.

B Applicability

Although the activation of norm representations by situational cues appears to be spontaneous, it is not a knee-jerk reaction. Application of norm representations also follows the applicability principle of knowledge activation ([Higgins, 1996](#)). Applicability refers to the appropriateness of applying the activated norm representation to a given situation. Whether an activated norm would influence

individuals' behaviors and judgments depends on its applicability to the immediate context. For example, in a Prisoner's Dilemma game, individuals can choose to compete or cooperate with their partners. The cooperation norm in Chinese culture encourages the adoption of a cooperation script. In one study ([Wong & Hong, 2005](#)), prior to playing the Prisoner's Dilemma game, Hong Kong Chinese players were reminded of their Chinese cultural tradition through subtle situational cueing (i.e., through incidental exposure to symbolic icons of Chinese culture). This culture-priming procedure rendered the Chinese norm of cooperation cognitively accessible to the players. The players did not apply the cognitively accessible norm indiscriminately in the game, however. Rather, they applied it only when it was appropriate to the situation as when they were playing the game with a friend (vs. a stranger).

In short, norm representations are a kind of knowledge representation. Their activation follows the principles of availability, accessibility, and applicability, just like other forms of knowledge. Because a norm representation encodes the acceptable standards of behavior that are widely shared in one's community, it is also a powerful social control tool for regulating individual behaviors in the society ([Fiske, 2000](#); [Heylighen & Campbell, 1995](#)).

A SOCIAL REGULATORY FUNCTIONS OF CULTURAL NORMS: THE CASE OF RESPONSIBILITY ATTRIBUTION

Norms are evolved social control mechanisms for coordinating individual activities in collective living. They prescribe socially desirable behaviors and proscribe

behaviors that would disrupt smooth coordination of behaviors in the society. Norms are often reflected in the dominant practices that are intended for sanctioning disruptive behaviors. Due to differences in physical and social ecologies and variations in adaptive responses to these ecological factors, different cultural groups have developed different knowledge traditions, which consist of amalgamations of lay theories and intersubjective values (see Chapters 2 and 3, this volume). The dominant social control practices in a society typically cohere with its prevailing beliefs and values. For instance, some societies tend to practice personal responsibility as a way of social regulation, whereas others tend to rely on collective responsibility.

B Personal Responsibility

A common social control practice in many contemporary Western societies holds the wrongdoer and the wrongdoer alone responsible for a transgression. In establishing personal responsibility, the relative contribution of personal causality and environmental influence are typically taken into consideration. The social reasoning behind personal responsibility judgment is articulated in Heider's (1958) attribution model. According to [Heider \(1958\)](#), lay people use five criteria to determine an actor's personal responsibility for a negative event: association, causality, foreseeability, justification, and intentionality. Association is the connection of the individual with a negative event (e.g., whether the driver is associated with the car accident). Causality refers to whether the individual, regardless of intention, was causally responsible for the event (e.g., whether the car accident resulted from the

driver's speeding). Foreseeability refers to whether the individual could foresee the act's negative consequences (e.g., whether the driver foresaw that speeding could cause the accident). Justification refers to whether the individual could justify the act (e.g., whether the driver had a legitimate reason for speeding). Finally, intentionality refers to whether an individual intended to cause the harm (e.g., whether the driver deliberately sped, causing the car accident).

The amount of personal responsibility assigned to the wrongdoer increases from mere association with a negative outcome to intentional wrongdoing. It also increases with the subjective evaluation of the person's contributions and decreases with the perceived amount of environmental contributions to the harm. There is ample evidence that these social reasoning processes underlie personal responsibility attribution (Fincham & Shultz, 1981; Shultz, Schleifer, & Altman, 1981), which aims to deter future wrongdoings and serves as a means of social control.

B Collective Responsibility

In addition to the wrongdoer, individuals who are not causally responsible for the wrongdoing but are associated with the wrongdoer may also be held accountable. This practice is known as collective responsibility attribution (Chao, Zhang, & Chiu, 2008; Chiu & Hong, 1992; Zemba, Young, & Morris, 2006). In societies marked by interlocking obligations (e.g., some East Asian societies), the collective as a whole has the duties and opportunities to monitor each individual's behavior (Nishida, 1985; Zhang, 1984). Thus, when a member performs a malevolent act, it reflects not only the moral failure of the member but also the failure of the collective in meeting

its social obligation. Hence, collective responsibility attribution is relatively prevalent in Eastern cultural contexts ([Chiu, Morris, Hong, & Menon, 2000](#); [Menon, Morris, Chiu, & Hong, 1999](#)). For example, in American organizations, an individual “bad apple” is often identified as the target of blame whereas, in clanlike Japanese organizations, blame is often handled by “cleansing” the organization. The head of the organization often becomes the sacrificial lamb in the company blunder ([Bell & Tetlock, 1989](#)).

There is consistent evidence for the greater prevalence of collective responsibility attribution in East Asia. In one study ([Chiu & Hong, 1992](#)), 87 Hong Kong Chinese junior business executives read a scenario that depicted an industrial accident in a toy-manufacturing company. In the story, the action of a foreman in the factory caused the accident, in which a machine operator lost his fingers when the machine’s emergency brake failed. That accident happened either because the foreman tampered with the emergency brake to improve productivity (high intentionality) or because he failed to check the condition of the brake (low intentionality). The investigators measured personal and collective responsibility attributions by having the participants rate the extent to which the foreman and his boss should be held responsible for the accident. When assigning personal responsibility, the participants considered personal causality and assigned greater responsibility to the foreman when intentionality was high than when it was low. They also assigned a substantial amount of responsibility to the foreman’s boss, who was causally unconnected to the accident. Consistent findings were obtained in a

second study ([Chiu & Hong, 1992](#), Study 2), in which Hong Kong Chinese participants assigned responsibility to a child and his parents for the child's misbehavior. Again, although participants considered personal causality when attributing personal responsibility, they also assigned a considerable amount of responsibility to the child's parents, who were not causally connected to the negative incident.

In another study (Zemba, [Young, & Morris, 2006](#); Study 2), 56 American students and 60 Japanese students studied a food-poisoning case in a school, in which a student got sick after eating contaminated eggs prepared by the school cook. Compared with their American counterparts, the Japanese participants were more likely to blame the school principal, who was not causally connected to the food-poisoning incident. In addition, the more they perceived the school as responsible, the more responsibility they attributed to the principal.

In sum, social norms evolved to coordinate activities among individuals within the collective and to discourage disruptive behaviors. Although both Easterners and Westerners consider personal causality when attributing responsibility to the wrongdoer, Easterners are more likely than Westerners to attribute collective responsibility and generalize responsibility to causally unconnected others in the collective. Moving beyond mean-level comparisons ([Bond, 2007](#)), recent studies have explored why people assign collective responsibility to causally unconnected individuals ([Chao et al., 2008](#)).

[B] Functions of Collective Responsibility

Despite the higher prevalence of collective responsibility attribution in Eastern than Western cultures, collective responsibility is also practiced in Western societies, albeit much less extensively ([Denson, Lickel, Curtis, Stenstrom, & Ames, 2006](#)). For example, perceivers may blame the national leader for the national problems created by his/her predecessor, or attribute the responsibility of the damages in a riot to a mob. In these instances, responsibility is attributed to individuals who are not causally responsible for the action or outcome. Why do people in Eastern and Western cultures practice collective responsibility? Legal and social philosophers (e.g., [Levinson, 2003](#); [Nishida, 1985](#); [Zhang, 1984](#)) have identified two major reasons for practicing collective responsibility: delegated deterrence and group harmony.

[C] *Delegated Deterrence*

In societies marked by interlocking interpersonal relations, responsibility is delegated to the collective to monitor each other's behavior and prevent or deter individuals in the collective from committing malevolent acts. In legal philosophy, this practice is referred to as delegated deterrence and is expected to increase the group's vigilance in monitoring and controlling potential troublemakers' behaviors. The delegated deterrence function of collective responsibility was heavily emphasized in the traditional Chinese legal system. Starting from 746 B.C., the system of *yuan zuo* was widely practiced in China ([Nishida, 1985](#); [Zhang, 1984](#)). Under this system, when a crime was committed, besides the wrongdoer, the wrongdoer's superiors, kinsmen,

neighbors, and other associates could be held responsible for the wrongdoer's behavior. The rationale underlying this practice is the belief that one's superiors, neighbors, and kinsmen have the obligation and opportunity to monitor the offender's behavior, and therefore should be able to prevent the offender from doing harm. In other words, in Chinese societies, collective responsibility assignment serves to delegate responsibility to the group to deter individual members from committing malevolent acts.

Although collective sanction is also used as delegated deterrence in Western societies, the idea of punishing group members simply because they could have monitored and controlled the responsible individuals is at odds with the basic principle of legal liability in Western legal philosophy. This principle of legal liability holds that individuals should be responsible for their own actions. From this perspective, generalizing blame to others who have no direct causal connection to an offense is inappropriate. Indeed, extant research findings show that collective responsibility as a delegated deterrence mechanism is more widely practiced in Asian countries than in Western countries. For example, compared to European Americans, Asians are found to have a higher likelihood of blaming a group for the wrongdoing of a group member because the wrongdoing of a member is seen as a reflection of the group's inability to regulate that member's actions (Chiu et al., 2000; [Menon et al., 1999](#)). Zemba and her associates ([Zemba, 2006](#); [Zemba et al., 2006](#)) also found that, in Japan, the collective's leader, who is causally unconnected to the wrongdoing,

could be punished when the perceivers feel that the organization should be punished and that the leader is a representative of the organization.

To directly examine the delegated deterrence function of collective responsibility in Asian cultural contexts, in one study ([Chao et al., 2008](#), Study 2), Asian-American and European-American participants were presented with a scenario depicting a team of students taking part in a design contest. The team had come up with two proposals, and the project coordinator submitted one of them to the contest. The team lost in the contest. Worse still, the proposal that the project coordinator did not submit was similar to the winning proposal. In one experimental condition, the goal of delegated deterrence was made salient: The participants were told that there was a concern that similar events might happen again in other student organizations in school. Thus, the school felt that there was a need to find out how this incident happened and to identify the parties who could have prevented this incident from happening. In another condition (the control condition), this description was omitted in the scenario.

After reading the scenario, participants were asked to indicate how much responsibility and blame they would attribute to the project coordinator, other members of the project team, the teacher, and the headmaster of the school. Although the teacher and the headmaster were members of the school, they were not causally associated with the decision. Assignment of responsibility and blame to the teacher and the headmaster constituted a measure of collective responsibility attribution.

Consistent with previous findings, Asian-American participants assigned higher levels of collective responsibility than did European Americans. Furthermore, compared to the control condition, in the condition under which the goal of delegated deterrence was made salient, Asian-American participants attributed more collective responsibility. In comparison, European-American participants did not show an increase in collective responsibility attribution when the goal of delegated deterrence was made salient. These results indicate that, in Asian cultural contexts, where there are many interlocking social relations, collective responsibility serves the function of delegated deterrence and motivates individuals within a collective to increase their vigilance in monitoring the actions of one another. Therefore, situations that call for collective actions to deter future wrongdoing increase collective responsibility attribution.

C *Group Harmony*

Another function that collective responsibility serves is maintenance of group harmony. Sharing of collective responsibility may protect an individual wrongdoer from potentially becoming the target of public denouncement and social isolation. The collective's willingness to share the blame also increases a wrongdoer's emotional bonding to the group (Tetlock, 2002). Given that maintaining group harmony is an important interpersonal goal in Asian cultures (Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1997), activating the goal of group harmony can increase collective responsibility attribution among individuals with an Asian background. Similarly, in Western societies, group punishment may also be justified when groups show signs

of group solidarity (e.g., shared interests, positive interdependency). [Denson et al. \(2006\)](#), for instance, reported that American undergraduates found collective responsibility to be most acceptable when the group is an intimacy group, which has a high level of positive interdependency. Consistent with the empirical observations made by Denson and colleagues, in contemporary Western social philosophy, group solidarity is often cited as a justification for collective responsibility ([Feinberg, 1968](#); [Friedman & May, 1985](#); [May, 1987](#); McGray, 1987).

To examine the group harmony maintenance function of collective responsibility, in the design contest study mentioned earlier in this chapter ([Chao et al., 2008](#), Study 2), besides the delegated deterrence and control conditions, an interpersonal harmony condition was included. In the interpersonal harmony situation, the participants were told that, after that incident, there was a concern that students' morale and trust among them might deteriorate. Thus, the school authority felt that there was a need to minimize the negative impact of this incident on students' morale and on their social relationships in the school. The results showed that both Asian- and European-American participants increased responsibility attribution to the collective when the goal of maintaining interpersonal harmony was made salient (compared to the baseline level in the control condition). In other words, when the situation called for harmony maintenance, the practice of collective responsibility became more acceptable to both Asian Americans and European Americans, because collective responsibility could protect the wrongdoer from social isolation and promote group solidarity.

In short, collective responsibility is practiced in both Asian and American contexts. It is practiced for different social regulatory purposes, however. In Western cultures, collective responsibility is practiced occasionally to promote ingroup harmony. In Asian cultures, collective responsibility is practiced relatively frequently. Aside from promoting ingroup harmony, the practice of collective responsibility also serves to deter disruptive behaviors in the collective.

B **Context-Specificity of Collective Responsibility Attribution**

Thus far, we have illustrated that situational goals can increase the normative practice of collective responsibility in both Asian and American contexts. People do not indiscriminately attribute responsibility to causally unconnected members of the collective when the goal of delegated deterrence or group harmony is activated, however. As mentioned, the principle of applicability states that an activated norm and its associated practice will be adopted only when they are applicable to the immediate situation (Higgins, 1996). In the Asian context, when the goal of delegated deterrence is activated, perceivers will assign responsibility to the wrongdoer's associates only when the associates are perceived to have the responsibility to monitor the wrongdoer's behaviors and prevent the wrongdoing. For example, collective responsibility for a work-related wrongdoing will be assigned only when the wrongdoing took place when the wrongdoer was on duty.

To test these predictions, Chao and colleagues (2008, Study 1) presented American and Chinese participants with a traffic accident scenario modified from the one used in the study by Zemba and colleagues (2006, Study 1). In the scenario,

while speeding in his own car, an employee of a transportation company hit a person. Two variables were manipulated: situational goal and the context of the wrongdoing. As in the design contest scenario discussed earlier in this chapter (Chao et al., 2008, Study 2), participants were assigned to one of the three situational goal conditions: delegated deterrence, group harmony, or control. The context of the wrongdoing was manipulated by telling the participants that the accident happened when the driver was (a) on duty, (b) off duty helping his supervisor, or (c) off duty helping a friend to move. Next, the participants assigned responsibility and blame to five targets: (a) the employee who caused the accident, (b) other drivers in the company, (c) the employee's supervisor at the time of the accident, (d) the employee's new supervisor who took up the position after the accident, and (e) the company. Assignment of responsibility and blame to targets other than the driver constituted a measure of collective responsibility attribution, because these targets were not causally involved with the accident.

When the wrongdoing occurred while the driver was on duty, as in the design contest study (Chao et al., 2008, Study 2), Chinese participants assigned higher levels of responsibility to members of the collective who were not causally connected to the accident, compared to European-American participants. Furthermore, when the goal of delegated deterrence was made salient, only Chinese participants were more likely to hold the collective accountable in the on-duty condition (compared to the baseline level in the control condition). These effects were not observed when the wrongdoing occurred while the driver was off duty (as in the other conditions). These results

underscore the context specificity of collective responsibility attribution. Activating the goal of delegated deterrence increases Asians' collective responsibility only when they perceive the collective as having the responsibility to monitor the wrongdoer's behaviors and prevent the occurrence of the wrongdoing, as in the on-duty condition. Finally, when the goal of group harmony was emphasized, both Chinese and European-American participants made more collective responsibility attribution if the driver was on duty (compared to the baseline level in the control condition).

In summary, similar to other knowledge representations, the activation and application of norm representations and their attendant normative practices follow the basic principles of knowledge activation ([Higgins, 1996](#)). The practice of collective responsibility as delegated deterrence is available to people in Asian contexts but not in American contexts, thus making the goal of delegated deterrence salient increases collective responsibility attribution among Asians, but not among Americans. The practice of collective responsibility as a harmony maintenance mechanism is available in both Asian and American cultural contexts; hence, making salient the goal of harmony maintenance increases collective responsibility attribution among individuals in both cultural groups. After an available norm representation is activated, its level of cognitive accessibility increases. A cognitively accessible norm representation would not be used, however, unless it is applicable to the normative expectations in the immediate situation. For instance, coworkers and superiors are responsible for monitoring and deterring disruptive behaviors of employees only when the employees are on duty. Therefore, as demonstrated in the car accident

experiment reviewed earlier in this chapter, the practice of collective responsibility was applicable only when the driver was on duty, when members of the collective were expected to monitor and deter disruptive behaviors.

A IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDYING CULTURE

In this chapter, using collective responsibility as an example, we examined the nature and function of norms in cultural processes. Culture is a global elusive concept. To understand cultural processes, it is necessary to unpack culture. One way to unpack culture is to focus on the effects of its constituent symbolic elements. From this perspective, we have examined the normative influence of culture through the activation of specific shared norms and their attendant social regulatory practices. Through this analysis, we are able to understand cross-cultural variations in the social regulatory functions of collective responsibility attribution. We are also able to move beyond mean-level comparison between cultures and to specify more concretely the psychological processes leading to the observed cultural differences. Specifically, this analysis enables us to understand not only *whether* there are cultural differences, but also *when* and *why* cultural differences would emerge (or disappear).

Our analysis connects cultural processes to basic processes of knowledge activation. As the research program on collective responsibility attribution illustrates, applying the basic knowledge activation principles to understanding cultural processes does not preclude investigators from taking a macroscopic perspective to culture. On the contrary, our analysis highlights the dynamic interplay of social control mechanisms in the society, normative expectations in the immediate situation,

and the individual processes of sense making. Precise predictions of when people in Eastern and Western cultures would make collective responsibility attribution are rendered possible by considering simultaneously (a) the social regulatory functions of collective responsibility attribution (e.g., harmony maintenance, delegated deterrence) that have evolved through the cultural group's history of creative responses to basic problems of social coordination in its particular physical and social ecology, (b) the normative expectations and social regulatory goals in the immediate situation, and (c) the basic cognitive processes whereby individuals learn, retrieve from memory, and apply knowledge of cultural norms and their attendant practices. In short, a process analysis of culture and its constituent elements has helped to highlight the dynamic unfolding of normative judgments in concrete situations. It illustrates how individuals actively participate, both as individual agents and as their culture's representatives, in addressing major concerns regarding the coordination of human activities within the collective by recruiting symbolic cultural resources (in the forms of normatively sanctioned ideas and practices).

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