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Social transmission of cultural practices and implicit attitudes



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ABSTRACT

Cultural dynamics were examined in an experimental setting to investigate the mechanisms of transmission of cultural practices (what people typically *do*) and implicit attitudes at the micro-level, and the maintenance of transmitted cultural traits at the macro-level. A cover story of a fictitious group was used to establish "microcultures" within the laboratory and to gauge the effect of culture on practices and attitudes across two generations of experimental participants (cultural oldtimers and newcomers). The results suggested that cultural practices and implicit attitudes are transmitted through two distinct mechanisms: cultural practices through explicit instructions and imitation; implicit attitudes through newcomers' observations of oldtimers' performance and, presumably, automatic attitude inference. Furthermore, cultural practices were maintained across generations by explicit instructions, but implicit attitudes were better maintained by institutionalizing "the way of life" as a cultural given. Implications of the findings for organizational behaviour and the limitations and advantages of experimental investigations of cultural dynamics are discussed.

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Introduction

The interface between culture and psychology has been a significant research topic in recent times. Following a steady, decadeslong development in cross-cultural psychology (e.g., Segall, Lonner, & Berry, 1998), kicked off by Hofstede's (1980) empirical work and Shweder's (1991) meta-theoretical argument, cross-cultural research has flourished into a major field of inquiry (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001; Triandis, 1989; see Kashima & Gelfand, 2012, on the history of culture research). Although cross-cultural research tends to highlight stable aspects of culture (Kashima, 2000a), culture - both within organizations and in society more broadly - obviously changes over time (e.g., Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012; Uhls & Greenfield, 2011; Wolff, Medin, & Pankratz, 1999). Particularly in light of ongoing globalization (e.g., Chiu, Gries, Torelli, & Cheng, 2011; Hermans & Kempen, 1998), cultural dynamics – stability and change of culture over time - has become a significant research question (e.g., Kashima, 2000a; Leung, Qui, Ong, & Tam, 2011).

A prominent meta-theoretical approach to cultural dynamics (e.g., Boyd & Richerson, 1985; Campbell, 1975; Cavalli-Sforza & Feldman, 1981; Dawkins, 1976; Sperber, 1996; for an overview, see Kashima, 2008; Mesoudi, 2009) takes the view that culture is

primarily formed, maintained, and transformed through the generation, transmission, and retention of non-genetically transmissible information within a human population. According to this view, social transmission of information is the engine of cultural dynamics. Nonetheless, a number of questions remain about the mechanisms of cultural transmission. Although some perspectives such as Dawkins's meme theory have left them unanswered, others (e.g., Sperber, 1996; Tomasello, 1999) have taken them very seriously indeed. In considering human cultural dynamics, what is critical is an examination of a unique set of cultural transmission mechanisms that humans possess at their disposal, and that is the focus of the present research.

To answer the questions of mechanism of cultural transmission, an experimental approach is beneficial. Although experimental investigation of cultural dynamics began more than half a century ago (e.g., Gerard, Kluckhohn, & Rapoport, 1956; Rose & Felton, 1955), it had a long period of dormancy only to find its renaissance in the past decade (e.g., Bangarter, 2000; Kashima, 2000b; see Kashima, 2008, for a review). Extending this research tradition, we investigate micro-level cognitive and macro-level institutional mechanisms of the transmission of implicit attitudes. Attitudes are explicit or implicit predispositions to think, feel, or behave favourably or unfavourably towards an object or a class of objects; widely held attitudes have always been regarded as an important aspect of culture (e.g., Triandis, 1971). Implicit attitudes – introspectively unidentified (or inaccurately identified) traces of past experience that mediate favourable or unfavourable feeling, thought, or action

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towards social objects (e.g., Greenwald, Banaji, Pratkanis, & Breckler, 1981) – pose a particularly intriguing question about cultural transmission. Although they are widely distributed within a population, thus forming part of a culture (e.g., gender-based implicit attitudes to maths and science, e.g., Nosek et al., 2009; implicit prejudice towards minorities, e.g., Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002; see Dasgupta, 2004, for a review), they are presumably neither directly observable nor (necessarily) verbalized. Individuals in a society, then, cannot acquire their implicit attitudes by simply observing others' implicit attitudes or by explicit communication. How, then, are implicit attitudes transmitted?

Micro-mechanisms of implicit attitude transmission

A potential mechanism is the observation of others' behavioural enactment of *cultural practices*. Cultural practices include all forms of behaviours that are culturally meaningful; examples include conventionalized nonverbal behaviours (e.g., greetings such as handshaking, bowing, nose touching) through to typical styles of language use (e.g., use of adjectives vs. verbs; Kashima, Kashima, Kim, & Gelfand, 2006) and more complex sequences of coordinated actions supported by social institutions (e.g., buying and selling, going to a restaurant, visiting a dentist, and other types of actions typically called scripts; e.g., Bower, Black, & Turner, 1979; Schanck & Abelson, 1977; Triandis, Marin, Lisansky, & Betancourt, 1984). Importantly, some cultural practices imply favourable or unfavourable responses towards objects, thus people may acquire implicit attitudes by observing others' enactment of such attitude-implying cultural practices (see Weisbuch & Ambady, 2008, for a similar argument).

Consistent with this, Weisbuch, Ambady, and their colleagues showed that people's implicit attitudes are significantly influenced by the observation of others' nonverbal behaviour. In particular, Weisbuch, Pauker, and Ambady (2009) found that popular US TV series exhibited different degrees of pro-white (vs. pro-black) nonverbal bias - nonverbal behaviours directed to whites were more positive relative to those directed to blacks: and that TV viewers' exposure to pro-white nonverbal bias correlated with their prowhite implicit attitudes. Furthermore, when people were experimentally exposed to pro-white, pro-black, or no clips (control), those who were exposed to pro-black clips showed less pro-white implicit attitudes than those in the other conditions, providing evidence for a causal effect of observed nonverbal race bias on implicit attitudes. Weisbuch and Ambady (2009) replicated these findings for nonverbal and implicit attitudinal biases for slim vs. overweight women as well, by showing that exposure to pro-overweight TV clips resulted in a lower pro-slim implicit attitudinal bias. Interestingly, the effect of observed nonverbal bias on attitudinal bias was mediated by people's beliefs about the cultural ideal (i.e., the body size they thought was most highly culturally valued).

These findings suggest that implicit attitudes may be transmitted by observing others' cultural practices – evaluatively-laden nonverbal behaviours in this instance. This points to intriguing possibilities regarding the mechanisms of cultural transmission for cultural practices and implicit attitudes more broadly (see Fig. 1).

Transmission of cultural practices and implicit attitudes

First of all, cultural practices may be transmitted by *imitation*. That is, those who are new to a cultural group (i.e., newcomers) imitate the cultural practices enacted by those who have been in the group for some time (i.e., oldtimers); in so doing, the newcomers learn to perform the oldtimers' cultural practices. A number of theorists, past and present, have suggested that imitation is one of the central mechanisms of cultural transmission (e.g., Smith, 1759;

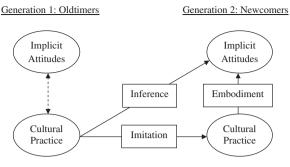


Fig. 1.

Tarde, 1903; Tomasello, Kruger, & Ratner, 1993; see Allport, 1935, for a review).

The common coding model provides a contemporary account of imitation (e.g., Hommel, Musseler, Aschersleben, & Prinz, 2001; Prinz, 1997). According to this, an action representation or 'event code' contains representations of motor action (B: bodily movement) and its typical effects (E: anticipated proprioceptive and visual information; Hommel et al., 2001). First of all, if newcomers and oldtimers develop similar action representations (i.e., knowing that a given motor action produces a given effect; $B \rightarrow E$), then the newcomers' viewing the oldtimers' motor actions (i.e., observation of $B \rightarrow E$) is likely to predispose the newcomers to imitate. Indeed, evidence suggests that people tend to copy one another's behaviours (e.g., Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001; see Chartrand & van Baaren, 2009, for a review). Therefore, newcomers' viewing of the oldtimers' enactment of cultural practices should predispose them to enact the same cultural practices if they are supposed to perform the same motor actions as the oldtimers.

H1a. Newcomers imitate oldtimers' behaviours.

It also follows that, when the newcomers' view of the oldtimers' motor actions is obstructed (i.e., newcomers cannot observe oldtimers' A), they are less likely to imitate (see McShane, Bradlow, & Berger, 2012).

H1b. Obstructing newcomers' perceptions of the oldtimers' behaviour reduces imitation.

The foregoing discussion has presumed that newcomers are required to perform the same motor actions as oldtimers. However, in some circumstances, task constraints may require newcomers to perform somewhat different motor actions to produce the same end results. For example, if a new tool or machinery is introduced to harvest fruits or to hunt for animals, newcomers would have to perform somewhat different motor actions, to produce the same effects (i.e., fruits and animals). The common coding model suggests that even if newcomers have to perform different motor actions to produce the same effects (i.e., $B' \rightarrow E$ when oldtimers perform $B \rightarrow E$), their viewing the oldtimers' producing those effects (i.e., observation of E) should predispose the newcomers to perform them (e.g., Bekkering, Wohlschläger, & Gattis, 2000; Brass, Bekkering, & Prinz, 2001; Brass, Bekkering, Wohlschläger, & Prinz, 2000; Kilner, Paulignan, & Blakemore, 2003). This is often called emulation (e.g., Whiten, McGuigan, Marshall-Pescini, & Hopper, 2009; we do not follow this terminology here to avoid complication). Therefore, even if newcomers are to perform motor actions that are different from oldtimers', they "imitate" those actions that reproduce the same effects.

H1c. Newcomers imitate oldtimers' cultural practices if they have the same effects even though their motor actions are different.

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