Cultural Influences on the Formation of Interpersonal Intentions

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Abstract
The formation of interpersonal intentions has been a central theme in social-psychological research for over twenty years. Existing psychological models propose that attitudes, social norms, and moral obligations often combine to form intentions. These models will be utilized to develop individual indexes of the relative influence of attitudes, norms, and moral obligations in forming intentions. These indexes will then be correlated with measures of locus of control, self-monitoring, and individualism-collectivism in order to explore the extent to which personal and cultural factors influence the intention-formation process.

Introduction
The formation of interpersonal intentions has been a central theme in social psychological research for more than twenty years. An intention is defined as a self-instruction to perform a specific behavior and is usually measured as the estimate of the probability that a person will perform the behavior. Past research suggested that intentions could be measured through attitudes, although it is very difficult to predict behavior with a single attitude score (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Understanding how intentions are formed, especially those about social behavior, has been considered a major theoretical problem in social psychology because it is linked to the explanation of interpersonal behavior. On the practical side, the prediction of social behavior—especially behavior that is complex and needs to be reasoned through—cannot be accomplished without access to people’s intentions about the behavior.

Fishbein and Ajzen’s model for attitudinal prediction of behavior suggests that behavior is influenced by a person’s intention to perform that behavior and that his/her intention, in turn, is influenced by two other variables: a personal or “attitudinal” factor and a social or “normative” factor (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The central equation (1) is as follows:

\[ B \sim BI = [A_{act}]w_0 + [NB \times Mc]w_1 \]

In this equation, B = overt behavior, BI = Behavioral Intention, A_{act} = attitude toward the act, NB = Normative Belief, Mc = Motivation to comply with the normative belief, and \( w_0 \) and \( w_1 \) are empirically determined weights. The behavioral intention in this theory refers to a self-instruction to perform a given action in a given situation; it is the intention to perform the particular overt response that is to be predicted. A person’s attitude, or his/her evaluation towards a specific act (as opposed to their attitude towards the object),
is proposed to be a function of its perceived consequences and its value to the individual (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1973). The normative belief component measures the individual's belief of the likelihood that members of a social group expect him to perform the behavior in question. As the equation (1) shows, the effect of the normative belief is modified by the individual's motivation to comply with that expectation.

Triandis (1975) also developed a model for the prediction of behavior similar to that of Fishbein and Ajzen (1975). He believes that intentions are a function of different social antecedents (S) including perceived norms, roles, the self-concept, and interpersonal agreements; the perceived affect associated with the behavior (A); and the sum of the perceived consequences associated with that behavior (Pc) multiplied by the value of each consequence (Vc). Different weights, γ, δ, and ε, are applied to determine whether the person places more emphasis on social influences, or S, (γ), attitudes, or A, (δ), or consequences and their value to the person, or PcVc (ε). The equation (2) is as follows:

\[ I = \gamma S + \delta A + \varepsilon PcVc \]

There are several other approaches to the prediction of behavior. In an effort to integrate the existing theories, including the above mentioned, the National Institute of Mental Health sponsored a workshop in which Fishbein and Ajzen, Triandis, and many other researchers met to develop a common theoretical framework that integrated the core constructs of each theory (Jaccard, Litardo, & Wan, 1999). The model is organized into two sequences, the first of which focuses on the immediate determinants of behavior. The four variables of this component include the individual's knowledge and skills for behavioral performance, the motivation to perform the behavior, environmental constraints, and salience of behavior. The second sequence focuses on the determinants of an individual's motivation to perform the behavior. The six major variables that influence this component are attitudes, social norms, expectancies, self-concept, affect and emotional reactions, and self-efficacy. Demographic, biological, and other more distal variables are believed to influence through these six predictor variables. In addition, the relative importance of the determinants of behavior may also differ from one population to another.

It would appear from the work reviewed above that culture must play a significant role in the formation of intentions. After all, intentions, according to the theories reviewed above, are a function of, among other things, norms, which are influenced by culture and various social factors. In fact, intentionality itself is a psychological construct that must be at least partially determined by culture, since culture makes a range of behaviors available to us to perform. Despite this connection, cross-cultural research has not paid a lot of attention to this problem.

The present theory deals with the role culture plays in the formation of intentions, at the group level, but more importantly, at the individual level. As implied earlier, self-instructions must have one or more sources—what traditional psychologists have called “attitudes.” The other source may reveal an external influence—what social psychologists have called “norms.” Further reflection, however, reveals that such “external” influences (filtered, of course, through the individual's own perceptual system) may themselves be of different kinds. For example, “norms” may refer to community standards—what a person “should” do. In addition, however, there may be a sense of duty or moral obligation that also drives people's intentions—what a person “ought” to do. Some past work by psychologists (Davidson, Jaccard, Triandis, Morales, Diaz-Guerrero, 1976) has alluded to that, but for the most part this problem has not been given a lot of systematic attention.

The present study will focus on these three determinants of (or sources of influence on) intentions, and will examine how they may differentially affect the process of intention formation in differing cultural contexts. In particular, this approach predicts that individualists will be influenced primarily by attitudes (affect, personal wishes) in forming intentions. According to Triandis (1993), individualists have an independent self; they choose their goals to fit their individual needs instead of the group's; they behave according to their attitudes, beliefs, and values; and they base their relationships on a cost/benefit analysis of the relationship. He also suggests that collectivist individuals are influenced more by “external” factors. They are more interdependent, choose goals that are compatible with their in-group, and emphasize norms and relatedness versus rationality as determinants of their behavior. However, previous research has not differentiated between different types of “external” sources. In this study, we will explore this problem in depth.

Research participants will be asked to indicate their intentions to perform a number of different behaviors from a variety of domains in their lives (e.g., financial decisions, personal lives/relationships). They will also respond to a number of scales measuring the extent to which they are influenced by attitudes, norms, and moral obligations/duty. Their responses will be analyzed at the individual level in order to create a personal “intention profile” for each subject. In other words, using multiple regression techniques, we will form a model showing the extent to which each subject's intentions are generally
influenced by attitudes, norms, moral obligations, or a combination of the three. In other words, the regression weights will reflect the extent to which attitudes, norms, or moral obligations play a systematic role in determining the intentions of a particular individual.

Participants will also respond to a number of scales measuring stable dispositions: self-monitoring, locus of control, and individualism-collectivism. The self-monitoring scale measures the process of making sure that one's behavior conforms with the demands of the current social situation. The locus of control scale differentiates people who believe that they themselves are primarily responsible for what happens to them from those who believe major events in their lives are determined mainly by other people or forces beyond themselves. The individualism-collectivism scale measures the degree to which people are fundamentally independent vs. interdependent. Each scale will be used to test a different aspect of our approach:

1) For the self-monitoring scale, we expect a correlation with the intention profile, such that low self-monitors will be more likely to determine their intentions from their attitudes or personal wishes.

2) For the locus of control scale, we are looking for discriminant validity. In other words, we will try to show that the intention profile for each subject is different from simply a sense of having control over one's life. After all, one's sense of personal self-instruction should be psychologically independent of being under the control of others.

3) For the individualism-collectivism scale, previous research suggests that individualists will be more likely to be influenced by attitudes in determining their intentions, whereas collectivists will be influenced by duty (Triandis, Ping, Chen, & Chan, 1998). However, contrary to previous research, we expect that norms will be just as likely to influence individualists as collectivists because all people are subject to the influence of community standards. It is the role of duty that has emerged as a significant difference between individualists and collectivists in recent cross-cultural research (e.g. Miller, 1994).

Method
Participants
Fourteen male and 15 female students from an Introductory Psychology course at Grand Valley State University completed the surveys. They received academic credit for their participation.

Instruments
Intentions
A list of 30 intentions and their underlying components (attitudes, subjective norms, and moral obligations) was generated following recommendations by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) and Triandis (1976). An effort was made to sample intentions from a variety of domains of people's lives, including career/school, personal life/dating, family/marriage/children, helping others, and finances/purchases. Respondents rated the likelihood of the statement on a 7-point likely/unlikely scale. Examples of the measurement of attitudes, subjective norms, and moral obligations for an intention involving family relationships follow:

Example: Attitude
Calling or talking to my family very often while in college is
good :_:_:_:_:_:_: bad
unimportant :_:_:_:_:_:_: important
wise :_:_:_:_:_:_: foolish

Example: Subjective Norm
Most people who are important to me think that I should call or talk to my family very often while in college.
agree :_:_:_:_:_:_: disagree

Example: Moral Obligation
I feel a moral obligation or duty to call or talk to my family very often while in college.
agree :_:_:_:_:_:_: disagree

Individualism-Collectivism Scale
This scale measures the degree to which respondents are individualists or collectivists. Individualists are not as integrated with others and with the social environment as are those who are collectivists (Hui, 1988). They believe they can survive independently and therefore define the self as separate from the group. Collectivists see themselves more as members of a group and define the self as interdependent with others. The scale consists of 29 items that are all measured on a 7-point agree/disagree scale. An example of a scale item appears below:

When another person does better than I do, I get tense and aroused.
agree :_:_:_:_:_:_: disagree

Self-Monitoring Scale
This scale measures the degree to which respondents observe and control their self-presentation and expressive behavior (Snyder, 1974). Those who score high on the scale are said to modify their self-presentation and their behavior according to the social situation. Those who score low
behave more independently of the social situation. The scale consists of 25 items, and respondents have to answer whether they consider the statement to be true or false. An example of a scale item appears below:

When I am uncertain how to act in a social situation, I look to the behavior of others for cues. T_____ F_____

_Locus of Control Scale_
This scale measures the degree to which respondents believe that they are responsible for what happens in their lives or the degree to which they believe that external forces control their destinies (Levenson, 1973). Those who score high believe that they are in control of their lives, and those who score low believe that chance, fate, and powerful others have more control over their destinies. The scale consists of 24 items, measured on a 7-point agree/disagree scale. An example of a scale item appears below:

To a great extent my life is controlled by accidental happenings. agree :_:_:_:_:_:_: disagree

Five random orders will be generated for the items of the four scales to reduce any fatigue effects. Research participants will be informed of the general purpose of the study and given one hour to complete the surveys. At the end of the experimental session, each participant will be debriefed about the nature of the study and given a chance to ask questions.

_Results_
A multiple regression was computed for each subject’s responses. The dependent variable was the intention, and the predictors were the attitude, calculated as the mean of three items, social norms, and moral obligations. The central equation of the theory is as follows:

\[ I = \omega_1 A + \omega_2 SN + \omega_3 MO \] (3)

In this equation, \( I \) = Intention, \( A \) = Attitude, \( SN \) = Social Norms, and \( MO \) = Moral Obligations. \( \omega_1, \omega_2, \) and \( \omega_3 \) are the standardized regression weights computed for each of the three predictors. They were used in subsequent analyses as indexes of the importance of each of the three predictors in the decision-making process of every individual.

One of the results we expected to find was that individuals who scored high on the individualism scale would also score high on the attitude scale as determinant of their intentions. We also expected that individuals scoring high on the collectivism scale would also score high on social norms and moral obligations scales. However, correlations among the three predictors and the individual’s individualism and collectivism scores were not significant. The correlation between individualism and attitudes was \( r_{I,A} = -.122 \), n.s. The correlation between collectivism and social norms was \( r_{C,SN} = -.127 \), n.s.

Moreover, contrary to what we expected, we found that the correlation between individualism and moral obligations was higher than that of collectivism and moral obligations, with \( r_{I,MO} = .252 \), n.s.

Correlations were also computed between the predictors and the self-monitoring and locus of control scales. The self-monitoring score was correlated with the social norms score, with \( r_{SM,SN} = .409, p<.05 \); the correlations between the attitudes score and that of social norms and moral obligations were \( r_{A,SN} = -.458 \) and \( r_{A,MO} = -.613 \), respectively. Moreover, we did not expect to find any relationship between the individuals’ scores on the locus of control scale and any of the other scales. Indeed the results were not significant, except for a marginally significant correlation between the individualists and their chance score (belief that what happens in their life is due to chance), with \( r_{IND,CH} = .345, p=.10 \).

_Discussion_
Our hypothesis that individualists were going to score high on the attitude scale and the collectivists on the social norms and moral obligations scales was not supported. In fact, though the results were still not significant, the opposite trend was found with the individualists scoring higher on the moral obligations scale. One reason for this outcome could be the small number of subjects that participated in the study. Another reason could be that the data were collected from a sample in an area of high religiosity, and religion usually plays a highly significant role in the formation of an individual’s moral obligations.

The correlation between the self-monitoring score and that of social norms suggests that individuals who are high self-monitors—meaning that they adjust their behavior depending on the social situation—also rely on social norms in their decision-making process. This correlation was predicted because high self-monitors follow social norms in order to adjust their behavior according to the demands of the current social situation.

Another interesting result was the higher correlation between the individualists and their “chance” score from the Locus of Control scale. This suggests that individualists tend to believe that chance plays a significant role in what determines the outcomes in their lives. We had predicted that there would be no correlation between the locus of control scores and the collectivism or individualism scores because one’s sense of personal self-instruction should be psychologically independent from being under the control of others. These results may also be due to the small sample in our study. Further data collection in order to explore these trends is indicated.
References


