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Culturally Conferred Conceptions of Agency:  
A Key to Social Perception of Persons,  
Groups, and Other Actors

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## Abstract

Many tendencies in social perceivers' judgments about individuals and groups can be integrated in terms of the premise that perceivers rely on implicit theories of agency acquired from cultural traditions. Whereas, American culture primarily conceptualizes agency as a property of individual persons, other cultures conceptualize agency primarily in terms of collectives such as groups or non-human actors such as deities or fate. Cultural conceptions of agency exist in public forms (discourses, texts, and institutions) and private forms (perceiver's knowledge structures), and more prominent the public representations of a specific conception in a society, the more chronically accessible it will be in perceiver's minds. We review evidence for these claims by contrasting North American and Chinese cultures. From this integrative model of social perception as mediated by agency conceptions, we draw insights for research on implicit theories and research on culture. What implicit theory research gains is a better grasp on the content, origins, and variation of the knowledge structures central to social perception. What cultural psychology gains is middle-range model of the mechanism underlying cultural influence on dispositional attribution, which yields precise predictions about the domain-specificity and dynamics of cultural differences.

More than just an occasional modern pastime, people watching is an essential, primordial human activity. As social animals, people depend on the social perception abilities that allow them to navigate their social environments. Yet learning who to avoid, who to trust, and so forth, requires more than simply registering others' observable actions; it requires inferring underlying characteristics, enduring dispositions, from which future actions can be predicted. Psychologists have long contended that perceivers go beyond the observable data with inferences guided by theory-like knowledge structures (Bruner, 1957; Heider, 1958). This "theory theory" of social perception is rooted in the metaphor that lay social perceivers are like scientists, guided by theories in the questions they ask and the answers they construct when interpreting ambiguous data. Proposals about the content of the implicit theories guiding social perception have ranged, "theories of action" (Heider, 1958) and "theories of mind" (Wellman, 1990) being among the most influential. These proposals have been successful in accounting for particular inferences that perceivers make about persons, yet they do not capture how perceivers make parallel inferences about other kinds of perceived actors, such as groups or nonhuman supernatural entities. An integrated model of social perception across cultures requires a more encompassing account of the implicit theories that underlie attributions to dispositions.

We propose that social perception is best understood as guided by implicit theories of agency (ITAs). ITAs are conceptions of kinds of actors, notions of what kinds of entities act intentionally and autonomously. Some specific ITAs, for example, would be conceptions of agentic persons, groups, or supernatural entities. Agency conceptions allow perceivers to make sense of an outcome by asking, Who is behind this? What purpose does it reflect? What enduring characteristics does it reveal? These conceptions also provides frames for construction of answers. An outbreak of war, for example, might be attributed to wiles of a leader, the will of a nation, or the wrath of God, depending on the specific conception of agency guiding the perceiver.

As we shall see, a variety of findings concerning perception of individuals and groups can be integrated in terms of ITAs, as can findings about cultural differences in social perception. Not only is the content (agency) of these knowledge structures important to our argument but also the process by which they operate. Simply put, possessing a knowledge structure, such as an ITA, does not entail relying it for every stimulus and on every occasion. Social cognition principles allow

predictions, however, about where and when ITAs will drive social judgments—about the domain-specificity and dynamics of implicit theory activation (see Higgins, 1996).

Our contention is that integrating the “theory theory” of social perception with cultural psychology is mutually enriching. On the one side, the literature on perceivers’ theories gains a much needed answer to the question of where implicit theories come from—a question often begged in past research that facilely “explained” puzzling patterns of judgment as reflections of implicit theories, yet did not, in turn, explain the origins of such theories. Using an epidemiological metaphor (Sperber, 1996), we describe theories of agency as strains of culture propagated across the generations through the mutual interplay of representations in public artifacts and private knowledge structures. As we shall see, the implicit theories described by Heider (1958) and other psychologists are tied to American or more broadly Western culture.

On the other side, cultural psychology gains a much-needed model of the mechanism through which culture shapes attribution. A model of cultural influence through the mechanism of specific ITAs allows predictions about the domain-specificity and dynamics of cultural differences that have eluded past models of cultural influence on cognition. The prediction of domain-specificity (vs. generality) follows from the assumption that activation of an implicit theory depends on its applicability to the stimulus event (Higgins, 1996). The prediction that cultural patterns are dynamic (rather than constantly manifest) follows from the assumption that activation of an implicit theory depends on the perceiver’s epistemic state (Kruglanski, 1990). We discuss how the ITA model provides a middle-range theory of cultural influence that complements grander meta-theories of culture and cognition.

### **Conceptual Background**

Before we review cultural variation in ITAs, it is worthwhile to clarify the component ideas, beginning with implicit theories. Cognitive, developmental, and social psychologists have proposed that inference is guided by theory-like knowledge structures—variously called “implicit theories,” “lay theories,” “naïve theories,” or “causal schemata” (Bruner, 1957; Heider, 1958; Piaget, 1960). Other functions ascribed to implicit theories are organizing knowledge (Murphy & Medin, 1985) and directing children’s learning (Hirschfeld & Gelman, 1994; Keil, 1989). To further distinguish implicit theories from other cognitive mechanisms, Morris, Ames, and Knowles (2000) proposed that theories comprise abstract representations of a kind of thing (e.g., in the case

of the dominant American agency theory, the ontological category of person) and its causal properties that trigger when theory can be applied to a stimulus. Hence, implicit theories differ from more specific cognitive mechanisms, such as episodic memories, which are less abstract, and from general mechanisms, such as basic principles of inference, which can apply to any stimulus event. In sum, theories comprise propositional content about kinds of things and their consequences.<sup>1</sup>

Now let us clarify what we mean by agency. In philosophy, an agent is a source of playful action (Taylor, 1985). Thus, agency presupposes internal states of an actor such as intent, belief, and desire (Bratman, 1991).<sup>2</sup> Also there is an external aspect of agency, which refers to action overcoming external constraints, or autonomy (Kant, 1786/1949). In proposing that lay perceivers hold implicit theories of agency (ITAs), we mean that perceivers represent both the internal feature of intentionality and the external feature of autonomy with respect to the environment.

Intentionality and autonomy have figured in past proposals about the implicit theories guiding social perception, yet the potential for integrating these ideas has gone unrealized. Heider (1958) contended that perceivers rely on a “naïve theory of action” (see Figure 1), in which action is caused by the interaction of environmental force and personal force. Personal force itself results from the interaction of the person’s capacity (power) and intention-directed effort (trying). A critical and often neglected feature of Heider’s analysis was that the interaction of environmental and personal forces results in personal action having the property of equifinality—shifting environmental conditions change the means of reaching an end but not the end itself. This captures perceivers’ critical expectancy that individual persons act with autonomy, yet it does not elaborate perceivers’ inferences about these actors’ mental states. Critiques of the attribution theory tradition flowing from Heider’s work have noted theoretical problems arising from this shortcoming (Malle, 1999; Rosati et al, in press). Although Heider was most explicit, other social psychological theorists have also discussed autonomy beliefs under different terminologies (see reviews by Bandura, 1999; Russell, 1996).

Research by developmental psychologists on children’s “theory of mind” has been characterized by an opposite emphasis on the internal aspect of agency. Although some scholars regard conceptions of intentionality as innate modules (Leslie, 1995), a more common view is that children hold theories of mind that undergo qualitative reorganizations with development, much

like paradigm shifts in science. For example, before age three, children simply attribute actions to desires, not conceiving that idiosyncratic actions may reflect idiosyncratic beliefs rather than idiosyncratic desires. Later, children's theories of mind incorporate the idea that beliefs are representations that differ across individuals and cause their behavior (for a review, see Gopnick & Meltzoff, 1997). By adulthood, the implicit theory comprised the propositions that actions reflect intentions and these in turn reflect beliefs and desires, as shown in Figure 2 (Wellman, 1990).<sup>3</sup> By comparing figures, one can see that Wellman's distinctions fit within what Heider labels as "trying," and that they do not address environmental forces. Indeed, a critique of the theory of mind tradition is that it does not represent perceivers' concerns with an actor's embeddedness in social contexts (Ames et. al., in press).

In sum, developmental psychology research has elaborated the internal, intentionality aspect of agency, yet has neglected the external, autonomy aspect. Social psychology research has done the converse. So, while the leading proposals about relevant implicit theories are incomplete, they are complementary and can be subsumed by the more encompassing agency construct.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, it is worth clarifying what is meant by culture. The question of what constitutes culture is a matter of controversy not only in psychology but also anthropology. One tradition locates culture in individuals' private thoughts (Levy-Bruhl, 1926; Levi-Strauss, 1967) and another locates culture in public phenomena irreducible to individuals (Durkheim, 1895/1964). The equation of culture with private knowledge reached its zenith several decades ago with "ethnoscience" studies of structured knowledge about kin relationships, color names, disease and other delimited domains (Tyler, 1969). Anthropologists in this school (e.g., Goodenough, 1957) assumed that culture consists of cognitive structures, defining it as "whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members" (D'Andrade, 1995, p. xiii). In reaction, a next wave of theorists emphasized the public forms of culture. Geertz (1973) offered a semiotic view in which an individual's actions are constrained by external structures of signification—by traditions, roles, and symbolic systems in discourse—rather than by internal knowledge. Harris (1979), from a Marxist perspective, argued that many cultural practices have a material, economic basis and that the knowledge or self-understandings of cultural informants can be incorrect.

Recent contributions to cognitive anthropology have sought to capture the confluence of private thoughts and public artifacts in driving cultural patterns (D'Andrade, 1995; Holland & Quinn, 1987; Shore, 1996). Particularly useful is Sperber's (1996) re-casting of anthropology as the epidemiology of representations. On this view, strains of culture should be researched as are diseases—by identifying the forms in which they are stored, the mechanisms through which they are transmitted, and the distortion or mutation that occurs in the process. Hence different kinds of cultural representations call for analysis of different kinds of historical, sociological, and psychological factors. As Sperber explains,

The diffusion of a folktale and that of a military skill, for instance, involve different cognitive abilities, different motivations, and different environmental factors.... Though which factors will contribute to the explanation of a particular strain of representation cannot be decided in advance...potentially pertinent psychological factors include the ease with which a particular representation can be memorized, the existence of [relevant] background knowledge...and a motivation to communicate the content of the representation. Ecological factors include the recurrence of situations in which the representation gives rise to ... appropriate action, the availability of external memory stores (writing in particular), and the existence of institutions engaged in the transmission of the representation (p. 83).

Although Sperber's arguments are highly relevant to the transmission mechanisms for ITAs, there is one important respect in which our analysis differs. Whereas Sperber and other anthropologists have focused on cognitive availability, we focus on cognitive accessibility (Higgins, 1996). The notion of chronic accessibility is useful in modeling that specific ITAs are more likely to come to mind for perceivers in one culture than another, even when cognitively available in both cultures. Before using this perspective to contrast the specific ITAs that are privileged in Chinese and American cultures, generating insights about nature of lay theories and of cultural influence on cognition, we can summarize the assumptions we have stated thus far in a diagram linking culture, implicit theories, and social judgment--see Figure 3.

### **What Does Implicit Theory Research Gain?**

Psychologists proposing implicit theories have had relatively little to say about where implicit theories come from. Granted, some scholars (Ichheiser, 1943; Moscovici, 1985; Vygotsky,

1978) have emphasized that theories are culturally transmitted, but the mainstream has followed Piaget's emphasis on each child's acquisition and refinement of theories based on first-hand experimentation with the world (Gopnik & Meltzoff, 1997). Although this analogy to scientists may owe more to cinematic images of solitary scientists in remote laboratories than to the reality of scientists who inherit theories from mentors, conferences, and reading the literature, the person-as-lone-scientist analogy persists, perhaps because it comports with the extreme methodological individualism to which most psychologists adhere (Ho, 1991; Lukes, 1973). Linking implicit theories to culture makes it easier to see how "lay scientists" acquire theories from socialization within a culture, from communication with others in the prevailing cultural discourses, and from participation in cultural institutions.

To illustrate our argument, we draw a contrast between conceptions of agency salient in American and Chinese cultures. American culture privileges a conception of agentic individual persons, whereas Chinese culture privileges a conception of agentic collectivities—families, groups, and organizations. This contrast is not intended to capture all the ways in which culture shapes agency, but merely to illustrate a particular difference between the (American) cultural tradition within which the vast majority of social psychological research (including that on implicit theories) has been conducted and another major cultural tradition within which different specific theories of agency are prominent.

### Public Representations

We will review some public cultural forms that represent American and Chinese ITAs, such as texts, institutions, and discourses. This part of our argument necessarily wanders beyond the ken of social psychological research and ranges into sociology and even historical conjecture. Our goal here is to review forms of public culture that plausibly serve as representations of ITAs, carrying them to each new generation of perceivers, imparting them through distinctive mechanisms of transmission.<sup>5</sup>

Texts--written, spoken, or pictorial narratives--may be the most important kind of cultural artifact in the transmission of implicit theories. Exposure to texts gives rise to implicit theories in the minds of cultural members by activating relevant knowledge structures and leaving them incrementally changed in the direction of the content of the text (Bartlett, 1932; Spivey, 1997). Both the informal texts of "low culture" (e.g. folktales, television commercials) and the more

formal texts of “high culture” (e.g. religious tracts, canonical works of literature) are capable of conveying and reinforcing conceptions of agency. Novels and movies describe the kinds of agents that make things happen and solve problems. Political doctrines spell out a conception of which units of society possess agency or presuppose a particular kind of agent. Theories of ethics spell out what individuals and groups ought to do, and often present justifying myths describing an original or ideal society where the favored form of agency reigns.

Hence, in reviewing the conceptions of agency salient in American and Chinese cultures we can start with classic texts. North American conceptions of individual agency can be seen in the texts often referred to as the Western canon, such as Judeo-Christian writings on the individual soul, the notions of individual rights emergent in English common law, the individual-focused social, political, and economic theories promulgated in 18th and 19th-century Europe, and the 20th American popular novels and popular psychologies exalting individual liberation from social constraints (for a comprehensive review, see Lukes, 1973; Morris, Nisbett, & Peng, 1995). When the agency of groups or collectives is addressed in influential North American texts, it has often been denied or disparaged. For example, in his essay “Self-reliance,” Emerson avowed that, “An institution is but the lengthened shadow of one man...and all history resolves itself very easily into the biography of a few stout and earnest persons (1841/1982, p. 185).” By contrast, individual agency is dismissed as illusory in some of the most prominent religious and philosophical texts in Chinese society, such as Buddhist and Taoist writings (for a review, see Ho, 1995). The form of agency supported in the all-important social and ethical writings of Confucius is that of the groups to which individuals are subordinated, such as families and governments (for a review, see Munro, 1985). While these examples of texts are merely illustrative rather than definitive, the point is hardly controversial. We know of no efforts to prove this through a content analysis of a sample of such texts, although some more restricted studies, such as McClelland’s (1961) comparison of children’s readers, supports the notion that themes of individual autonomy occur more frequently in North American texts than in other cultural settings.

While acknowledging that classic texts continue to directly shape contemporary minds, it is also important to avoid romanticized portraits of cultural members immersed in ancient, canonical texts. Such views rob cultures of their recent history, their contemporary dynamics, and the more informal “low culture” texts that permeate and give texture to everyday life. Ubiquitous popular

cultural products, such as proverbs, advertising, and journalism carry conceptions of agency. For instance, Kim and Markus (1999) found that American compared with East Asian magazine advertisements are likely to show individuals rebelling against social institutions and less likely to show people following trends in order to harmonize themselves with the direction of the group. Morris and Peng (1994) showed that American newspaper accounts of murders were more likely to stress individual persons as causes (e.g., describing a shooter as having “a short fuse”) while Chinese news accounts were more situational, stressing factors such as group relationships (e.g., detailing a shooter’s isolation from his community).

Institutions are another public form of culture that carries conceptions of agency. Of course texts and institutions overlap, as can be seen clearly in the case of the law, which is encoded in texts and enforced by institutions. American law is founded on an analysis of the rights of individual and criteria for assessing individual responsibility for crimes; it says little about group rights or responsibilities.<sup>6</sup> Legal disputes are resolved through an adversarial process that requires individuals to defend their claims. By contrast, traditional Chinese law centered on duties to groups and even included provisions for group punishment. And although various Chinese societies today differ in their legal systems, none emphasizes civil rights of individuals to nearly the extent as in American law (see review by Su et al., 1999). In addition to legal institutions, educational institutions also differ, in that American schools encourage individual self-expression and self-esteem whereas Chinese schools encourage obedience and rote learning (Biggs, 1996). Institutions also work in tandem with texts to impart conceptions of agency in that high status role models endorse ideas in texts, adding a new set of incentives for others to internalize the ideas.<sup>7</sup> Similar contrasts can be drawn with regard to many other social institutions, such as family and economic structures, and have been reviewed elsewhere (Hsu, 1953; 1983).

These legal, educational, and economic institutions influence the chronic accessibility of implicit theories via two mechanisms. First, such institutions shape the stimulus environment of the social perceiver. Since American social structures give more freedom to individuals, an implicit theory of agency is “called for” more often by the social stimuli that American social perceivers encounter. By imposing tighter reigns on individual action, Chinese social structures allow less innovation and improvisation (Boldt, 1978), providing Chinese perceivers with less occasion to use knowledge structures describing individual agency (Bond, 1983).

Second, by participating in these institutions, members of a culture adopt certain expectancies about agency and ultimately enact particular forms of agency. To illustrate, legal procedures based on individual expression presuppose and thus give rise to freely acting citizens; those founded on group rights set the conditions for collective action. Participative classrooms presuppose and thus create self-motivated students; hierarchical classrooms shape duty-motivated students. Market institutions, from advertisements to shopping malls, presuppose and thereby evoke consumers with idiosyncratic preferences; command or subsistence economies do not afford the expression of rampant individualism through material purchases. As feminists and other historians of oppression have documented, participation in institutional roles conferring individual agency raises a perceiver's consciousness of that form of agency, facilitating the perception of this form of agency in other contexts (e.g. Scott, 1990).<sup>8</sup>

In addition to formal institutions such courthouses, schools, and banks, society is also structured by informal institutions, such as norms, scripts, and role relationships. Norms are rules with no physical or legal existence, but they become institutionalized through peoples consensual participation in them (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). While the law has a strong influence because people are obliged to mind the law under the threat of legal sanction, people are also obliged to mind their manners, under threat of social sanctioning. Institutionalized norms are particularly vivid when they congeal into complementary roles. Individuals learn scripts in order to play their role, in part because they are cued to perform correctly by people on the other end of the interaction (Goffman, 1959). For example, in Chinese culture hierarchical role relationships (e.g. the exchange of paternal benevolence for filial piety) structure many interactions even in modern work organizations and restrict individual agency (Chiu & Hong, 1997; Su et al., 1999). Individuals are obliged to participate in culturally shaped roles because they are embedded in social networks formed along the lines of these roles. In every setting of recurrent interaction, tangible and intangible resources are exchanged between individuals and groups and these patterned exchange relationships crystallize into binding social structures (Simmel, 1950). Cultural differences in typical network structures have been documented. For instance, in American business settings individuals can engage in instrumental networking with people they have no prior basis for relationship with, whereas in Chinese society network exchanges (or "guanxi") follow the lines of long-term relationships often relationships between families that have spanned generations (Morris,

Podolny, & Ariel, 2000). Informal institutions that carry conceptions of agency have also been identified in studied of practices (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1979).

Informal institutions such as norms, roles, and network forms determine which ITAs are chronically accessible in the same ways as with formal institutions; however, they also affect ITAs in another more subtle way. Many norms, roles, and practices require joint performances, which require individuals to establish an inter-subjectively shared representation of what is going on. This happens in subtle ways of which neither party need be consciously aware. A simple example is one individual's act of pointing, which leads the observer to follow the gaze of the pointer and to coordinate his or her attention on a particular entity (Trevarthen, 1980). Faced with ambiguous outcomes, we point at perceived origins or agents. Pointing is just one of many verbal and nonverbal behaviors that create inter-subjectivity, and thereby foster a contagion of attentional focus in the culturally privileged direction (Cole, 1996). For example, American parents treat infants' spontaneous gestures as intentional communications and thereby bring about the infants' perception of themselves and others as having intentions (Bruner, 1983). The chronic accessibility of a culturally privileged ITA results from the accumulative many minor influences of this sort.

Overall, conceptions of agency do not exist solely inside people's heads. Implicit theories of agency are represented in the external world, in public forms of culture, and this accounts for their permanence and consensus in a society. We have speculated about a number of ways that theories may be transmitted from these public forms to perceiver's private thoughts, and clearly more research is needed before conclusions can be reached.

#### Private Representations

What is the evidence that implicit agency theories exist in perceiver's minds with theories of persons versus groups differing in salience between American and Chinese perceivers. The best evidence comes from various studies of beliefs. Admittedly, some scholars doubt that perceivers' explicitly espoused beliefs provide a perfect barometer of their implicit knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Yet the studies of this sort comparing American and Chinese respondents' beliefs nevertheless lend some credence to our proposal. Beliefs about the differing components of agency--autonomy, intentions, and enduring characteristics--have all been compared in separate studies, if admittedly not all at once in full test of the current proposal.

Beliefs about the autonomy of individuals and groups were studied by Menon et al. (1999) who found that, compared with Americans, Singaporean students were less likely to believe in the autonomy of individual persons—by endorsing statements such as that individuals “possess free will” and “follow their own internal direction”—but were more likely to endorse parallel statements about organizations. The beliefs endorsed by Americans but not Chinese resembled those in Heider’s proposed “naïve theory of action.” These beliefs may, then, be part of a Western cultural theory and not a salient driver of social perception everywhere..<sup>10</sup>

Next, beliefs about intentionality of individuals and groups have been found to differ. Ames and Fu (2000) found that Americans believe a wider range of individual acts are intentional than do Chinese. Beliefs about the intentionality of organizations were found to be stronger among Japanese respondents than Americans in a study by Ames et al. (2000). Consistent with ascribing intentions to organizations, Japanese also ascribed widely ranging obligations.

Finally, several studies have measured beliefs about dispositional properties of individuals and groups. In study focused on beliefs about individuals, Kashima et al. (1992) found that, compared with Australians, Japanese students were less likely to endorse statements that individuals’ behavior generally reflects their attitudes. Similar findings were obtained in a comparison of American and Korean students (Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999). A study of beliefs about individuals and groups by Chiu, Dweck, Tong and Fu (1997) found that, compared with American students, Hong Kong students were more likely to believe in the social world has fixed moral characteristics.

Overall, evidence from attempts to directly measure the component beliefs of lay theories is consistent with our proposal. Admittedly, studies have been incomplete in tapping all the components of ITAs and the method of testing espoused beliefs is open to questions. Nevertheless, this evidence in combination with findings about patterns of social judgments presumed to follow from ITAs allows some confidence that these culturally varying knowledge structures exist in people’s heads.

#### Summary of Insights about Implicit Theories

Having made our case that social perceivers’ theories concern agency and that cultures shape which kind of agency is most salient, we can now delineate some insights for the implicit theory literature that have been generated along the way:

- Implicit theories are not all dedicated to target of individual persons. Perceivers also have theories of group actors, and also theories of non-human actors such as fate (although we lack space to review this evidence here). The almost exclusive emphasis in social and developmental psychology on theories of persons may reflect a blindspot of the Western cultural moorings of psychology.
- Social perceivers' key theories are not narrowly about "action" or "mind"; they are about "agency". Agency is the common denominator in perceivers' assumptions and judgments about persons, groups, and other actors. Agency beliefs take on slightly different meanings in relation to these different kinds of actors. For example, the "intention" of an agentic organization might be a strategy plan written by the top management, whereas the intention of an agentic person would be a mental state.
- Implicit theories exist publicly as well as privately. They are not induced from experience by each perceiver. They exist in enduring public forms, and are transmitted to perceivers' minds. This helps explain the consensus of theories among perceivers within a society.
- The chronic accessibility of particular ITAs in perceivers' private thoughts mirrors their prominence and prevalence in the public representations of society.

### **What Does Cultural Psychology Gain?**

The second half of our thesis concerns the advantages cultural psychology reaps from the implicit theory construct. In describing this, we are well-served by Merton's (1957) point that productive research programs in social psychology has required "middle range" theorizing--models more general than the working hypotheses within a particular project, but more focused than the all-inclusive master conceptual schemes forwarded by 19<sup>th</sup> century social theorists. This distinction might be recast, in more contemporary parlance, as the need for models that specify boundary conditions and mechanisms rather than merely having frameworks or meta-theories, which call attention to groups of related variables without specifying precise causal hypotheses. A middle-range model yielding precise hypotheses is exactly what the implicit theory construct affords to researchers of culture and social judgment. This is much needed because, in the cultural psychology field, theories about the process or mechanism of cultural influence on cognition are scarce (while, interestingly, grand meta-theories or master schemes are all too abundant. It is as

though something about the topic of culture causes researchers to abandon their contemporary moorings and theorize in the style of 19<sup>th</sup> century social theorists!).

We begin by describing the phenomena under explanation--differences in social judgments patterns of Americans and Chinese—and then we compare rival accounts of this in terms of, respectively, the traditional construct of cognitive styles and the construct of ITAs. A substantial body of ethnographic evidence suggests that, compared with Americans or Western Europeans, Chinese social perceivers are comparatively less inclined to attribute social behaviors of individuals to internal dispositions, such as personality traits or attitudes, and they are more inclined to attend to social institutions, roles, and groups (Hsu, 1953). More recently, cross-cultural psychological studies (Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999; Morris & Peng, 1994) have provided evidence that matched samples of Chinese and American participants differ in their judgments given the same stimulus information, with Chinese participants showing a reduced bias toward attributing a person's act to dispositions, the "fundamental attribution error" (Ross, 1977).

A traditional explanation for such cultural differences posits that perceivers vary by culture in their cognitive style, Americans having an analytic style and Chinese a contextualist style (L-H Chiu, 1972; Shweder & Bourne, 1982). Under this rubric, the bias of attributing an actor's behavior to internal dispositions can be explained as a consequence of an analytic style. Conversely, situational attribution would follow from a contextualist style. This explanatory model is rooted in Witkin's (1954) argument that individuals can be reliably distinguished as field-dependent (cognizing objects as they are embedded in surrounding contexts) versus field-independent (cognizing the object apart from its context). Many historical and anthropological observations about Western versus Non-Western tendencies can be interpreted as consequences of analytic as opposed to contextualist styles. Indeed Berry and colleagues in 1970s were able to interpret many diverse variables in the ethnographic record in terms of the thesis that the cognitive style characterizing members of a culture becomes more analytic and less contextualist as a function of the role complexity of their society (Witkin & Berry, 1975). Yet this generality has also been the Achilles heel of the argument: The observed patterns of cultural differences have always proved to be more complex than would be the case if they followed from domain-general styles. When Berry and colleagues mounted a highly ambitious study to test their thesis, results not only failed to support the hypothesized antecedents of cognitive style, but also they failed to support the

construct validity of analytic vs. contextualist cognitive styles (for a review, see Cole, 1996). Individuals' scores on tasks involving different stimulus domains failed to correlate, which they would have had they emerged from a cognitive style. Despite their poor track record in direct tests, cognitive style accounts of cultural difference in judgment continue to resurface in the cross-cultural literature, in large part, perhaps it has been the only game in town; alternative models of how culture impacts cognition have not been well articulated traditionally.

Our more novel account rejects the notion that culture impacts cognition by imprinting individuals with domain-general styles of thinking. We make the much narrower claim that American and Chinese perceivers differ in the specific ITAs that are chronically accessible. That is, theories of persons as agentic for Americans, and theories of groups as agentic for Chinese. Yet chronic accessibility does not itself entail that the ITA will be operative whenever the perceiver is interpreting a social stimulus. The activation of a given ITA, as with any knowledge structure, depends on its applicability to the stimulus; features of the stimuli must structurally fit the description of the ontological kind in the ITA (Higgins, 1996; Wittenbrink, et al., 1998). For instance, a theory of agentic groups agency can only be applied if the stimulus event includes elements that can be construed as a social group. In sum, a first distinguishing hypothesis of the ITA account is that culturally varying biases toward dispositional attribution should be domain-specific, depending on the applicability of the relevant ITA to the stimulus.

Another distinguishing hypothesis of our account concerns the dynamics of ITA activation. Often perceivers can interpret stimuli either through top-down application of accessible knowledge structures such as ITAs or through more effortful bottom-up analysis of information in the stimulus data. Whether perceivers engage in the knowledge-intensive process or the more data-intensive process depends, in part, on their state of mind. Perceivers rely more on knowledge such as ITAs under conditions where they have little attention to spare, a state of cognitive busyness (Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988) or where they want a quick answer, a state of need for cognitive closure (Kruglanski, 1990). Our ITA account of cultural variation in dispositional attribution predicts that these aspects of the perceiver's state of mind should moderate the extent to which individuals manifest culturally typical biases in judgment. In sum, by contrast with cognitive style accounts, the ITA account predicts that cultural differences should be domain-specific and dependent on the

perceiver's cognitive dynamics. As we shall see, empirical tests of domain-specificity and dynamic dependence have supported precise predictions from the ITA account.

### Domain Specificity

Causal attributions are made for every type of event that a perceiver encounters—not only social events, such as actions of people, but also physical events, such as the movements of billiard balls, changes of the weather, and so forth. A cognitive style account suggests that a general pattern of cultural difference should appear across all domains—analytic versus holistic information processing will play out in the same way in attributions for social behavior and for physical events. By contrast, an ITA account predicts that the knowledge structures underlying cultural biases will only be activated by stimuli within a given domain, so the pattern of cultural differences should not sweep across domains.<sup>11</sup> Initial evidence of domain-specificity came from comparative studies by Morris and Peng (1994) of American and Chinese perceptions of social individuals as opposed to mechanical objects (e.g., an individual being “launched” forward by the advance of a group vs. a soccer ball being launched forward after being struck by another object). Importantly, both kinds of stimuli involved the possibility that a trajectory reflected internal dispositions or external forces. The two cultures differed in attributions of social causality but not mechanical causality. Within the social domain, many kinds of interactions involving an individual and a group elicited the cultural difference, consistent with the notion that differences arise so long as cultural divergent ITAs were applied. This pattern of differences is consistent with the ITA mechanism. It is inconsistent with both the mechanism of domain-general cognitive principles, on the one hand, or the mechanism of highly specific knowledge about particular kinds of social interactions, on the other hand.

More fine-grained distinctions about the domain-specificity of cultural differences in dispositional attribution were drawn by Menon et al. (1999), who clarified that Chinese attribute to dispositions of group actors. In one study, American and Hong Kong college students read a vignette in which an individual actor and collective actor jointly contributed to a negative outcome. The event concerned a maladjusted co-worker who created problems in a work group. This ambiguous story could be construed in two plausible ways, one of which assumed the individual as agent and the other which assumed the group as agent. The individual could be seen as an irresponsible “free rider” who shirked obligations. Or, the group could be viewed as an

irresponsible team that failed to integrate a member. Whereas American participants were more likely to attribute to dispositions of the individual; Chinese participants were more likely to attribute to dispositions of the group. Granted, in the maladjusted co-worker study, the group may be seen as a context around the individual or as an agent in its own right. That is, Chinese attributions might have been attributions to the contextual factor around the focal individual (consistent with the cognitive style account) or as to a group agent in its own right (consistent with the ITA account). In a follow-up study, Menon et al. (1999) varied between-subjects whether the actor in a story about a transgression was an individual or a group. One such vignette concerned, in one condition, the action of an individual bull and, in the other condition, a herd of cattle:

A farmer was grazing a small herd of cattle. One day, things unexpectedly went wrong. At first, a bull (the herd) seemed agitated by something near the farmer. Moments later, the bull (herd) charged directly at the farmer, who fell to the ground as he was hit by its (their) impact.

The bull (herd) managed to break free from the enclosed area. It (they) escaped and ran free.

Participants communicated their attribution for the outcome by rating several possible causes of the outcome, both dispositions, such as aggressiveness of the bull (or herd), and contextual factors, such as provocation by the farmer's behavior. Note that the same dispositional factors and contextual factors were presented in both the individual actor and group actor conditions. As predicted from the implicit theory account, a significant interaction resulted whereby Americans made more dispositional attributions for acts by individuals, whereas Chinese made more dispositional attributions for acts by groups. In other words, Americans were contextualist when the stimuli was an act by a group, which is inconsistent with the ideas that contextual attribution reflects an underlying domain general contextual cognitive style.<sup>12</sup>

In sum, there is substantial evidence for domain-specificity in cultural biases toward dispositional attributions. Attributions for behavior of mechanical objects do not elicit the cultural biases in attribution seen in response to behaviors of persons. And, even within the general domain of human behavior, the differences between American and Chinese perceivers reverse depending on whether the stimulus involves an individual or a group. The diverging American and Chinese tendencies to attribute dispositions, however, do correspond to the predictions of our ITA model. Each culture shows a bias toward dispositional attribution when confronted with stimuli to which their chronically accessible ITA is applicable.

### Dynamic Dependence

A second set of distinctive predictions from our ITA account concern the dependence of cultural biases in dispositional attribution on perceivers' cognitive states. A great deal of social cognition research has focused on identifying the cognitive conditions that potentiate top-down knowledge-intensive processing as opposed to bottom-up data-intensive processing (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989; Higgins, 1996). An ITA account predicts that cultural differences should depend on these conditions, and recent studies lend support to this prediction. A first set of conditions, investigated by Gilbert and others (Gilbert et al., 1988), are low accuracy motive and high cognitive busyness, both of which should increase knowledge-intensive, which is to say ITA-based, processing. Accuracy motive was examined in a study of US and Hong Kong news articles for events assumed to be of high and low importance, respectively. Analyses of the prevalence of attributions to dispositions found stronger cultural differences in responses to unimportant events, as would be expected from a low accuracy motive (Lee, Hallahan, & Herzog, 1996). Cognitive busyness was investigated in an experiment by Knowles, Morris, Chiu, and Hong (in press) using the standard paradigm of Jones and Harris (1967) in which participants hear a speaker advocate a controversial political position and then judge the speaker's true attitude. Ascribing an attitude corresponding to speech follows from attributing the speech to the person's dispositions rather than to the situation. Participants were either burdened with a simultaneous task (high cognitive load) or were given nothing to do but concentrate on the attribution task (low load). Results showed that cognitive load had the effect of increasing dispositional attribution among American participants (replicating findings by Gilbert et al., 1988), but not among a matched sample of Hong Kong Chinese participants. In other words, a cultural difference appeared in the high cognitive load condition (because Americans relied on their applicable theory of persons as agentic whereas Chinese had no applicable theory) but not the low load condition (where neither Americans nor Chinese relied on a theory of agency in interpreting the stimulus).

Related to cognitive load is Kruglanski's notion that some conditions elicit an epistemic state of wanting a quick solution, or Need for Closure (NFC). NFC is also a property on which persons vary dispositionally, some individuals having a chronic desire for an orderly, unambiguous reality and others having the opposite wish (Kruglanski, 1989, 1990). Chiu, Morris, Hong, and Menon (2000) tested a hypothesis relating NFC to cultural differences, based on the idea that NFC

increases reliance on accessible knowledge structures and hence should increase reliance on ITAs in relation to applicable stimuli and hence increase cultural biases in dispositional attribution. In one study, the independent variable was an individual difference NFC scale developed by Webster and Kruglanski (1989). Participants from Hong Kong and the US read a vignette about a medicine mix-up in a pharmacy that resulted in illness. Participants rated attributions to dispositions of the pharmacy worker and dispositions of the organization. A three-way interaction between culture, NFC, and actor type revealed that, among Americans NFC was associated with increased dispositionism about individual actors but not group actors, whereas among Chinese, it was associated with increased dispositionism about group actors but not individual actors. A second study operationalized NFC with a situational manipulation of time pressure (Chiu et.al., 1999, Experiment 2). Participants read the aforementioned Cattle vignette, and were randomly assigned to one of the 2 (Actor: individual or group) X 2 (Time Pressure: low or high) conditions. Again, a three-way interaction emerged between culture, NFC, and actor type in prediction dispositional attribution. Time pressure, which induced need for closure, increased American attributions to individual dispositions and increased Chinese attributions to group dispositions. Interestingly, these studies found that the principles governing NFC are alike across cultures—that is, it increases reliance on chronically accessible implicit theories. Yet the contrasting contents of their respective implicit theories means that the judgment outcomes of American and Chinese perceivers are pushed in different directions by the introduction of NFC—increased attribution to individual dispositions by Americans and to group dispositions by Chinese. Such findings are particularly problematic for the cognitive style account, which presumes qualitative differences in the cognitive principles of American and Chinese perceivers.

A final research program favoring the dynamic ITA account over an account in terms of continuously present cognitive styles is premised on the notion that recently primed knowledge structures are more likely than otherwise to be activated in the interpretation of a stimulus (Higgins, 1996). The priming of cultural knowledge structures has been discussed in relation to bi-cultural individuals who experience the dynamic shifting of their accessible interpretive frames based on environmental cues that prime one or the other set of cultural schemas. In a series of experiments, Hong, Morris, Chiu, and Benet-Martinez (2000) primed Chinese-American bi-cultural participants (individuals selected for having acquired both Chinese and Anglo-American implicit theories) with

iconic images associated with either Chinese or American cultures or with neutral control condition images. The cultural icons included symbols (Chinese dragon vs. American flag), famous cultural figures (Superman vs. Stone Monkey), and landmarks (the Capitol building vs. the Great Wall). After the priming manipulation, in a putatively separate study, participants were asked to make attributions in response to ambiguous social stimuli. As predicted, perceivers primed with Chinese icons exhibited a trend toward attributing to group dispositions and those primed with American icons, a trend toward attributing to individual dispositions (with the neutral prime condition in between). Further studies varying the structure of the social stimuli found that the priming manipulation only influenced judgments if cultural theories were applicable to the stimulus. In sum, priming studies highlight the dynamism and domain-specificity of cultural differences in social judgment.

#### Summary of Insights About Culture

Having reviewed the evidence from tests of our ITA model of cultural differences in dispositional attribution, we arrive at several insights for cultural psychology that come with the introduction of the implicit theory construct:

- Cultural influences on cognition are narrow and nuanced not sweeping and simple. They arise from a process that depends on the specifics of the stimulus domain as well as on the perceiver's cognitive dynamics. The many failures to replicate broad cultural differences that have stirred controversy in cross-cultural psychology may be symptomatic of the fact that researchers have looked for broad, simple patterns, not theorizing about moderating conditions. Research on knowledge activation has enabled increasingly precise models to some areas of social psychology (Higgins, 1996). Cultural psychology stands to inherit this wealth of insight.
- While middle-range theories, such as our account of dispositional attribution in terms of ITAs, enable precise predictions about a given psychological process, they do not suffice by themselves. As we have seen, this model of psychological process is embedded within broader meta-theories, such as the epidemiological theory of cultural representations (Sperber, 1996). Also in the background are frameworks describing the constellation of psychological tendencies associated with particular cultures, such as American and Chinese cultures (see Nisbett et al., in press). This level of analysis looks for coherence at the level of a homeostatic system of institutions, practices, and psychological tendencies, rather than

necessarily at the level of individual differences. These frameworks underlie assumptions about which specific ITAs will be prominent in which cultures.

- Finally, divergences across cultures in judgment outcomes do not necessarily reflect qualitatively different psychological principles. While results from tests of the ITA model, such as the Chiu et al. (2000) study of NFC, suggest that dispositional attribution occurs with regard to different kinds of social perception targets for American and Chinese perceivers, results also highlight that principles governing dispositional attribution—the processes operating, boundary conditions relevant, and functions served—are strikingly parallel in the two cultures. Overall, rather than another image of starkly different American and Chinese mentalities based on differing outcomes in a localized task, our research has looked more broadly and uncovered an Escher-like tableau of similarities alongside differences, and of differences that look like similarities when considered more abstractly. Complex patterns can arise from simple principles.

### **Conclusion**

We began with argument that implicit conceptions of agency are a key to integrating the social perception of persons and groups. We have seen that the ITA construct is also a keystone in the sense it that connects two literatures—implicit theories and cultural psychology—and enables them to support to each other by providing new insights. As we have seen, the insights resulting from this integration are plentiful, and they generally suggest that person perception and group perception are more alike than many scholars have assumed. Yet in complex ways. For example much of what social psychology has learned from Western studies of person perception may greatly elucidate some group perception phenomena, yet not group perception by Westerners but rather by Chinese! One of the perennial benefits of considering cultural differences is the critical reflection on one's theoretical constructs that it spurs, in which new parallels become apparant. <sup>13</sup>

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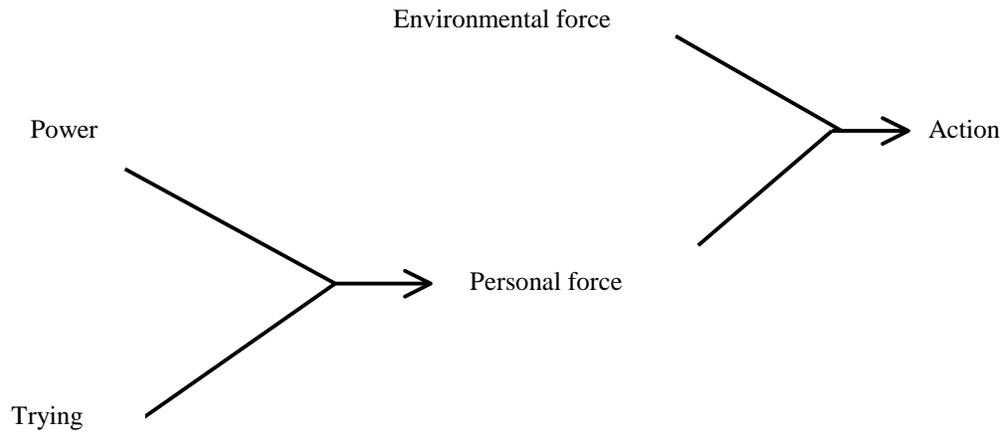
Wittenbrink, B., Hilton, J. L., & Gist, P. L. (1998). In search of similarity: Stereotypes as naive theories in social categorization. Social Cognition, 16, 31-55.

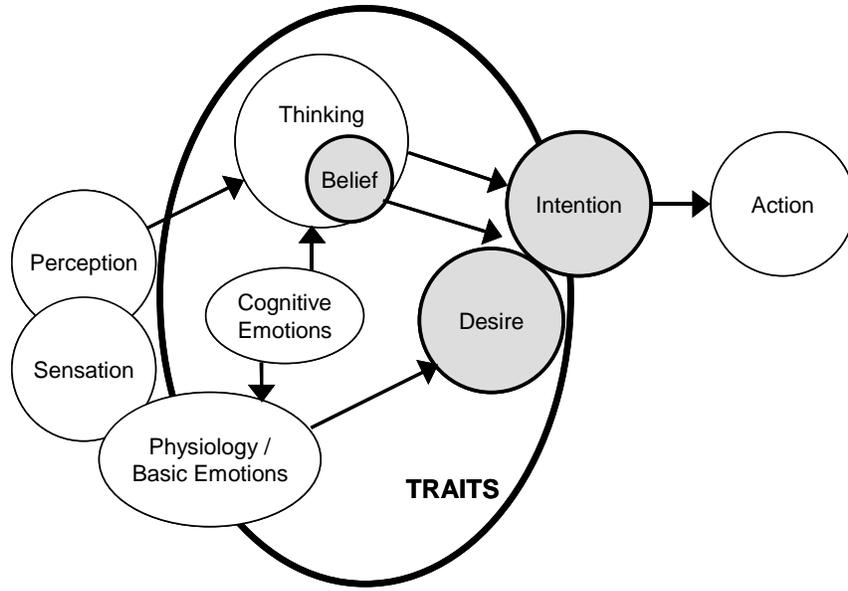
## Figure Captions

Figure 1: The lay person's theory of action (Heider, 1958)

Figure 2. The adult's lay theory of mind, according to Wellman (1990)

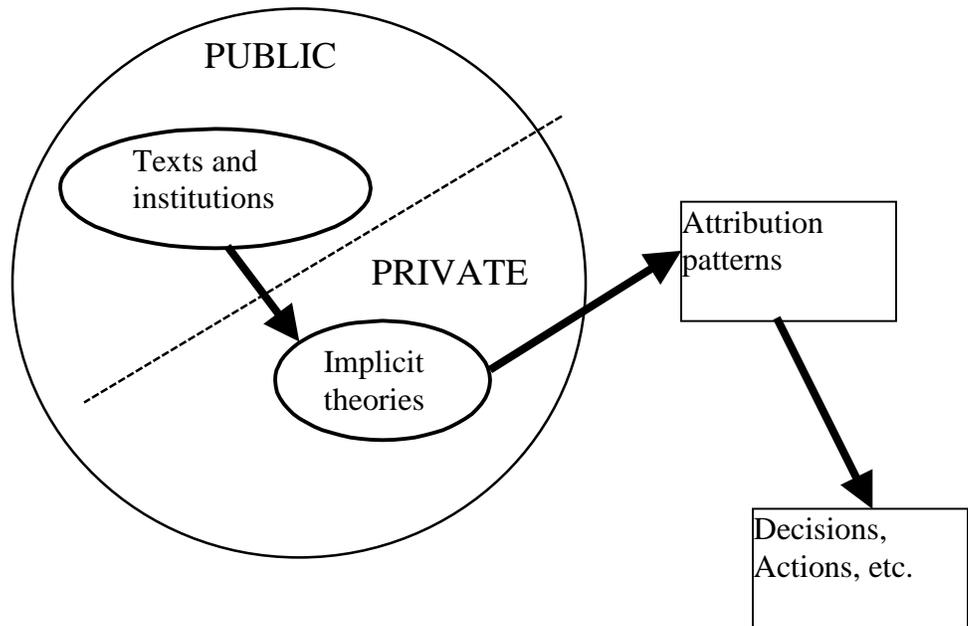
Figure 3: Cultural conceptions of agency exist in public, material representations and private, mental representations and they shape social interactions through their influence on patterns of causal attribution .





CULTURAL CONCEPTIONS  
OF AGENCY

SOCIAL  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
CONSEQUENCES



Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> We have defined implicit theories as specific to a domain yet more general than a particular episode. Within this range, theories might exist at several levels, such as expectancies about the locus of control of social outcomes (Rotter, 1990), as well as expectancies specific to sub-domains within social outcomes, for example, outcomes involving particular kinds of social actors, such as individuals or groups (Menon, Morris, Chiu, & Hong, 1999) or those involving particular kinds of actor properties, such as intellectual or moral characteristics (Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997; Kelley, 1972; Weiner, 1986). Specific to still narrower domains are implicit theories of particular types of interactions, such as maintaining harmony (Morris & Peng, 1994), particular routine events, such the restaurant script (Shank & Abelson, 1977; Morris & Murphy, 1990), or particular ethnic groups, such as stereotypes (Hirschfeld, 1996; Wittenbrink, Hilton, & Gist, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> The power of the agency construct has given it a central place in history and anthropology (e.g. Gardiner, 1995; Scott, 1990). Also, different forms of agency are central to studies of organizational action, where intentions, beliefs, and desires may correspond to internal states of the organization (i.e., policies, records, and strategic goals) rather than to mental states. Agency is also used in some branches of computer science, where the relevant internal states refer to the code driving a particular module.

<sup>3</sup> This research helps to clarify why applying an agency theory engenders attributions to dispositions of the agent. As the perceiver traces backward from an action (from right to left in Figure 2) to proximal intentions and more distal beliefs and desires, the attribution is increasingly to a trait-like, enduring property of the actor.

<sup>4</sup> Conceptions of agency could exist at various levels of abstraction. Our view is that perceivers acquire conceptions at a level that is specific to the kind of actor (individual versus group). More specific representations about particular kinds of interaction types, scripted sequences, or actor

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demographics are probably associated with these conceptions of individuals and groups, and probably guide judgment when they are directly applicable. More abstract representations—a conception of agency in general—would not be detailed enough to guide interpretation of an outcome. Hence, to the extent that perceivers possess such abstractions, they likely serve a belief-organizing function rather than a judgment-guiding function. Wellman (1998) calls these “framework theories” rather than “specific theories”, and suggests that cultures differ in the latter but not the former.

<sup>5</sup> In this part of our argument, we endeavor only to offer illustrative evidence. When we turn to psychological questions, we will provide evidence of the sort readers will expect.

<sup>6</sup> Although, on the surface, American law treats corporations as persons, this analogy is never taken far. In the famous words of Chief Justice Marshall, “a corporation is an artificial being, invisible, intangible, and existing only in contemplation of law.” Corporations are not held to be as responsible as individuals because they are not seen as entities having intentionality or autonomy (May & Hoffman, 1991; Velasquez, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> The ideas in classic texts which survive are the ones that powerful people advocate. Christianity diffused in the West because leaders from Roman emperors to American presidents have endorsed it, just as Chinese emperors and some contemporary leaders have endorsed the teachings of Confucius. Sperber (1996) makes the very interesting point that the ideas that vary most across cultures are likely to be those which people believe on the basis of their source rather than on the basis of their content.

<sup>8</sup> Admittedly, participation does not automatically create commitment to an implicit theory; individuals are free to express skepticism about the presuppositions of the institutions that surround them, and of course they do this often. Yet, even when satirizing or objecting to an institution, individuals must cognitively negotiate the conception of agency that underlies it, and this attention to the idea renders the idea more cognitively accessible than it was before. Like “cookies” downloaded from the internet,

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implicit theories are sometimes unwanted souvenirs of an individual's contact with an institution.

<sup>9</sup> First, implicit theories may not correspond well to the explicit beliefs tapped by researchers' tasks. If agency theories, like rules of syntax, are largely tacit, then one would want to study them not by interrogating lay people about their beliefs but rather by their performance in parsing and interpreting ambiguous stimuli. Also these measures may tap the availability of an idea more than its accessibility. Second, individuals may hold idiosyncratic versions of the cultural theory. Just as no individual knows all the words in a language but nevertheless the structures of the language exist and individuals follow them (Saussure, 1916/1983), it may be that no individual holds a perfect version of the cultural theory that matches researcher's items. Indeed, according to Sperber (1996) cultural representations are never transmitted without distortion, and hence individuals within a culture may differ in their representations of the theory even though they generate the same inferential bias.

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps even the venerable person-situation dichotomy, which reflects the assumption that an individual person is the agent and the "situation" is an undifferentiated residual category, is itself a product of the predominant American lay theory of agency. This dichotomy has characterized the situation as a non-agentic background—an inanimate stage upon which the focal individual performs. Persons, according to Heider (1958), "are usually perceived as action centers" (p. 21) whereas the environment is not—it is not "trying" or "exerting itself" (p. 83). Attributions to group agents suggests the following challenges for attribution frameworks: the construct of "internal attributions" should be reformulated to capture dispositions of any kind of agent, individual, group, or non-human; and the construct of "external attribution" should be parsed into specific social and nonsocial elements, at least, and perhaps into finer sub-components.

<sup>11</sup> Unless of course knowledge of one domain is being applied to another domain in analogical or metaphoric thought.

<sup>12</sup>Even at the level of a thought experiment, the idea of domain general contextualism seems problematic. If Chinese perceivers were simply contextualist -- focusing on all the perceivable elements at once--then how would they ever make sense of stimuli? If they were always oriented to context, they would suffer an infinite regress of attending to contexts around individuals, such as the surrounding groups and organizations, but also to the contexts in which these groups are embedded, and then to the contexts of those contexts.

<sup>13</sup> The constructs used in this paper may be still too general to capture differences that exist among a broader set of cultures. For example, we have lumped together different forms of group or collective agency. It may be that lay theories of agency are specific to particular kinds of collectives such as companies, villages, families, governments, etc. However, more fine-grained comparisons—say between Chinese culture where family agency is privileged and Japanese culture where corporate agency may be more prominent—may reveal evidence for greater domain specificity of the relevant lay theories. Likewise, our dearth of attention to non-human agents such as God or Fate (relative to the abundance of ethnographic evidence that such conceptions shape everyday interpretations in many cultures) no doubt indicates another of our blind spots.