COGNITIVE CAUSAL MECHANISMS IN HUMAN AGENCY: ETIC AND EMIC CONSIDERATIONS

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Summary — The debate over the contribution of cognitive processes in understanding human endeavor rages on in psychology despite decades of conceptual and empirical scrutiny from researchers. Recently, the construct of self efficacy has stimulated a renewal of this debate. We discuss the significance of this cognitive construct from the perspective of cross-cultural behavior. We examine the empirical evidence from a number of cross-cultural studies, and we argue that the etic quality of this construct provides strong evidence for its significance in understanding universal aspects of behavior.

The debate over the importance of cognitive constructs in explaining individual behavior has existed for many years. While the number of theories incorporating cognitive constructs has exploded since the 1950s, skeptics reassert the traditional viewpoint espoused in behaviorism (Skinner, 1953, 1977). Recently, several scholars have focused this general argument on the cognitive construct of self efficacy (Bandura, 1982, 1986), and the debate has been resurrected (e.g., Hawkins, 1992; Lee, 1989, 1990, 1992).

At its heart is more than a conceptual or empirical split. Scholars on both sides have significant philosophical and ideological differences in their views of human activity. Needless to say, such an active and fundamental debate will not be solved through a single essay, and it is not our intent to attempt such folly. However, we will draw on evidence from the cross-cultural psychology, organizational behavior, and anthropology literatures in an attempt to provide a somewhat different perspective than is typically presented. More specifically, we draw on the cultural literature in order to assess the universal aspects of self efficacy, and in so doing we argue that its existence logically can be neither epiphenomenon (Hawkins, 1992) nor illusion (Lee, 1989).

Culture and Cognitive Meaning

People live in collectivities or groups in order to survive (Etzioni, 1968). People in a particular setting often share a number of characteristics such as religion, political views, lifestyle patterns, and approaches to work. People vary in the ways that they build their lives but this variation is predictable within and across groups of people. It is the descriptive dimension of what is termed culture (Earley, in press; Herskovits, 1955; Rohner, 1984). An oft-cited definition of culture presented by Kluckhohn (1962) suggests that culture refers to the systematic ways of thinking, feeling and reacting for a given group of people that is acquired and shared through symbols, and is reflected in the achievements of the group through artifacts and other traditions including

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ideas, values, and ideals. Such a definition is founded on the basis of cognition and evaluation, and unobservable constructs are essential for its meaning. In this usage, culture refers to the core values and beliefs of individuals within a society that are formed in complex knowledge systems (Lachman, 1983; Triandis, 1994). Further, cultural beliefs and values can be understood at an individual level if we consider that individuals possess both cultural knowledge structures as well as individual, or specific, structures. Thus, an individual’s behavior within a social context is a product of both culturally-acquired and as individually-acquired (via unique life experiences) knowledge systems (Earley & Mosakowski, 1995).

It might seem that we have already discounted a behavioristic orientation in favor of a cognitive one by defining a core aspect of our argument — culture — using cognitive terms and constructs. To some extent this criticism is valid. However, our purpose is to examine the nature of self efficacy as it manifests itself in a variety of different cultural settings, and to provide a somewhat different form of evidence for assessing the viability of efficacy as a cognitive construct. More explicitly, our thesis is that if efficacy provides a useful explanation for behavior of individuals across cultures, then it is unlikely simply to be illusory or epiphenomenal. Although it is conceivable that the numerous studies presented in the U.S. literature concerning self efficacy may indicate a unicultural illusory bias as Lee (1989) argues, it is very unlikely that such a bias can explain the specific, a priori functioning of self efficacy in a cross-cultural, theoretical context. In order to justify our conclusions, we first turn to a general discussion of constructs used in a cultural context.

Emics and Etics in Conceptual Models

Various aspects of manifested behavior are unique to a particular culture, whereas others exist across cultures. For example, most societies have taboos concerning incest although the definition of what constitutes incest varies (Lonner, 1980). Likewise, all societies appear to have standards for acceptable behavior, deviations from which result in sanctions. Organizations and societies appear to share a fundamental feature of hierarchy as well (Tannenbaum et al., 1974). These shared features are referred to as “etic”, or universal, aspects of the cultures (Berry, 1990). Certain other features of a culture are unique in meaning, significance, and manifestation to a given culture, and these are referred to as “emic” features (e.g., the Chinese concept of “guanxi”, or relationships, does not have an equivalent counterpart in Western society).

Our argument is that epiphenomenal or illusory constructs may well have a seeming life of their own in a given culture, or in closely related ones, but there is no reason to anticipate that they would have a functional equivalent in vastly divergent cultures. In this sense, an illusory construct is one which is emic; that is to say, it has a specific significance and meaning within a given culture that does not readily transfer to other cultures. A classic example of such emic phenomena concerns the misguided use of standardized Western intelligence tests in several African tribes during the 1950s. The sample assessed using the tests were not able to process (effectively) three-dimensional representations placed on a two-dimensional surface (drawings used to represent 3-D space). The conclusion drawn was that the subjects who could not respond correctly to these items were of lower intelligence than Westerners who could readily interpret such images. Of course, the problem here was one of an emic assessment of intelligence, used as if it were an etic assessment.

What, then, of self efficacy as an emic or an etic? If self efficacy is illusory or epiphenomenal, then it is highly unlikely (and certainly NOT parsimonious as claimed by critics) that it will manifest itself as a key explanatory variable in models of a cross-cultural nature. We now examine two general forms of evidence assessing self efficacy in a cross-cultural context. The first is a main effects approach, in which the construct of self efficacy is associated with performance in a
direct causal fashion. In the second, self efficacy again plays a direct role in influencing performance, but it is differentially influenced by some aspect of culture used as a moderating variable. This latter form of evidence is particularly compelling in favor of efficacy as a cognitive construct given that it not only presumes the presence of main effects, but also makes precise predictions concerning the presence or absence of an effect on efficacy as driven by a conceptual framework of culture.

Specific Evidence of Self Efficacy

In understanding the emic versus etic significance of self efficacy, we begin by examining a sample of the empirical evidence in support of efficacy from a cross-cultural perspective. There are a number of recent studies that have employed self efficacy as a key construct in understanding behavior across cultures.

Direct effects. Singer (1993) examined the relative contribution of self efficacy and valence expectancies in the career choices of overseas Asian students. He studied a sample of 205 male students from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand who were studying at various educational institutions in Australia using a questionnaire assessment of their overall desire to work in Australia versus their home country; instrumentality and valence expectancies for 16 outcomes for working in Australia versus their home country; and the associated self efficacy expectations. He found that the best predictor of the respondents’ desire to work in a given locale was self efficacy. Specifically, he found that the case-of-success self efficacy variable was a key determinant of the level of overall desire to return home for those students with greater desire to do so, and that the effectiveness self efficacy scores were the single determinant of the overall desire to stay in Australia for those individuals determined to do so. Vrugt (1994) examined the relative importance of self efficacy and positive feelings of students regarding their skills in the prediction of academic performance for a sample of 206 students from the Netherlands. His findings demonstrate that self efficacy was correlated with participants’ feelings about their study skills, and that these feelings significantly predicted performance.

In a conceptual approach, Spindler and Spindler (1989) utilized Bandura’s efficacy concept in describing the adaptation behaviors of the Menominee Indians as they confronted Western culture. They argue that the situation specificity of self efficacy is useful for understanding various specific actions, but that a more general, and enduring, self concept is useful as well in predicting minority children’s reactions to school and home. Likewise, Erez and Earley (1993) utilize self efficacy as a core aspect of their cultural self-representation model. They posit that an individual’s behavior is motivated by three basic motives, namely, self enhancement, self efficacy, and self consistency. They argue that although these motives are universals, the specific satisfaction of each motive depends on its relative salience based on an individual’s unique experiences and cultural background. A similar argument is posited by Triandis (1989) in his sampling theory of cultural influence.

Moderating Influences. In her sample of 76 Francophone Canadians, Bouffard-Bouchard (1994) found that self efficacy was positively related to reading performance except for individuals whose awareness of existing task-specific strategies was increased by experimental manipulation. Her results, that awareness of task-specific resources operates independently of self efficacy in contributing to performance, demonstrate that self efficacy has a causal effect on performance that is different than the reinforcement of behavioral strategies. This suggests that cultural background or individual experience may lead to the presence of an effect on efficacy in contributing to performance.

Earley (1993, 1994) has examined the concept of self and group efficacy in samples of managers from the United States, People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong, and Israel. In general, his
results are supportive of the universality of the efficacy → behavior linkage at both the individual and group-levels of analysis. For instance, Earley (1994) looked at the relative effectiveness of individual versus ingroup training on self efficacy and work performance. In a laboratory and a field experiment, he manipulated training style and assessed its impact on efficacy and performance using the cultural value of individualism versus collectivism as a potential moderating variable. Results demonstrate that task training that was consistent with an individual’s cultural values (e.g., group-based training given to a collectivist) led to significantly higher efficacy and performance than training that was inconsistent with these values.

Earley, Gibson, and Chen (1995) provide additional support for the generality of self efficacy. In a laboratory study of American, Chinese, and Czech managers working on a performance appraisal task, they found that subjects presented with individual and group-related performance information differentially used this feedback in forming their subsequent efficacy judgements. More specifically, they found that individualists who were presented with individual and group performance feedback only increased their self efficacy if the feedback demonstrated individual success in contrast to group failure. For collectivists, only if individual and group feedback both demonstrated success did self efficacy increase.

Finally, Gibson (1995) examined the importance of group efficacy in the prediction of group task performance in the United States, Indonesia, and Hong Kong in a study conducted in both laboratory and field settings. Her findings appear to provide mixed support for the contribution of efficacy to performance at a group level. She found that group efficacy was positively related to group performance in her laboratory experiment (conducted in the United States and Hong Kong) and her field study (conducted in the United States and Indonesia), but only at an individual- and not a group-level of analysis. (This likely reflects a power issue given that she had relatively small samples at a group level from each country.)

General Considerations

The evidence we have presented to this point suggests that self efficacy (and its conceptual counterpart at the group level) is consistently associated with performance across many cultural contexts. The main effects evidence presented in Singer (1993) demonstrates a simple, but powerful, relationship of external influences on individual action mediated by self efficacy. This relationship is, of course, obvious based on the extensive evidence arising from Western literature (primarily the United States). However, these examples demonstrate that this relationship is valid in a wide variety of cultural contexts. In addition, the concept of self efficacy is a central one in a number of conceptual frameworks used to explain behavior across cultural settings.

Perhaps more compelling is the evidence presented by the moderating frameworks proposed and tested by Bouffard-Bouchard (1994), Earley and his colleagues (1993, 1994; Earley et al., 1995), and Gibson (1995). In these studies, self efficacy is not only posited to provide a main effects influence on behavior, but there are specific cultural variables that are introduced as moderators of this relationship. An example of this form of relationship is presented in Figure 1. In the top half of the Figure, a basic form of relationship is presented as a direct effects model. The fundamental relationship suggests that job training influences self efficacy which, in turn, influences an individual’s work performance — a relationship well supported by the efficacy literature in the United States (e.g., Gist, 1987; Wood & Bandura, 1989). The bottom half of the Figure illustrates the introduction of a cultural moderator, namely, individualism-collectivism. In the case of an individualistic culture, job training that is focused on the individual employee is posited to have its greatest influence on self efficacy, whereas for a collectivistic culture job training focused on an employee’s ingroup is posited to have its greatest influence on self efficacy.

It might appear that behavioristic view of training can easily explain these differences
Main effects model:

Job training → Self-efficacy → Performance

Moderating effects model:

Collectivism/individualism

Job training → Self-efficacy → Performance

Figure 1. Main and moderating influence of cultural context on efficacy and performance.

captured in Figure 1 without the need to introduce an unobservable construct such as self efficacy. In other words, it may be argued that the common experiences (reward contingencies) of people from a given society lead to a similar form of job training, within culture, being effective in enhancing performance. In essence, this is the nature of "culture" according to Skinner (1953) — a shared set of reward and punishment contingencies. However, the analysis presented by Earley (1993, 1994) provides evidence that is not easily reconciled with this behavioristic approach. Specifically, Earley analyzed his data at an individual-level of analysis in which his cultural moderator, individualism-collectivism, was not synonymous with country-of-origin. He tested his model using the cultural variable measured as a set of individual beliefs, and not simply using country as a surrogate for culture. One implication of this procedure is that multiple countries are sampled in order to increase variability of distribution for a given cultural characteristic (Leung & Bond, 1989; Earley & Mosakowski, 1995) suggesting that the importance of nation-states is to increase power detecting cultural effects. This means that within a given country there exists a range, albeit somewhat limited in breadth, of values on a given cultural variable manifest at an individual level. Therefore, the moderating effect that Earley observed across countries should be present within a given country as well even though it may be attenuated given a range restriction problem. This proposition was supported in the studies conducted by Earley (1993, 1994). More importantly for our paper, this suggests that individuals from the same country, and hence, exposed to similar reward and punishment contingencies, exhibit drastically different responses (job performances) to similar antecedent conditions (job training manipulations). A staunch behaviorist might posit that the precise experiences of individuals coming from the same country are not identical, and that this variability leads to different reinforcement histories related to different reactions to similar job training exposure. This explanation would be valid if we additionally assume that these unique experiences consistently gave rise to covarying levels of individualism-collectivism (presumably illusory as is efficacy). However, this rather post hoc and convoluted explanation seems to be quite a bit less parsimonious than the simple assertion of a cognitive construct such as self efficacy. Quite to the contrary of Hawkins’ (1992) and Lee’s (1992) assertions, the introduction of self efficacy in a cultural context provides more, and not less, parsimony of explanation.

What this suggests is that self efficacy as
illusion or epiphenomenon would not only need to operate consistently despite very different cultural contexts, but that it would have to operate differentially contingent on specific aspects of cultures as well. Such an occurrence might be posited, but it seems extremely unlikely that such an artifact would arise in highly diverse cultures. Additionally, it is even less likely that such an artifact would operate as a consistent covariate of cultural values such as individualism versus collectivism.

As we suggested at the outset, our single commentary cannot possibly address the complexity of the debate concerning the utility of cognitive constructs in understanding human behavior. Rather than address the mainstream debate well captured by others’ work (e.g., Bandura, this issue; Locke & Latham, 1990), we chose to examine this debate concerning self-efficacy from a somewhat different perspective, namely, the cross-cultural implications of cognitive constructs for understanding emics and etics. Our description of several examplar studies is not intended to be comprehensive, but it is meant to be illustrative of the findings related to self-efficacy in various cultures. Clearly, there is a strong and parsimonious role for a construct such as self-efficacy to play in a conceptual framework of culture and work behavior. As Mead (1928) and others contend, it is through cross-cultural experiences that we are best able to understand the significance and meaning of our indigenous theories of human behavior. Perhaps the contextualizing of individual action in the richness of a cultural framework would provide yet even more compelling evidence for the meaningfulness of cognitive constructs in psychological theory. Additionally, it may be that through the limitations imposed by a behavioristic interpretation of action, the richness of culture and society has been lost.

References


