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CT **Epistemic Functions of Culture**

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[CT] **Epistemic Functions of Culture**[CA] MELODY MANCHI CHAO AND CHI-YUE CHIU²

Norms prescribe culturally appropriate behaviors and proscribe inappropriate ones (see Chapter 4, this volume), but why do individuals follow cultural norms? One answer to this question, informed by the theory of lay epistemic ([Kruglanski, 2004](#)), holds that people adhere to cultural norms because norms are closure providers; they are widely accepted behavior standards within a given culture ([Chao, Zhang, & Chiu, 2009](#); [Chiu, Morris, Hong, & Menon, 2000](#); Fu, Morris, [Lee, et al., 2007](#)). According to the lay epistemic theory ([Kruglanski, 2004](#)), the need for cognitive closure (NFCC) is a basic epistemic motive. Individuals who have high NFCC have the need to reduce uncertainty and to hold on to firm answers for questions. Because cultural norms are consensually validated social knowledge, they help reduce uncertainty and provide firm answers to otherwise ambiguous issues. In the present chapter, we will discuss the epistemic functions of culture, focusing on how cultural knowledge can serve as closure providers that confer epistemic security.

[A] **EPISTEMIC NEED: NFCC**

The lay epistemic theory ([Kruglanski, 2004](#)) posits that individuals have a basic desire for cognitive closure (the need for order, predictability, and certainty). People differ in how much they desire cognitive closure. Thus, NFCC can be measured as a

chronic individual difference (Webster and Kruglanski, 1994). Individuals with high NFCC are characterized by a felt urgency to seize a firm answer in the face of uncertainty and freeze on the answer once they have found it (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996).

NFCC has strong effects on information processing, judgment, and behaviors in interpersonal contexts. It has been shown that individuals who have high NFCC are more likely to rely on stereotypical information (a kind of conventional knowledge) in person perception (Dijksterhuis, Van Knippenberg, Kruglanski, and Schaper, 1996). In interpersonal communication, individuals with high NFCC also tend to adhere to their dominant communication strategies and tend not to accommodate their communication style to the unique attributes of their interaction partners (Richter & Kruglanski, 1999). Furthermore, in negotiation, high NFCC individuals also tend to rely on stereotypes when rendering judgments of and interacting with their negotiation partner, and tend not to make concessions (De Dreu, Koole, & Oldersma, 1999). In short, individuals with high NFCC tend to rely on established knowledge to structure their experiences. In the face of ambiguity, they have an urgency to seize information that can help to reach a decision. After a judgment is formed, they would close their mind to novel information (e.g., Kruglanski, 2004; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Webster & Kruglanski, 1998; also see Chapters 13 and 14, this volume).

Because group norms – particularly norms in a homogeneous group – are established behavior guides with high consensual validity (Kruglanski, Pierro,

Mannetti, & de Grada, 2006), high NFCC individuals are attracted to homogeneous groups and group consensus (Kruglanski, Shah, Pierro, & Mannetti, 2002), and these individuals would readily conform to group consensus. They also tend to resist changes and to exclude deviates (Kruglanski & Webster, 1991).

A EPISTEMIC NEED AND CULTURE

Like group norms, cultural norms are also closure providers. They are evolved tools to guide individuals' actions and enable individuals to grasp experiences (Chiu et al., 2000). Certain norms are prevalent in a culture because members of the culture generally agree that they are appropriate for solving problems. Given their consensual validity, conventional ideas and norms constitute a shared reality for the individual (Sechrist & Stangor, 2001). Hence, responses that follow these ideas or norms will be readily accepted in the culture as legitimate and appropriate. In this sense, conventional ideas and cultural norms confer epistemic security and have a strong appeal to high NFCC individuals who desire certain and definite answers (e.g. Chiu et al., 2000).

Supportive evidence for this idea abounds. In the domain of person perception, it has been shown that, compared to each other, Americans are more likely to make dispositional attributions to the individual, and Chinese are more likely to make dispositional attributions to the group (Menon, Morris, Chiu, & Hong, 1999). In one study, Chiu and colleagues (2000; Study 1) presented Hong Kong Chinese and American participants with two accidents that occurred in pharmacies. In a fever medicine mix-up scenario, children were given mouthwash to drink instead

of their prescribed syrup by a pharmacist, and many children became sick. In the second scenario, a pharmacy worker failed to dilute cough medicine, resulting in patients' sickness. After reading the scenarios, participants responded to the attribution items, which depicted dispositions of an individual agent (e.g., the pharmacist) or dispositions of a collective agent (e.g., the hospital). They also completed the Need for Cognitive Closure Scale that assessed their level of cognitive closure ([Webster & Kruglanski, 1994](#)). As expected, the Chinese participants were more likely to make dispositional attribution to the group than to the individual whereas the American participants were more likely to make dispositional attribution to the individual than to the group. More importantly, these cultural differences were more pronounced among participants with high NFCC.

This effect of NFCC on cultural conformity was replicated in another study ([Chiu et al., 2000](#), Study 2) in which NFCC was experimentally manipulated. In this study, Hong Kong Chinese and American participants were asked to respond to a "rouge cattle" scenario ([Menon et al., 1999](#)) in which an agitated bull on a cattle farm charged directly at the farmer. The vignette was constructed to assess the tendency to make dispositional attribution of the incident to an individual bull and dispositional attribution to the herd. Participants' NFCC was manipulated by inducing time pressure, because people tend to prefer a firm answer when they work under time pressure ([De Dreu, 2003](#)). In the high-time-pressure condition, participants were led to believe that they needed to finish the questionnaire quickly to complete the study on time and were reminded of the time every three minutes. In the low-time-pressure

condition, participants were told that they had more than enough time to complete the questionnaire and could take their time. As predicted, only the participants in the high-time-pressure condition followed the prevalent norms in their culture when making attributions. That is, when put under high time pressure, Chinese participants made more dispositional attributions to the group than to the individual, and American participants made more dispositional attributions to the individual than to the group. These cultural differences were not observed when the participants were not under time pressure.

Convergent results have been reported in the domain of justice behaviors. There are marked differences between justice norms in Eastern and Western cultures. For example, compared to individuals in Western cultures, those in Eastern cultures have stronger preferences for conflict resolution strategies that maintain social harmony and reduce animosity between the disputants (Leung, 1987). Relative to Westerners, Easterners are also more likely to make compromises (Gelfand et al., 2001; Sullivan, Peterson, Kameda, and Shimada, 1981) and are more concerned about “blending in” when making justice judgment (Gelfand et al., 2001; also see Chapter 11, this volume). These divergent conflict resolution goals in Eastern and Western cultures are also reflected in the preferred procedures to manage conflicts (Leung and Morris, 2001): Easterners tend to look for relational information regarding the anticipated effects of taking various managerial actions on the involved parties for the purpose of finding a settlement that is acceptable to the disputants. In contrast, Westerners tend to look for diagnostic information that would reveal the

truth for the purpose of identifying the wrongdoers and mete out punishment (Fu, Morris, Lee et al., 2007). In addition, in reward allocation situations, compared to each other, Westerners prefer the contribution rule that fosters productivity more, whereas Easterners favor the equality principle that promotes social harmony more (e.g., Chiu & Hong, 1997; Leung & Bond, 1984). These established justice norms in Eastern and Western cultures possess high consensual validity in the respective culture; hence, they offer epistemic security to their followers. As such, individuals with high NFCC are particularly likely to follow the prevalent justice norms in their culture (Chao et al., 2009; Fu, Morris, Lee, et al., 2007).

In a study that examined NFCC and preference of conflict resolution style (Fu, Morris, Lee, et al., 2007), 175 Chinese students in Hong Kong and 160 American students in the United States completed a survey that assessed their need for closure (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994) and preferences for five conflict management styles (Rahim, 1983): competing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating. Previous cross-cultural studies have found that compared with Chinese persons, Americans prefer the competing style more (Morris et al., 1998). Results from the study by Fu, Morris, Lee, and colleagues (2007) showed that this cultural difference was particularly pronounced among high NFCC participants, suggesting that high NFCC Americans and Chinese persons are particularly motivated to follow the conflict resolution norms in their own culture.

In another study (Fu, Morris, Lee, et al., 2007), 58 Hong Kong Chinese students and 57 American students responded to a conflict scenario after completing

the Need For Cognitive Closure Scale ([Webster & Kruglanski, 1994](#)). The vignette depicted a dispute between two associate managers in the marketing division of a firm. They had a dispute over who deserved credit for an idea and agreed to find a third party to help settle the dispute. Participants took the role of one of the disputants in the situation and were asked to indicate their preference for one of four managers who could be approached as a conflict mediator. Two candidates were common friends of the disputants and two were not. Previous studies have found that Chinese persons preferred a mediator who had an existing relationship with the disputants, believing that a mediator who knows both parties well can reduce animosity between the disputants ([Leung, 1987](#)). Consistent with this finding, Fu and her colleagues found that Chinese participants preferred mediators who knew both disputants well more than did American participants. More importantly, this cultural difference was more pronounced among high (vs. low) NFCC participants. Follow-up mediation analysis results revealed that consensus expectancy mediated the interaction of culture and NFCC on mediator selection, suggesting that high (vs. low) NFCC individuals are particularly motivated to follow cultural norms, which are consensually validated cultural knowledge.

The same result came from a third study ([Fu, Morris, Lee, et al., 2007](#)) that examined cultural differences in information seeking in conflict management settings. In this study, Asian- and European-American participants completed the need for closure measures ([Webster & Kruglanski, 1994](#)) and responded to two conflict scenarios. They were assigned to take the role of midlevel managers in two

conflict situations. One scenario depicted a conflict between a pharmacist at a drugstore and a client who felt sick after taking the medicine he bought from the store. The other scenario described an authorship dispute between two university professors. In the drugstore scenario, Sue, a manager of a drug chain store, was assigned to handle a dispute between a pharmacist and a customer who felt sick after taking the medicine bought from the store. After reading the scenario, participants were shown seven pieces of diagnostic information and six pieces of relational information. Diagnostic information was useful for deciding the disputants' causal responsibility in the incident (e.g., whether the pharmacist had a record of making similar mistakes), and relational information was useful for assessing the potential interpersonal impact of a certain way of handling the conflict (e.g., how the pharmacist's coworkers would feel if the pharmacist was fired). The participants were instructed to take the perspective of Sue. For each information item, they rated on 6-point scale how important it was to have that information to resolve the conflict.

In the second scenario, Johnson, a university professor, was assigned to settle an authorship dispute between two university professors. After reading the scenario, participants took the role of Johnson and rated the perceived importance of five pieces of diagnostic information (e.g., Was there evidence that could help to determine who was telling the truth?) and six pieces of relational information (e.g., How much concession was Yang/Jones willing to make?) for resolving the conflict. Consistent with previous research findings, compared to each other, European Americans considered diagnostic information to be more important, whereas Asian

Americans found relational information to be more important. Again, this cultural effect was more pronounced among high (vs. low) NFCC participants.

Consistent results were also obtained in a study conducted in a reward allocation setting (Fu, Morris, Lee, et al., 2007). In this study, culture was experimentally manipulated among Hong Kong Chinese participants. Previous research has shown that due to Hong Kong's cosmopolitan environment, both Chinese and Western norms are prevalent in this city (Fu, Chiu, Morris, & Young, 2007). Consequently, it is possible to increase the salience of Chinese or Western norms to Hong Kong Chinese persons by priming them with Chinese or Western culture (presenting to them iconic symbols of Chinese or Western cultures; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). As mentioned, the norms governing reward allocation are different in American and Chinese cultures, with American norms emphasizing contribution more and Chinese norms emphasizing equality more (Leung & Bond, 1984). Consistent with this cultural difference, Hong Kong Chinese persons adhered to the equality rule more when primed with Chinese culture and the contribution rule more when primed with American culture. Again, this culture-priming effect was particularly pronounced among persons with high NFCC.

In sum, there is consistent evidence that individuals with high NFCC are more likely to adhere to the prevailing norms in their own culture, possibly because cultural norms, being established behavioral guides in the culture, confer epistemic security. A question remains: Would norms in a foreign culture also provide closure

to high NFCC individuals when these individuals interact with others in a foreign future? We now turn to this question.

[A] EPISTEMIC NEED IN TRANSCULTURAL CONTEXTS

[B] NFCC and Cultural Assimilation

As mentioned, cultural norms offer epistemic protection against unpredictability, ambiguity, and uncertainty (Chiu et al., 2000; Fu, Morris, Lee et al., 2007; Kruglanski, 2004). The norms in one's native culture, however, would have questionable epistemic utility in transcultural contexts, where individuals interact with people from other cultures. This is the case because norms in one's native culture may not be widely accepted in foreign cultures, particularly in cultures whose cultural traditions are markedly different from those in the native culture. Given the low consensual validity of native cultural norms in foreign cultures, high NFCC individuals should be particularly motivated to follow the norms in foreign cultures instead of adhering to the norms in their own culture when interacting with people from foreign cultures.

Results from several acculturation studies (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Kosic, Kruglanski, Pierro, & Mannetti, 2004) are consistent with this idea. In a series of studies, Kosic and colleagues (2004) surveyed 157 Croatian immigrants (Study 1) and 162 Polish immigrants (Study 2) residing in Rome, Italy. When immigrants move to a new country, they face a lot of uncertainty and rely on the norms in their reference group to provide behavioral guides. Thus, to the new immigrants, norms in their reference group are closure providers. In the immigration studies, participants

were asked to respond to a questionnaire that assessed what their initial reference group was when they first immigrated to Rome from their own country. Their acculturation strategies and NFCC were also assessed.

Because high NFCC individuals desire closure, they should be motivated to adhere to the behavioral norms in their reference group. Indeed, when the immigrants' initial reference group was made up of mainly host nationals (i.e., Italians), high (vs. low) NFCC immigrants were more motivated to assimilate to the Italian culture. When the immigrants' initial reference group was made up of their coethnics, however, high (vs. low) NFCC immigrants were more motivated to adhere to the norms in their native culture and were relatively slow in assimilating into the Italian culture.

In another study ([Kashima & Loh, 2006](#)), when Polish immigrants were asked to express their attitude toward different acculturation strategies, those with high (vs. low) NFCC rated assimilation more favorably and separation more negatively if they had many social connections with host nationals. Contrarily, high NFCC immigrants rated separation favorably and assimilation unfavorably if they had many social ties with their coethnics. For immigrants, norms in their social networks are closure providers. Thus, Polish immigrants who desire epistemic security would feel inclined to follow the norms in their social network.

The same results were obtained among Asian students studying in Australia. In one study ([Kashima & Loh, 2006](#)), 100 Asian international students responded to a questionnaire that assessed their social ties in Australia, their psychological and

sociocultural adjustment in the host culture, and individual differences in NFCC. Among students with high NFCC, the more social ties they had with host nationals (i.e., Australians), the better they adjusted to Australian culture, presumably because these students were motivated to assimilate into the host culture.

In short, individuals who desire firm answers are motivated to follow cultural norms that confer epistemic security. When new immigrants' reference group and social network are composed of mostly host nationals, the norms in the host culture confer epistemic security and high NFCC individuals would tend to follow norms in the host culture instead of those in their native culture. Conversely, when the reference group and social network are mostly composed of coethnics, the norms in the native culture confer epistemic security and high NFCC individuals would tend to follow norms in the native culture instead of those in their host culture.

B Effects of Cultural Identification

Culture also serves self-definition needs (see Chapter 7, this volume). Individuals who define the self vis-à-vis their cultural tradition (i.e., those with strong cultural identification) are likely to follow the norms in their culture. This may apply, however, to interactions in the local cultural contexts only.

According to social identity theory, individuals with strong ingroup identification tend to attribute to the self and other ingroup members the ingroup's defining characteristics and expect ingroup members to adhere to the ingroup norms (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). At the same time, high identifiers also seek to distinguish outgroups from the

ingroup. Thus, they would attribute characteristics that are markedly different from the prototypic ingroup features to the outgroups and expect outgroup members to follow outgroup norms (Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1996). Accordingly, ingroup identification should increase the perceived homogeneity of both the ingroup and the outgroup and enhance the salience of between-group differences (Denson, Lickel, Curtis, Stenstrom, & Ames, 2006; Lickel, Miller, Stenstrom, Denson, & Schmader, 2006; Turner & Oakes, 1989). That is, compared with low identifiers, individuals who highly identify with their own culture are more likely to perceive intercultural boundaries as discrete (see Chapters 12 and 13, this volume). Consequently, relative to low identifiers, high identifiers would perceive (a) norms in their own culture to be better closure providers in local cultural contexts and (b) norms in foreign cultures to be better closure providers in foreign cultural contexts. This analysis implies that ingroup cultural identification should enhance high NFCC individuals' conformity to the local norms in the culture where the interaction takes place (Chao et al., 2009).

Recent evidence supports these predictions. In one study, Chao and colleagues (2009, Study 1) examined the effects of NFCC and cultural identification on the way European-American students manage conflicts in the United States and China. They assessed participants' NFCC (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994) and identification with American culture (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989). Next, the participants responded to modified versions of the two conflict situations – the drugstore scenario and the authorship dispute scenario – used in the study by Fu, Morris, Lee and colleagues (2007, Study 2). In the drugstore scenario, Sue was

depicted as a New Jersey–born European-American manager of a drug store. She was assigned to handle a dispute between a pharmacist and a customer who felt sick after taking medicine bought from the store. In the U.S. condition, the participants were told that, because the chain store expanded, Sue was relocated to a branch in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and was now the manager there. The conflict involved the pharmacist Donna and the customer Chris and took place in the Pittsburgh branch. In the China condition, the participants were told that Sue was relocated to a branch in China because the chain store expanded and that the conflict involved the pharmacist Xue-lin and the customer Dong. After reading the scenario, the participants were told to take the role of Sue and handle the situation. As in the study by Fu, Morris, Lee and colleagues (2007), the participants were presented with diagnostic information and relational information and were asked to rate how important it was to have each kind of information to resolve the conflict.

In the authorship dispute scenario, Johnson, a university professor, was assigned to settle an authorship dispute between two university professors. In the U.S. condition, the participants learned that Johnson accepted a job offer from a big research university in California and was now the head of the Department of Alternative Medicine in the university. The conflict took place in this university between Professor Jones of Golden Gate University and Professor Tony Smith in Johnson's department. In the China condition, participants learned that Johnson accepted a job offer from a big research University in China and that the conflict took place between Professor Yang of Zhongyuen University and Professor Huei Chen in

Johnson's department. Participants were told to take the role of Johnson and rate the perceived importance of diagnostic information and relational information for resolving the conflict.

Results of a pretest showed that American students were aware of the different normative expectations in American and Chinese contexts. When asked to indicate how American or Chinese managers would handle the drugstore conflict if the conflict occurred in the United States or China, the 52 American participants who took the pretest expected that American managers would seek out diagnostic information when handling conflict situations in the United States and that Chinese managers would seek out relational information when the conflict took place in China.

The results from the main study revealed that, as expected, high (vs. low) NFCC American students were more inclined to follow the American norm of seeking diagnostic information when handling the conflict in the United States and to follow the Chinese norm of seeking relational information when handling the conflict in China. More importantly, the NFCC effects on conformity to American norms in American contexts and Chinese norms in Chinese contexts were more pronounced among persons who strongly identify with American culture.

Results from another study conducted in China provided convergent evidence for the effects of NFCC and cultural identification on cultural norm adherence. In this study ([Chao et al., 2009](#), Study 2), the participants were 241 Chinese Master of Business Administration (MBA) students in Beijing who responded to a reward

allocation situation that took place in China or the United States. All the participants had at least five years of work experience. In the China condition, participants were told that Chen Dong was a manager of the sales department of a company. Because the company expanded, he was relocated to Nan Zhou, China. One day, he asked his accountants Li Jian and He Bo Li to figure out the department's performance, and promised to reward them for their overtime work. The participants were told that Li Jian worked hard and was able to finish work twice as much work as He Bo Li. In the U.S. condition, Chen Dong was relocated to Chicago, Illinois, as the company expanded, and the reward was to be allocated between Jim Smith and Peter Hudson.

After reading the scenario, participants were asked to estimate how the two employees in the scenario would allocate the reward if they were given the money to allocate among themselves. Results confirmed that participants were aware of a well-documented cultural difference in normative expectations (Chiu & Hong, 1997; [Leung & Bond, 1984](#); see Chapter 11, this volume): They expected the two American employees to follow the contribution rule to motivate job performance and Chinese employees to follow the equality rule to maintain a good coworker relationship. Furthermore, consistent with the social identity theory – which predicts that ingroup cultural identification would increase the salience of perceived cultural differences ([Turner & Oakes, 1989](#)), participants who more strongly identified with Chinese culture tended to perceive greater cultural differences between the allocation norms in American and Chinese cultures: They believed that most Americans valued productivity and that most Chinese persons valued harmony.

Next, half of the participants in the China condition and half in the U.S. condition were assigned to one of the two allocation goal conditions. In the productivity condition, participants were told that, when distributing the reward, the manager sought to promote productivity. In the harmony condition they learned that the manager's allocation goal was to promote interpersonal harmony. For example, participants in the China-productivity condition were told that Chen Dong wanted to improve productivity, and they believed that his allocation decision would motivate Li Jian and He Bo Li to work harder and increase productivity in the future. Participants in the China-harmony condition were told that Chen Dong wanted to promote coworker relationships in the company, and they believed that his allocation decision would make Li Jian and He Bo Li enjoy working together more in the future.

After reading the allocation method of Chen Dong, participants evaluated his allocation decision in terms of its perceived fairness, desirability, and appropriateness. As expected, participants with high (vs. low) NFCC evaluated the allocation more favorably when the manager followed the American norm of promoting productivity in the American context and when the manager followed the Chinese norm of promoting harmony in the Chinese context. Furthermore, these effects of NFCC on norm adherence were more pronounced among persons who more strongly identified with Chinese culture.

In sum, cultural norms confer epistemic security through their consensual validity. Factors that increase the perceived consensual validity of cultural norms

should also enhance the utility of cultural norms as a closure provider. Ingroup cultural identification may increase the perceived consensual validity of local cultural norms in local cultural contexts and foreign cultural norms in foreign cultural contexts. Individuals with high NFCC desire closure. Thus, they are motivated to follow local cultural norms in local cultural contexts, as well as foreign cultural norms in foreign cultural contexts, particularly among persons who have high levels of ingroup cultural identification.

A CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, using individual differences in the need for firm answer as an example, we sought to illustrate the epistemic function of culture. Specifically, by virtue of its high level of consensual validity, cultural norms offer members of a culture firm answers and widely accepted behavioral guides. They reduce ambiguity and uncertainty in social interactions and confer epistemic security. Thus, individuals who have high NFC are particularly likely to follow cultural norms.

This analysis also indicates that people do not always adhere to the cultural norms in their own culture. Indeed, in situations in which norms in their own culture can no longer confer epistemic security, individuals, particularly those with high NFCC, tend not to follow these norms. This is the case for new immigrants whose social network and reference group consist primarily of host nationals. This is also the case in transcultural interactions. Indeed, under these circumstances, individuals who desire firm answers are the first to follow norms in a foreign culture because foreign norms are better able to confer epistemic security.

Our analysis challenges the idea that cultural conformity is always an indication of passivity and submission. Rather, cultural conformity can be an expression of personal NFCC. This analysis also accounts for individual and situational variations in cultural norm conformance within a culture. Individuals vary in NFCC, and situations vary in the salience of NFCC. Thus, within a culture, some people (e.g., high NFCC individuals) are more likely than others to follow cultural norms, and some situations (e.g., high time pressure) are more likely than others to elicit cultural conformity.

We show that high NFCC individuals are relatively likely to follow cultural norms. It should be emphasized, however, that cultural conformity does not always lead to cultural competence. This is particularly the case in transcultural interactions. When interacting with foreign nationals, high NFCC individuals may be inclined to follow the cultural norms in the foreigners' culture. If these individuals do not possess a nuanced understanding of the relevant cultural differences, however, they are likely to act on their stereotypes rather than accurate representations of foreign cultures. As a result, quality of the transcultural interactions will suffer (see Chapter 13, this volume). Furthermore, situation-specific behavioral expectations in a concrete interaction may deviate from global cultural norms. In this kind of situations, individuals who indiscriminately follow cultural norms will not function effectively.

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Footnotes

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