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Fairness Or Compassion? Cultural Differences in Power Norms Affect Judgments of Power-Holders

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This research demonstrates that European Americans (Hispanics) are predisposed to apply to power-holders injunctive norms of fairness (compassion). These cultural variations were more evident when power was salient, and emerged in the norms more likely to be endorsed, the approval of hypothetical negotiators, and the evaluations of powerful service providers.

[to cite]:

Allyson Holbrook, Carlos J. Torelli, Noel Chavez, Sharon Shavitt, Timothy Johnson, and Young Ik Cho (2013) ,"Fairness Or Compassion? Cultural Differences in Power Norms Affect Judgments of Power-Holders", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 41, eds. Simona Botti and Aparna Labroo, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1015311/volumes/v41/NA-41>

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Fairness or Compassion? Cultural Differences in Power Norms Affect Judgments of Power-Holders

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Cultures appear to differ in the degree to which they nurture personalized versus socialized power concepts (Torelli and Shavitt 2010). European Americans seem more likely to conceptualize power as something to be used for advancing one's personal agenda, and obtaining praise and admiration from others (i.e., a *personalized* power concept). In contrast, Hispanics appear more likely to foster a view of power as something to be used for helping and benefitting others (i.e., a *socialized* power concept). However, little is known about the role of social norms in carrying and reinforcing such cultural patterns. We address this issue in the current research.

Social norms are a central concept in the study of human social behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975) and the study of cultures (Triandis 1995, 1996). The term *norm* can refer to what is commonly done by people in a group (i.e., descriptive norms) or to conduct that commonly earns approval or disapproval (i.e., injunctive norms). Although what is approved is typically what is done, descriptive and injunctive norms are conceptually and motivationally distinct (Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren 1990). This distinction seems particularly relevant when discussing the norms applied to power-holders. We propose that descriptive and injunctive norms applied to power-holders will not necessarily correspond. Because self-centered power-holders have the potential to negatively impact those around them by maximizing their personal gain at the expense of others', societies that foster a personalized view of power should fear the consequences of excessive power that goes unchecked. This is evident in the political system of checks and balances contained in the American Constitution—aimed at assuring fairness in the use of power by the different branches of government. Thus, mainstream European Americans, because they are seen as more strongly embodying North American culture (Devos and Banaji 2005), may be especially likely to apply injunctive norms of fairness when judging the interactions of power-holders with others.

As important as fairness norms are, research suggests that compassion can sometimes override fairness, particularly when notions of compassion are made salient (Batson et al. 1995). We propose that Hispanics who hold a socialized view of power for the benefit of others would be predisposed to apply injunctive norms of compassion to power-holders. A power-holder who focuses on helping those around him or her does not represent a social threat that needs to be deterred. On the contrary, people generally approve of benevolent power-holders (Frieze and Boneva 2001). Thus, we expect that Hispanics will apply to power-holders injunctive norms of compassion when judging their interactions with others.

An important characteristic of social norms is that, although they serve an important role in guiding behavior within a society, they are more likely to do so when they are made salient by environmental stimuli (Cialdini et al. 1990). Accordingly, cultural differences in the application of injunctive norms are more likely to emerge in situations that render these norms salient (Fu et al. 2007). We further suggest that cues that prime power should increase the salience of

the culturally associated injunctive norms and thereby increase the focus on these normative considerations for judging a power-holder. Thus, when power is salient (versus not salient) European Americans should rely more on notions of fairness for evaluating power-holders' actions, whereas Hispanics should focus more on notions of compassion in the same context.

Study 1 tested the basic contention that European Americans and Hispanics differ in the injunctive norms applied to power-holders. European American and Hispanic participants indicated the extent to which they believed that power-holders should embody three personal characteristics that were selected to represent fairness, and three personal characteristics selected to represent compassion. After that, they were presented with three pairs of characteristics designed to pit fairness against compassion (sympathetic vs. fair, ambitious vs. friendly, and thorough vs. good-natured), and asked to choose the one from each pair that they believe "it is a must" for power-holders to have. Results showed that European Americans believe that power-holders should embody more fairness than compassion characteristics, whereas Hispanics believe that power-holders should embody more compassion than fairness characteristics. European Americans (Hispanics) were also much more likely to choose characteristics of fairness (compassion) versus compassion (fairness) as "must haves" for power-holders.

Study 2 extends the findings to a negotiation context and provides evidence that power activated culturally distinct injunctive norms associated with power. Participants were first presented with a task designed either to make notions of power salient (power condition) or not (neutral condition). Participants were presented then with a negotiation task in which a powerful negotiator behaved in either a fair or compassionate way, and then evaluated the negotiator. When power was made salient (vs. not), European Americans (Hispanics) evaluated more favorably the powerful negotiator according to cultural norms of fairness (compassion).

In Study 3 we tested the hypothesis that power salience would cause European Americans (Hispanics) to evaluate power-holders more favorably the more fair (compassionate) they are perceived to be. We did so by investigating people's evaluations of power-holders with whom they have a real-life, on-going and consequential interaction (patient-physician interaction). Results showed that, when power is salient (vs. not), Hispanics evaluate more favorably a power-holder with whom they have an on-going, real relationship to the extent that he/she is perceived as being more compassionate. This effect was absent among European Americans, who evaluated the power-holder non-significantly less favorably as a function of compassionate perceptions when power was made salient (vs. the baseline condition). In contrast, European Americans evaluated non-significantly more favorably the power-holder as a function of perceptions of fairness in the power salient (vs. neutral) condition.

In sum, our research demonstrates that European Americans are predisposed to apply to power-holders injunctive norms of fairness, whereas Hispanics are predisposed to apply injunctive norms of

compassion. These cultural variations in the use of injunctive norms were more evident in situations where power was made salient. These findings have important consequences for service interactions in which notions of power are relevant.

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