

# PROTESTANT RELATIONAL IDEOLOGY: THE COGNITIVE UNDERPINNINGS AND ORGANIZATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF AN AMERICAN ANOMALY

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## ABSTRACT

*Cross-national comparisons of relational work styles suggest that the United States is an anomaly in its low relational focus. This article describes Protestant Relational Ideology (PRI), a cultural construct that explains the origins and nature of this anomaly. This construct refers to a deep-seated belief that affective and relational concerns are considered inappropriate in work settings and, therefore, are to be given less attention than in social, non-work settings. Akin to an institutional imprinting perspective, a review of sociological and historical research links PRI to the beliefs and practices of the founding communities of American society. A social cognition perspective is used to explain the mechanisms through which PRI influences American relational workways. The article also describes a program of research that uses PRI to address a wider set of organizational behavior issues that include: antecedents of prejudice and discrimination in diverse organizations; sources of intercultural miscommunication; beliefs about team*

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*conflict; mental models of “professionalism” and its effect on organizational recruitment and selection.*

[Our] practices and beliefs appear to us natural, permanent, and inevitable, whereas the particular conditions that make them possible often remain invisible.

Asch (1952)

In the corridors of American organizations, “Focus on the task” and “Don’t take things personally” are familiar words of advice, clichés repeated as subtle reminders about what it means to act “professionally.” The message is sometimes stated more bluntly. James Clifton, CEO of The Gallup Organization, tells of how frequently managers raise concerns about one particular item in Gallup’s popular “Q12 Survey” on employee engagement: the one that asks, “Do you have a best friend at work?” As one manager states, “We discourage friendships in the workplace.”<sup>1</sup> These directions for appropriate work behavior reflect a deep-seated sentiment that affective and relational concerns ought to be put aside at work in order to direct one’s attention to the task at hand. To be productive and efficient is *prima facie* to leave personal issues and emotional sensitivity at the office door.

Exceptions to this organizational preference in the United States for maintaining a polite but impersonal work style have been found, primarily in countries outside North America and Northern Europe. In these societies researchers have documented several unique cultural imperatives that specifically encourage people to closely monitor social-emotional cues in virtually all interpersonal situations (Ayman & Chemers, 1983; Diaz-Guerrero, 1967; Earley, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, Marin, Liansky & Betancourt, 1984). The traditional path taken to account for these exceptions has been to generate theory grounded in values and traditions indigenous to their respective cultures. For example, the emphasis on expressive social emotionality and harmony in Mexican culture has been traced to the indigenous cultural value of *simpatia* in Mexican society (Diaz-Guerrero, 1967; Triandis et al., 1984). Chinese preferences to conduct business through a web of loyal interpersonal networks are described as a manifestation of *quanxi* in Chinese society (Bond, 1986; Tsui & Farh, 1997). Familial characteristics of business relations in many Korean organizations are conceptualized with respect to the Korean tradition of *chaebol* (Kim, 1988). Heightened sensitivity among the Japanese to the needs and concerns of others is argued to stem from the central role of *amae* in Japanese society (Doi, 1962). Such cultural studies offer rich theoretical accounts of relational styles abroad that deviate from the impersonal ideal workway of North America and Northern Europe.

What is an exception versus what is the modal tendency, however, is more clearly revealed in comparative research designed to differentiate cultures along

broad relational dimensions. This literature shows that in contrast to American patterns, heightened attention to relational concerns is in fact common across a large and diverse set of societies. For example, independent American self-construals contrast with more relationally sensitive, interdependent Japanese self-construals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). American individualism also stands out from the harmony-focused Chinese collectivism (Bond, 1986; Earley & Gibson, 1998) or the Italian and French emphasis on team goals over an individual's goals (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993). American preferences for task-focused leaders over social-emotional leaders vary from Indian preferences for leaders high in both domains (Kool & Saksena, 1988; Sinha, 1979, 1980). Lack of attention to contextual details and relational cues in communication distinguish American social interactions from high-context Latin American, Chinese and Korean exchanges (Earley, 1997; Hall, 1983; Sanchez-Burks et al., 2003; Ting-Toomey, 1991). The pattern that emerges suggests that mainstream American society is a cultural anomaly in its low degree of relational focus. Across East Asia, Latin America, India, the Middle East and parts of Europe, social-emotional concerns are carefully monitored in virtually all interpersonal situations. One shortcoming of this literature, however, is that a different explanation is offered for every deviation from mainstream American patterns when it appears that it is in fact the American patterns that deviate from the norm.

Anomalies beg to be explained. Moreover, the possibility of an American anomaly in relational work style has important implications for the field given the reliance on primarily American samples to generate and validate theory. What then can explain the origin and psychological nature of what appears to be a peculiar relational work style? This article describes a cultural construct called Protestant Relational Ideology, or PRI (Sanchez-Burks, 2002). This construct will be used to address these questions and to explore several organizational behavior dynamics influenced by an attention to affective and relational concerns in the workplace.

The next section reviews research on interpersonal patterns across cultures to further examine the extent to which mainstream American society appears as a cultural anomaly in its low degree of relational focus. The PRI construct is introduced next, followed by a review of sociological and historical research that links its origins to the ideology and practices of the founding communities of American society. A social cognition perspective is used to explain the mechanisms through which PRI influences workplace perceptions, decisions and behavior. After reviewing experimental evidence validating PRI's main propositions, a program of research is described that uses PRI to address a wider set of issues that include: (1) antecedents of prejudice and discrimination in diverse organizations; (2) sources of intercultural difficulties in communication; (3) cultural variation in

beliefs about team conflict and its implications; and (4) implicit mental models of “professionalism” and its effect on organizational recruitment and selection.

## RELATIONAL STYLES ACROSS CULTURES

There has been a long-standing interest within the social sciences in mapping out variation in how cultures define and structure the nature of interpersonal relations. The definitions of culture that underlie many of these formulations resonate with what the cognitive anthropologist Sperber (1996) describes as community-specific ideas about what is true, good and efficient. As Sumner (1906/1979) argued, these unique *folkways* have a directive and historical force and as such are part of the fundamental building blocks for a society. In short, culture in this area of inquiry refers to “shared understandings made manifest in act and artifact” (Redfield, 1947).

The constructs most often studied by psychologists to capture this variation in relational style include independence-interdependence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994), individualism-collectivism (Hofstede, 1980; Hsu, 1981; Triandis, 1995; Triandis, Malpass & Davidson, 1972) and high context-low context cultures (Hall, 1973, 1976). The construct of independence-interdependence focuses specifically on the nature of the relationship between self and other (Singelis, 1994). Markus and Kitayama (1991) argue that members of interdependent cultures, for example the Japanese and Koreans, place importance on maintaining interpersonal harmony and remain highly attentive to the needs, desires and goals of others in social interactions. In contrast, members of independent cultures such as in the U.S., emphasize individual happiness and focus on how relationships can serve their own needs, desires and goals. Ambady and colleagues (1996) show that whereas Korean managers structure the way they convey information based on the relationship between self and other, Americans are less influenced by the relationship than by the content of the information being conveyed.

Research within the individualism-collectivism tradition makes similar distinctions between self and other but focuses more on the relationship between the individual and the group. Ting-Toomey and colleagues (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Ting-Toomey et al., 1991) have argued that collectivists, more often than individualists, make a large relational investment in in-group members. The collectivism of the Chinese is reflected in their use of language that maintains “face” for self and other – a strategy that reaffirms interpersonal bonds (Earley, 1993; Earley & Erez, 1997; Hu, 1944). Americans instead rely on language that is geared more toward conveying information than toward lubricating social emotional relations within the group. The Japanese focus on accomplishments that enhance their

“group-self-esteem” whereas Americans prefer work that affords opportunities to enhance their personal self-esteem (Heine, Lehman & Markus, 1999). Collectivists more generally are less likely to succumb to diffusion of responsibility effects in group work whereas individualism in the U.S. is associated with greater social loafing (Earley, 1989). A recent review by Wagner (2002) shows the wide range of organizational dynamics that differ across the individualism-collectivism divide. The majority of these studies juxtapose American patterns with those from a variety of countries. As suggested by Tocqueville over a century and half ago, Americans are individualists *par excellence*. As such, they frequently appear at or near the end of the distribution for phenomena shaped by relational sensitivity.

Finally, distinctions between high-context cultures and low-context cultures focus on how much information a person attends to about the other during social interaction and how broadly elements from one social context permeate other social contexts. As the label would suggest, in high-context cultures such as Mexico, people carefully attend to others’ emotional expressions, eye contact and tone of voice (Carroll, 1990; Hall, 1976). Moreover, relationships in these cultures are slow to develop, difficult to break and permeate many facets of life (Collier, Ribeau & Hecht, 1986; Condon, 1985). The heightened attentiveness to contextual cues inside and outside the workplace in high-context cultures is likely related to the fact that coworkers and close family friends often overlap. Recreational and important personal events are shared with the same folks from the workplace lunchroom. In contrast, relationships in low-context cultures are forged for a specific purpose in a particular context, often for a limited duration. Social cliques vary across activities (tennis friends, church friends) and more rarely bridge the work/non-work divide. Thus, there are fewer relational elements in any particular social context that have implications for other contexts and thus would require attention. Within specific social interactions, people in low-context cultures attend to what is said more than to how it is said (Ambady, Koo, Lee & Rosenthal, 1996; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993). The potential for serious misunderstanding is illustrated in a story retold by Triandis (1995) where a foreign diplomat did not take an American’s threat seriously because at the time the person did not appear emotional!

### *Culture-Specific Workways*

Departing from these cross-cultural comparisons along broad dimensions, another research tradition focuses on culture-specific folkways concerning the proper nature of work relations (i.e. workways). This research shows that cultural meanings ascribed to work-centered relations often entail guidelines about appropriate levels of attention to social emotional ties. Within South Korea, for

example, work relations are modeled after the tradition of *chaebol*, or “company familism” (Kim, 1988). In a typical South Korean organization, work relationships consist of tightly-knit personal bonds; managers play a paternal role in relation to their subordinates (Hui & Luk, 1997). Similarly, people within Japanese and Indian organizations place great importance on the creation and maintenance of highly personal relationships (Hui & Luk, 1997; Hui, Eastman & Yee, 1995; Kanungo, 1990; Kool & Saksena, 1988; Sinha, 1980). Managers in these cultures take care to know a lot about the personal lives of their subordinates and will even attend important personal events such as the funeral of an employee’s relative (Triandis et al., 1994; Trompenaars, 1993). In Chinese organizations, many important tasks are accomplished through meticulous attention to developing *you-yi* or deep friendships based on mutual obligation (Solomon, 1999; Wall, 1990). Indeed, one of the defining features of business in China is the emphasis on interconnected relationships or *guanxi* (Li, Tsui & Weldon, 2000; Tsui & Farh, 1997). Theorists have argued that for many Asians, establishing a highly personal connection is a necessary precondition to working with others (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993). This may also apply to the Indian sub-continent as suggested by data showing that the preferred leadership style among Indian managers involves a strong social emotional focus (Kool & Saksena, 1988; Sinha, 1979).

Research on Mexican work styles likewise describes an emphasis on attention to social emotional relations (Condon, 1985; Lindsley & Braithwaite, 1996; Raeff, Greenfield & Quiroz, 1999; Roll, Millen & Martinez, 1980). In Mexico, work relations, like most other relationships, are guided by the cultural tradition of *simpatía* (Diaz-Guerrero, 1967; Triandis, Marin, Lisansky & Betancourt, 1984). This highly valued relational style resembles the search for social harmony, that is characteristic of many East Asian cultures, but emphasizes the expressive displays of personal charm, graciousness and hospitality more common in Latin cultures (Diaz-Guerrero, 1967; Lindsley & Braithwaite, 1996; Sanchez-Burks, Nisbett & Ybarra, 2000). In Italy, for example, *simpatía* has been found to be a necessary (though not sufficient) prerequisite to leadership (Dechert, 1961). *Simpatía* in daily workplace interactions highlights the importance of respecting and understanding others’ feelings (Markus & Lin, 1999).

Taken together, this cross-cultural research shows that relational styles in organizations reflect the cultures in which they are embedded. Moreover it demonstrates that there is tremendous diversity in the mental models people use to navigate the relational dimension of the workplace. In most cultures, sensitivity to affective and relational concerns is tightly woven into the social fabric of virtually all relations, and some evidence suggests these concerns become more, not less, important within the workplace. Throughout this literature, however, in contrast to many cultures around the world, it is within mainstream American

society that affective and relational concerns are less carefully monitored and given diminished importance in the workplace. American culture is depicted as having the prototypical independent, individualistic and low-context relational styles. Despite what appears to be an anomaly in the cross-cultural distribution of relational sensitivity, most theoretical formulations have focused on explaining “the other” leaving a gap in the field’s understanding of the nature and origin of the American anomaly. The next section describes a theoretical account that addresses this lacuna and provides a framework in which to understand this American exceptionalism (Baker, 2004; Lipset, 1996).

## **PROTESTANT RELATIONAL IDEOLOGY**

Protestant Relational Ideology (PRI) refers to a deep-seated belief that affective and relational concerns are considered inappropriate in work settings and, therefore, are to be given less attention than in social, non-work settings (Sanchez-Burks, 2002). PRI can be traced to the beliefs and social practices of the founding communities in the U.S., the ascetic Protestants, who introduced a unique worldview concerning the proper role of relational concerns in work versus non-work settings. The influence of ascetic Protestantism on contemporary American culture was first noted by Alexis de Tocqueville (1840/1990) and later expanded by Max Weber (1904/1930, 1947), both of whom saw the cultural beliefs and practices of the early ascetic Calvinists reflected in the nature of modern work relations. Since then, sociologists (Bellah et al., 1996; Huntington, 2004; Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Lenski, 1963; Lipset, 1996), psychologists (McClelland, 1961; Winterbottom, 1953) and management theorists (Baker, 2004; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993) have continued to trace current American workways to those of the culture’s founding communities. This research tradition, as with theories on institutional imprinting (Baron, Hannan & Burton, 1999; Stinchcombe, 1965), are premised on the observations that prior social-historical conditions such as traditional religious values have an enduring influence on social institutions long after the original conditions have faded (Baker, 2005; Lipset, 1996).

Weber’s (1904/1930) seminal thesis on Protestant ideology is most widely known for its analysis of how the meaning of work was transformed from a necessary evil to one’s calling in life based on the beliefs advocated by the early Protestant sects (Bendix, 1977). During the initial stages of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther introduced the notion that one’s duty in life was hard work in every activity. In so doing, he elevated workplace activities to a level of religious significance afforded to prayer and other religious ceremonies (McGrath, 1993; McNeill, 1954). This was a radical departure from the then mainstream

sentiment that earthly work was a necessary but “debasement, demeaning activity, best left to one’s social – and spiritual inferiors” (McGrath, 1993, p. 223).

One of the hallmarks of the Protestant Reformation, according to Weber, was the creation of an ethic in which daily work was to be performed with all the fervor and moral imperatives as other activities done for the glory of God. This worldview, described by Weber as the “Protestant Ethic,” framed work as having a central role in life and meaningful in itself. Indeed, subsequent empirical studies have operationalized the Protestant Ethic as beliefs about the value of work in its own right, and its corollaries which emphasize the importance of self-reliance and limiting personal indulgences (Bendix, 1977; Buchholz, 1978; Furnham, 1990; Giorgi & Marsh, 1990; Mirels & Garrett, 1971; Quinn & Crocker, 1999).

Among the early American Protestants, however, these work ethic beliefs were intertwined with another ideology steeped in the teaching of John Calvin who articulated the proper nature of conduct in one’s calling. Calvin argued that in daily work and other duties pertinent to one’s calling, individuals ought to maintain an unsentimental impersonality in their conduct with one another (Weber, 1904/1930). Calvin’s justification for these limits on affective and relational attentiveness was that “to use time in idle talk, in sociability [while working] is evil because it detracts from the active performance of God’s will in a calling” (Bendix, 1977, p. 62). The social consequence of Calvinism according to Weber was the “entirely negative attitude of Puritanism to all the sensuous and emotional elements in culture and in religion,” (1904/1930, p. 105). These teachings on restricting attention to relational concerns by Calvin and his doctrine of predestination were among the defining characteristics of the early American Protestant sects (McGrath, 1993; McNeill, 1954).

#### *Appropriate Exceptions for Relational Sensitivity*

For the American Puritans, however, there were sanctioned exceptions to the official dogma restricting relational sensitivity. Despite these sharp prohibitions against attending to social emotional concerns, Weber (1947) along with contemporary cultural historians (Daniels, 1995; Fischer, 1989) have noted several exceptions outside of work and religious activities in which Puritan societies allowed and even encouraged social-emotionality. In contrast to the ever stoic Puritan stereotype, communities permitted social emotional relations among young people within certain contexts so that they could discover if they loved one another. Surprisingly, the ascetic Puritans “cherished true love, and insisted that it was a prerequisite of a happy marriage” (Fischer, 1989, p. 79). In another example, people were actively encouraged to participate in collective recreational activities



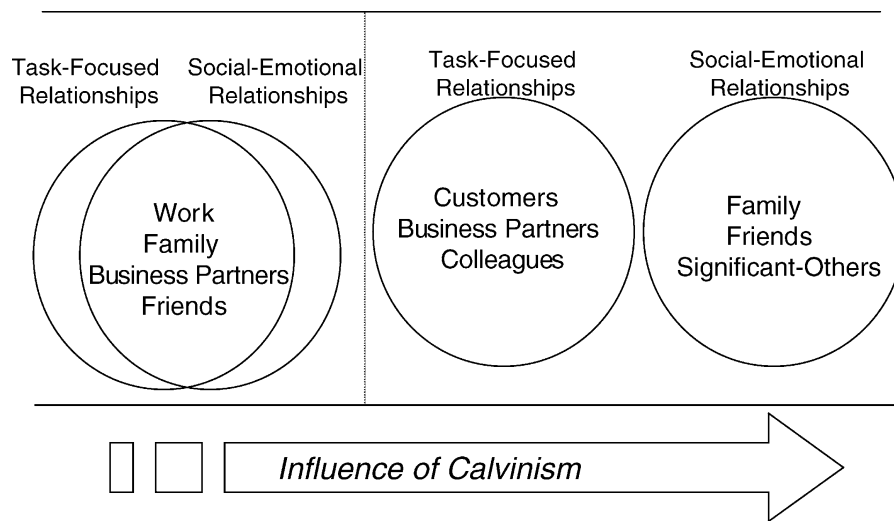


Fig. 1.

where people throughout the town would regularly gather. In settings such as taverns, common in most Puritan towns, people would engage in lively, expressive exchanges (Daniels, 1995). Such exceptions for relational sensitivity it appears were woven into the social fabric of early American communities, in stark contrast to the taboos against them within the workplace.

Weber (1947) argued this emergence of a sharp distinction between appropriate work and nonwork relational sensitivity exemplified Tonnies' (1887/2002) distinction between *gesellschaft* and *gemeinschaft* – two fundamental types of social relations. *Gesellschaft* refers to non-affective, rational, pragmatic relations, whereas *gemeinschaft* refers to social emotional-oriented relations. The relational ideology put in practice by the early American communities created a divide (illustrated in Fig. 1) in the social world between settings for *gemeinschaft* where attentiveness to affective and relational concerns is appropriate and settings for *gesellschaft* where only a task focus is appropriate. As characterized by Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (1993, p. 133), the “world [became] split between the machine and the suburban garden, producing and consuming. No intimacy, affection, brotherhood, or rootedness is supposed to sully the world of work.” This break from a sensitivity to relational concerns in work and non-work settings alike – a practice that remains common in much of the world – suggests that the early American protestants gave birth to a culturally unique impersonal and emotionally detached ideal relational work style (Lenski, 1961). Over time these beliefs about restricting attentiveness to relational and affective concerns in work settings were secularized and incorporated into the contemporary ethos of American culture (Fischer, 1989; Weber, 1930, 1947); they define PRI.

PRI is conceptualized within a social cognition framework in which work and non-work settings activate different relational schemas. Relational schemas refer to cognitive structures that provide goals and expectations about what can be expected to occur in a given situation, what behaviors are or are not appropriate and which elements of the situation are important to notice and remember (for a review, see Baldwin, 1992). Relational schemas are developed through experience and socialization in particular socio-cultural contexts and thus operate as a mechanism through which culture influences perception and behavior in social interactions (Earley & Mosakowski, 2002; Morris & Young, 2002). The theoretical analysis of PRI suggests that experience in cultures shaped by ascetic Protestantism influence the development and accessibility of relational schemas used to navigate work and non-work social interactions. As such, PRI provides specific propositions regarding workplace cognition and behavior.

#### *Propositions and Evidence of PRI*

PRI is grounded in three propositions. First, people are less attentive to affective and relational cues in work settings compared with non-work settings. Second, this pattern should be stronger among groups with greater exposure to cultural contexts shaped by Calvinist Protestantism. Third, PRI-influenced cultural groups diverge from other cultures with respect to relational focus more in work settings than in non-work settings. Thus, PRI describes the conditions under which to expect cultural differences and cultural similarities in relational attentiveness – a shift from constructs focused on explaining cultural main effect differences. Moreover, the decreasing relational focus at work compared to outside work is a pattern opposite to what many scholars argue exists in many other cultures. For example, in East Asian and Latin American organizations attention to relational cues is heightened rather than attenuated because of greater formality and emphasis on power dynamics (Earley, 1997; Triandis, Dunnette & Hough, 1994). The implication that cultural divides become pronounced in the context of work stresses the importance of considering cultural styles within organizations. Finally, these propositions narrow the domain of organizational behavior influenced by PRI to those dynamics contingent on attention to affective and relational cues. In this respect, PRI's focus on how social emotional cues are encoded complements research focused on their expression and regulation (cf. Hochschild, 1979; Martin, Knopoff & Beckman, 1998; Morris & Keltner, 2000; Pratt, 2000; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987).

Evidence for PRI's propositions comes from field and laboratory studies conducted across and within cultures using behavioral, self-report and implicit

cognitive measures. The research strategy used in these “existence proof” studies relied on common social cognition techniques used to demonstrate the existence and influence of particular relational schemas (Baldwin, 1992; Fiske & Haslam, 1996; Wilson & Capitman, 1982). In these studies, evidence of relational schema processes was obtained through measures that assessed the relative amount of emotional and relational cues people who vary in exposure to PRI encode and store in memory across work and non-work settings. These cues included global interpersonal dimensions of social interactions (e.g. information about team harmony or discord), the emotional content of verbal communication and non-verbal behavioral gestures of an interaction partner.

Initial indications that Americans use a strictly task-focused relational schema at work come from a set of field experiments conducted with Anglo-Americans and Latinos (Mexicans and Mexican-Americans) (Sanchez-Burks, Nisbett & Ybarra, 2000). These studies examined differences in what people believed they saw and heard in a video of a typical workgroup meeting. In these experiments, Anglo-Americans and Latinos watched a social interaction unfold in which two people meet to resolve problems with a project. After watching the meeting, participants answered unrelated survey questions and then completed a free recall task in which they wrote down what they remembered from the video. Responses were coded as either task-specific memories or interpersonal memories. Task-specific memories focused on the work, process and progress or lack thereof; for example, “They didn’t get much done,” “They asked a lot of questions” and “They were productive.” Interpersonal memories focused on the relational dimension of the meeting; for example, “One person was rude, the other was friendly” and “They seemed friendly.” The average number of task and interpersonal memories were compared to examine cultural differences and similarities in the types of information noticed.

For the Anglo-Americans, work activates primarily a task-focused schema as suggested by PRI theory. In contrast, for Latinos it activates a task-focused and social-emotional schema as suggested by research showing their heightened sensitivity to social emotional cues in work settings (Lindsley & Braithwaite, 1996; Triandis et al., 1984). This suggests the Anglo-American participants should show poorer recall for interpersonal memories than the Latino participants. Comparisons of the relative number of memories of both groups in each category show just this pattern. On average, the Latinos could recall twice as much information from the interpersonal dimension as could the Anglo-Americans. Indeed, the Anglo-Americans tended to have very little recollection about the nature of the relationships. However, comparisons of recall for task-specific information showed no difference between groups. In contrast to the Latinos who noted both task-specific and interpersonal cues, the Anglo-Americans focused almost exclusively on the task and were virtually oblivious to the interpersonal cues.

The findings of the [Sanchez-Burks et al. \(2000\)](#) study show that the cultural differences are cognitively deep and not limited to differences in explicit values about what is important in workplace meetings. The authors suggest that Anglo-Americans bring a different lens to workplace meetings than do Latinos and that this difference is specific to the relational dimension. Nonetheless, these differences could be attributed to the *simpatia* script common in Latin American culture ([Triandis et al., 1984](#)) rather than something particular to Anglo-Americans such as PRI. Indeed, one of the challenges of explaining cross-cultural differences is the variation between groups other than dimensions proposed to explain the differences ([Brockner, 2003](#); [Earley, 1989](#)). In addition to *simpatia* and exposure to PRI, Anglo-Americans and Latinos differ in various ways such as language, geography and social structure, which might also influence their relational work schemas. These issues and others were addressed in a set of experiments reported by [Sanchez-Burks \(2002\)](#) who constructed a more stringent test of PRI.

If differences in relational schemas arise from differential socialization, then PRI should be stronger among groups with greater exposure to Calvinism. One strategy that researchers have typically used to investigate the existence and influence of Protestant ideologies in American culture is to focus on comparisons within culture, specifically between groups of Americans socialized within different religious traditions, such as Protestants versus Catholics ([Lenski, 1961](#); [McClelland, 1961](#); [Winterbottom, 1953](#)). For example, [Winterbottom \(1953\)](#) studied the influence of the Protestant Ethic on child-rearing practices by comparing the point at which European-American Protestant and Catholic mothers' fostered self-reliance in their children. Similarly, [Lenski](#) examined evidence of the Protestant Ethic by comparing political, economic and family patterns across Protestant and Catholic Americans living in the Midwestern U.S. These strategies are consistent with the notion that the schemas people use to navigate the social world reflect their socialization and experience within particular contexts.

Following this tradition, [Sanchez-Burks \(2002\)](#) compared two groups of European-Americans with highly similar demographic profiles (education, ethnicity, parents' socio-economic status) who differed in whether or not they were raised within specifically Calvinist denominations, namely Presbyterian and Methodist. Presbyterians were among the first ascetic Protestant sects along with Puritans and Quakers to bring Calvinism to the New World ([Fischer, 1989](#); [McGrath, 1993](#)). In the eighteenth century, Methodism was formed as a Calvinist revival movement ([McNeill, 1954](#)). Within each of these denominations, Calvinism serves as the centerpiece of their beliefs and traditions. Participants raised in either of these groups were compared with the largest group of non-Protestant European-Americans with a clear lack of association with Calvinism, namely people raised within a Roman Catholic tradition. This design was based on the

rationale that PRI is enculturated over time as are other cultural beliefs and schemas. Moreover, the participants were selected not based on their espoused religious affiliation but simply on whether they indicated they were raised within one of these denominations. As with the Protestant Ethic in American society, where the sentiment that people have a moral obligation to work is no longer explicitly linked to one's calling or predestination (Giorgi & Marsh, 1990; Lenski, 1962), so too the PRI is not assumed to be linked explicitly to religious teachings. Rather, subtle cues about focusing on the task, not relationships while working are expected to be more common in socialization practices found in American communities generally and those rooted in Calvinism more specifically. The high degree of similarity between these groups, aside from their exposure to Calvinism, provides a more precise test of PRI. However, to the extent that PRI nonetheless is diffused in American culture, differences are unlikely to be large; therefore, a social cognition measure was used so as to detect reliable differences that were small in magnitude.

In one experiment, American males raised with Calvinism (e.g. from a Methodist family) or without it (e.g. from a Catholic family) were primed either for a work context (by having them don ties and dress shirts and discuss a Harvard Business School case) or for a social context (by having them put on Hawaiian shirts and play a fun card game) (Sanchez-Burks, 2003, Study 1). Participants then performed an "emotional Stroop test," based on a paradigm developed by Kitayama and colleagues (Ishii, Reyes & Kitayama, 2003; Kitayama & Ferguson, 1992; Kitayama & Howard, 1994). Participants heard words having either positive or negative valence read either in an affect-appropriate tone (e.g. a sad voice for *funeral*) or an affect-inappropriate tone (e.g. a sad voice for *wedding*). The task was to quickly identify the semantic valence (good-bad) of each word. The extent to which subjects were attending to the affective tone rather than to the explicit lexical meaning was indexed by subtracting speed of response to affect-appropriate words from those for affect-inappropriate words. The results showed that Catholics and Protestants were equally confused by affect-inappropriateness in the social context whereas Protestants were much less confused by affect inappropriateness in the work context than were Catholics. In fact, the potential distraction created when one spontaneously encodes emotion in this paradigm did not emerge for Protestants in the work context. Here, Protestants were particularly adept at narrowing their focus to the content of the message not the emotional tone used to convey it.

In another study (Sanchez-Burks, 2002, Study 2), a different experimental paradigm provided evidence of PRI's influence on behavior. The study capitalized on an effect proposed by William James (1890), whereby the mere encoding of a behavior automatically increases the likelihood of engaging in that behavior. This effect, referred to as behavioral mirroring or non-conscious mimicry, has

received empirical support from research conducted by Chartrand, Van Baaren and their colleagues (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Van Baaren et al., 2003; Van Baaren, Holland, Steenaert & Knippenberg, 2003; Van Baaren, Horgan, Chartrand & Dijkmans, 2004). In their studies, a trained confederate interacts with a participant by enacting subtle behavioral gestures such as shaking a foot. How much participants non-consciously mirror these gestures depends on how much they attend to the other person during the social interaction. Thus, non-conscious mimicry serves as an implicit behavioral measure of relational attentiveness.

Adapting this paradigm, the PRI study by Sanchez-Burks (2002) examined whether the differences in attention to interpersonal cues obtained in prior studies would influence the extent to which Anglo-Americans raised or not raised with Calvinism would engage in non-verbal behavioral matching while working together. In this experiment, Anglo-American males and females either raised with Calvinism (Presbyterian or Methodist) or in another tradition (e.g. Catholic, Atheist, Unitarian) were primed for a work context (by having them come to the study dressed in “interview appropriate” attire and then work on a business case) or a non-work context (by having them come dressed in casual beach attire and then generate a list of ideal spring break vacations). Participants interacted with a confederate who was trained to complete a sequence of non-verbal gestures (e.g. shake a foot, rub the face) during the meeting. The interactions were videotaped for later coding of the extent to which participants mirrored the gestures of the confederates (a measure of level of attention to task-unrelated interpersonal cues).

The pattern of results provided further support of PRI theory and its main propositions. Exposure to Calvinism was related to less mirroring in the work context compared to the non-work context. The researchers found no reliable group differences in the level of mirroring when participants were primed for a non-work situation. However, when primed for a work context, those raised as Protestants mirrored significantly less than those not raised with Calvinism. The virtual lack of attention to relational cues (indicated by low levels of behavioral mirroring) in the work setting among those raised with Calvinism is highly consistent with prior observations using very different measures of relational attentiveness.

Taken together, these studies provide evidence that diminished attention to affective and relational cues in work settings compared to non-work settings varies with one’s exposure to Calvinism. The multiple and converging measures of relational attentiveness show PRI as an organizing framework for the relational schemas used to navigate work and non-work social interactions.

The next section describes how PRI, operating as a psychological mechanism of culture, shapes relational and inter-group patterns and outcomes in organizations. In addition to providing further evidence of PRI’s influence within and between cultures, these research streams use PRI theory to better understand four areas

of organizational research: (1) antecedents of prejudice and discrimination in diverse organizations; (2) sources of intercultural miscommunication; (3) beliefs about team conflict; and (4) mental models of “professionalism” and its effect on organizational recruitment and selection. These studies employ survey, laboratory and field experiments with populations including senior level specialists, mid-level managers, young professionals, and undergraduate and graduate students.

### **FACE-SAVING CIRCUITOUSNESS VERSUS PROFESSIONAL DIRECTNESS**

Relational issues are deeply embedded in the way we communicate with one another. Imagine a situation where you need to deliver negative feedback to a colleague about their presentation idea for an upcoming board meeting. One option for communicating bad news would be to remain frank and to the point, focusing more on what to say rather than how to say it: “Bradley, the ideas in the presentation are not new or relevant to the meeting’s agenda.” Another option would be to deliver a more circuitous locution, saying for example: “Hmmm, that’s an interesting idea,” conveying with body language and vocal intonation the true sentiment while saving face for the coworker. Which option people use depends in part on how much they believe it is appropriate to attend to the social-emotional dimension of the exchange (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Earley, 1997; Goffman, 1967; Ting-Toomey, 1988, Ting-Toomey et al., 1991).

According to Goffman’s (1959, 1967) analysis of facework, indirectness is used when one attempts to both convey the message and be sensitive to social-emotional considerations including the relationship, the feelings and face (i.e. public image) of the other. When people presume social-emotional concerns to be far less relevant than the message in a situation, for example a workplace feedback session, they focus their attention on what is said rather than how it is said (Ambady et al., 1996; Kimmel, 1994). The need to rely on non-verbal and vocal intonations to convey or interpret the full meaning of the message is diminished by virtue of this belief that others will put aside relational concerns and focus on the work.

Problematic misunderstandings, therefore, can emerge when communicators have divergent beliefs about the importance of social-emotional concerns in an interaction. Indeed, conversational indirectness has long been considered a cause of interpersonal miscommunications. Indirectness can be understood following Grice’s (1968) distinction between sentence meaning and speaker meaning. Sentence meaning refers to the literal or semantic meaning of an utterance, and speaker meaning refers to what the speaker intends to accomplish with the remark. Thus, if the speaker says, “The presentation is interesting” but actually intends to

communicate reservations about its value, there is indirectness. Besides referring to how a speaker conveys a message, indirectness also affects how a listener interprets the messages of others. For example, a listener can infer a meaning that goes beyond what is explicitly stated, which can be independent of whether the speaker intends to be direct or indirect.

There is an extensive empirical literature demonstrating that people rely on indirectness more in situations where they are attentive to affective relational and relational concerns (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Earley, 1997; Hall, 1983; Holtgraves, 1997; Ting-Toomey et al., 1991). Moreover, indirectness has been shown to vary across cultures (for reviews, see Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Ting-Toomey et al., 1991). The role of face in East Asian culture, as described by Earley (1997) and Ting-Toomey (1998), permeates virtually every social interaction. The cultural obligation to saving face for others and preserving interpersonal harmony is revealed in the broad array of social cues people use to communicate. Koreans, for example, rely on indirectness to convey important information and to make requests construed as an imposition (Holtgraves, 1997; Holtgraves & Yang, 1990, 1992). They base their inferences about another's intentions on the content and pattern of non-verbal and relational cues contained in the message (Ambady et al., 1996).

Indirectness in East Asian communication is described in the literature in a manner suggesting that it is peculiar and requires explanation for its departure from the direct style, which is taken as the default. That is, departures from an implicit baseline of directness have been attributed to differences in various constructs, including the collective value placed on saving face and the high context of cultural tendencies. These approaches share a common focus in describing mean East-West cultural differences and often emphasize the high levels of indirectness abroad rather than the low level of indirectness in the U.S.

Alternatively, PRI has been used to generate hypotheses that go beyond main-effect cultural differences and posit the conditions under which East-West indirectness will vary by building on the relationship between indirectness and attentiveness to relational concerns. As people focus on relational concerns they also become more indirect. That American relational attentiveness decreases in work compared with non-work settings (*a la* PRI) suggests that Americans are less indirect at work. Conversely, East Asians have been shown to remain highly attentive to relational concerns at work, perhaps even more attentive compared with non-work settings (for an excellent review see Earley, 1997). In addition to the pervasive role of indirectness and relational concerns in East Asia, from the dinner table to the office, scholars have suggested that indirectness is more rather than less common in East Asian organizations because of greater formality and power dynamics (Triandis, Dunnette & Hough, 1994). This suggests a reverse pattern of



indirectness compared to Americans in which East Asians might remain or become more indirect at work. Together this points to a novel but unfortunate culture by situation interaction where the magnitude of East-West differences in indirectness grows larger in the context of work. Thus, PRI posits that miscommunications are more likely in those situations where economic need, career aspirations and organizational demands bring together and rely on effective cross-cultural communication.

### *Interpreting Performance Feedback*

In one experiment designed to examine these implications for Korean, Chinese and American managers, [Sanchez-Burks and colleagues \(2003\)](#) developed a performance feedback paradigm that quantified miscommunication. In this paradigm, people were given a transcript containing an indirect performance feedback message and asked to estimate the actual performance conveyed by the message on 14 dimensions. The actual message comes from [Lee \(1993\)](#) in which the author of the message was given a partner's poor performance ratings along the same 14 dimensions, and asked to write a note to the partner about the content of the evaluation. The specific message borrowed from Lee's study scored in the 95th percentile of indirectness. Thus, the task in the [Sanchez-Burks et al. \(2003\)](#) study is essentially Lee's study in reverse. Rather than give people actual ratings and ask them to convey the results, the study gave them a written message and asked them to estimate the actual ratings. Miscommunication was operationalized as the mean difference in a participant's interpretation and the actual performance ratings. In the work version, participants were told the message conveyed an employee's annual performance evaluation. In the non-work version, participants were told the message came from one friend conveying the results of another friend's personality test. The message and the evaluation form were identical in both conditions.

Accuracy in this paradigm required attention to indirectness; a direct interpretation of the message results in overestimating the actual performance. The [Sanchez-Burks et al. \(2003\)](#) study showed that Korean and Chinese managers maintained similar levels of accuracy across the work and non-work conditions. Across these situations, the Korean and Chinese managers remained attentive to the face saving indirect cues embedded in feedback. The American managers, consistent with a PRI orientation, also noticed the indirect cues but far less so when they read the message with a workplace mindset. Compared to a social setting, American managers in the work setting failed to pick up on the indirectness and as a result overestimated the actual value placed on the employee's performance. This is consistent with the proposition that work and non-work settings activate

different relational schemas for Americans. Face saving indirectness is noticed and used among Americans for interpreting communication between friends, whereas a literal interpretation is more common for workplace communication. Thus, in this study, the Korean and Chinese managers more accurately infer indirect performance feedback.

Findings from the [Sanchez-Burks et al. \(2003\)](#) study can be applied to cross-cultural communication in the workplace. For instance, Americans in the workplace are likely to miss messages conveyed indirectly, for example, when an Asian colleague tries to point out a serious flaw in an American colleague's idea without saying it directly (e.g. "I'm not sure your idea for the project will work, but it is very interesting"). Americans can miss such subtleties and consequently overestimate the Asian colleague's actual evaluation. Asians in the same situation are more likely to adjust for indirectness of communication style and thus correctly estimate the colleague's evaluation. However, the opposite can also occur: Asians may look for indirect meanings in messages that are meant by Americans to be taken literally. For example, when an Asian employee infers a negative evaluation from an American manager's remark, "you're doing great," when in fact the American intended to convey a very positive evaluation.

A series of follow-up studies ([Sanchez-Burks et al., 2003](#), Studies 3 and 4) used a self-report measure of indirectness to test the proposition that the East-West divide in indirectness grows larger in the context of work. Using a cross-culturally validated measure of indirectness developed by Holtgraves and colleagues ([Holtgraves, 1990, 1997](#); [Holtgraves & Yang, 1992](#)), [Sanchez-Burks et al. \(2003\)](#) examined within and between culture differences in indirectness. Specifically, they measured workplace and non-work indirectness by asking participants to answer the questionnaire items with respect to either someone within the workplace or someone with whom they interact only outside of work.

Remarkably, the pattern of results across four studies using this paradigm was identical whether participants were working managers ([Sanchez-Burks et al., 2003](#), Studies 2 and 3), MBA students ([Sanchez-Burks et al., 2003](#), Study 2) or undergraduate students ([Sanchez-Burks, 1999](#)). East Asian participants reported being equal or more attentive to indirectness in work settings as compared to outside work settings. This pattern does not differ for groups from China, Japan, Korea, Singapore or Taiwan. Consistent with their actual perceptions captured in the prior study, Anglo-American participants reported being less attentive to indirect communication at work as compared to outside of work. As illustrated in [Fig. 2](#), this research shows that among participants, the magnitude and consequences of East-West differences in communication are greater in the context of work.

The fourth study conducted by [Sanchez-Burks and his colleagues \(2003\)](#) ruled out factors aside from differences in PRI that may contribute to the culture by a

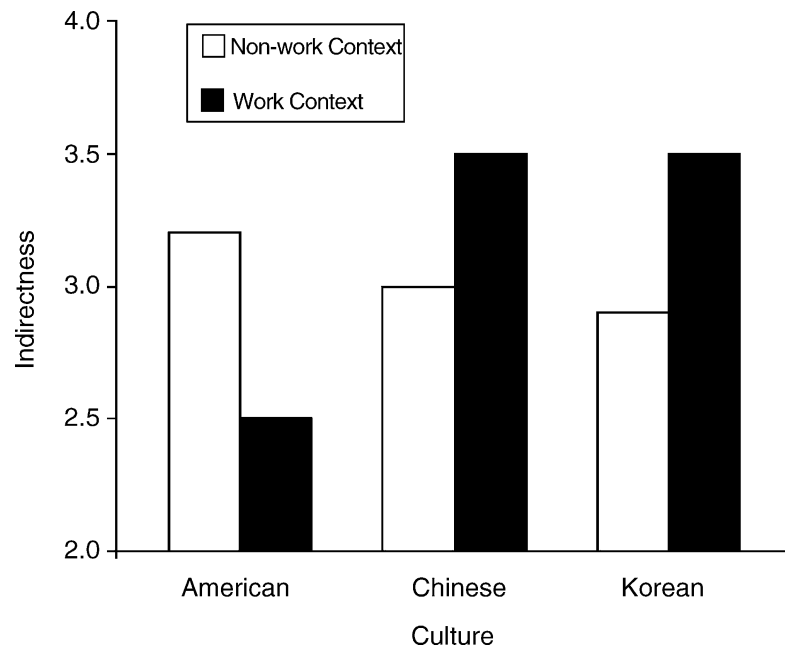


Fig. 2. Indirectness as a Function of Context and Participant's Culture. *Note:* Means are on a 7-point scale with higher values indicating greater indirectness. Adapted from Sanchez-Burks et al. (2003).

situation interaction pattern found across their four studies. The most plausible difference that could produce a similar pattern is that East Asian organizations are more likely than American organizations to include family members or close friends working together (Hui & Luk, 1997). This may attenuate the work/non-work distinction in relational focus, even for those that have not yet begun their careers. To address this possibility, the researchers adapted a cultural priming paradigm developed by Hong, Chiu and Kung (1997); a paradigm based on a *dynamic constructivist* model of culture.

The dynamic constructivist model of culture (Hong, Morris, Chiu & Benet-Martinez, 2000) holds that people often hold multiple cultural schemas but that contextual features of the environment influence which schema becomes accessible and thus operational for the individual in that setting. For example, someone with independent and interdependent self-schemas will perceive a particular social interaction according to which schema is primed by that situation (Hong, Chiu & Kung, 1997). Applying this framework, Sanchez-Burks et al. (2003, Study 4) surveyed a group that had been exposed both to PRI in the U.S. and East Asian cultural imperatives, namely Thai-American biculturals. In this study, the organization, its location and the population were held constant. Bilingual Thai employees completed the indirectness survey after being primed either for work

(by having them think of a specific co-worker in relation to the survey questions) or for non-work (by having them think of an acquaintance from outside work). This manipulation was crossed with a “prime” for either American culture or Asian culture. When primed for East Asian culture, Thais reported an equal preference for indirectness inside and outside the workplace. However, when primed for American culture, Thais reported a preference for less indirectness at work than outside of work – a pattern that mirrors the American samples in their previous experiments.

Together, these communication experiments within and across cultures show that American PRI leads to a preference for direct workplace communication with indirectness appropriate only after closing time. Throughout East Asia, going to work entails as much, if not more, sensitivity to the social emotional dimension of interpersonal communication. The result for cross-cultural communication in organizations is akin to ships passing in the night; the consequences, visible by morning.

## **INTERGROUP PREJUDICE & CULTURAL FULFILLING PROPHECIES**

Understanding the nature of intercultural contact remains as interesting for organizational scholars today (Brief, 2000; Chatman et al., 1998; Jehn, Northcraft & Neale, 1999; Polzer, Milton & Swann, 2002) as it was for the ancient Greeks who provided the first written accounts of diversity from their observations of trading across cultures on the shores of the Black Sea (Ascherson, 1996; Herodotus, 2003). The collection of faultlines (Lau & Murnighan, 1998) held responsible for the range of negative intergroup dynamics associated with diversity in organizations commonly focus on the demographic features of individuals (ethnicity, nationality, age, gender, tenure).<sup>2</sup> This form of diversity is posited to give rise to factors including in-group favoritism, implicit and explicit ethnocentrism, and competition for scarce resources (for reviews of this literature, see Hirschfeld, 1996; Sidanius, 1993; Stephan, 1985; Tajfel, 1982; Thatcher, Jehn & Zanutto, 2003; Williams & O’Reilly, 1998; Zanna & Olson, 1994) that in turn result in conflict, negative intergroup competition, turnover and absenteeism (Garza & Santos, 1991; Pelled, 1996; Tsui, Egan & O’Reilly, 1992).

The differences that have been purported to make a difference, however, traditionally overlook cultural variation in assumptions about appropriate relational styles (Fiske, 1993; Vodosek, 2000). Indeed, there is a surprising disconnect between scholarship on diversity and culture in organizational research. Surprising because of the natural connection between understanding the consequences of

intercultural contact and understanding the psychological nature of the cultural differences that may contribute to these consequences. Rather than disregard the influence of demography, a cultural psychology perspective provides opportunities to examine their mutual and relative influence on intergroup relations. A set of cultural field experiments on work team prejudices reported by Sanchez-Burks, Nisbett and Ybarra (2000) demonstrate the potential for this more integrative perspective.

As with PRI in American society, cultural styles can be conceptualized in terms of relational schemas, activated by situational cues. For Americans, settings presumably activate either a task-focused schema (work) or a social-emotional schema (outside work) but not both simultaneously (Sanchez-Burks et al., 2003). In contrast, a work setting presumably activates both task and socio-emotional schemas for Latinos (i.e. consistent with a *simpatía* script, DeVoe & Iyengar, 2004; Diaz-Guerrero, 1967; Trandis, Marin, Lisansky & Betancourt, 1984). One of the consequences associated with relational schema processes is that people show a marked preference for social interactions that unfold in a manner congruent with their schema (Baldwin, 1992; Wilson & Capitman, 1982). For example, imagine a software engineer, Jesse, is given an option between two teams that he will work closely with for his next project assignment. He is more likely to choose one that he believes shares a work style consistent with his – all else being equal. Alas, the dilemma for Jesse and most others in this situation is that all else is rarely equal. Imagine also that Jesse has a preference to work with people who share a similar ethnic background, as would be expected from research on social identity theory and the similarity-attraction bias (Chatman et al., 1998; Chatman & Flynn, 2001; Pelled, 1996; Williams & O' Reilly, 1998). The option of working with an ethnically congruent team that also works in a schema consistent manner would be an attractive option indeed. However, what would Jesse do when presented with the decision to work with one team that shares his ethnic background but not his cultural style versus work with another team comprised of only ethnic-outgroup members who shares his cultural style?

This is the dilemma Anglo-Americans faced in a field experiment that pitted congruence in cultural style against congruence in ethnicity to examine which was more important in people's decisions when committing to a four-month team project (Sanchez-Burks, Nisbett & Ybarra, 2001). Individuals in this study listened to two brief audio-recordings of a meeting from each team. Half listened to an Anglo-American workgroup that was strictly task-focused ("Task" Relational Style) and a Latino workgroup that combined a task focus with an expressive emphasis on establishing and maintaining interpersonal harmony ("Task + Interpersonal" Relational Style). Anglo-American participants showed a strong in-group preference; almost 90% choose to work with the

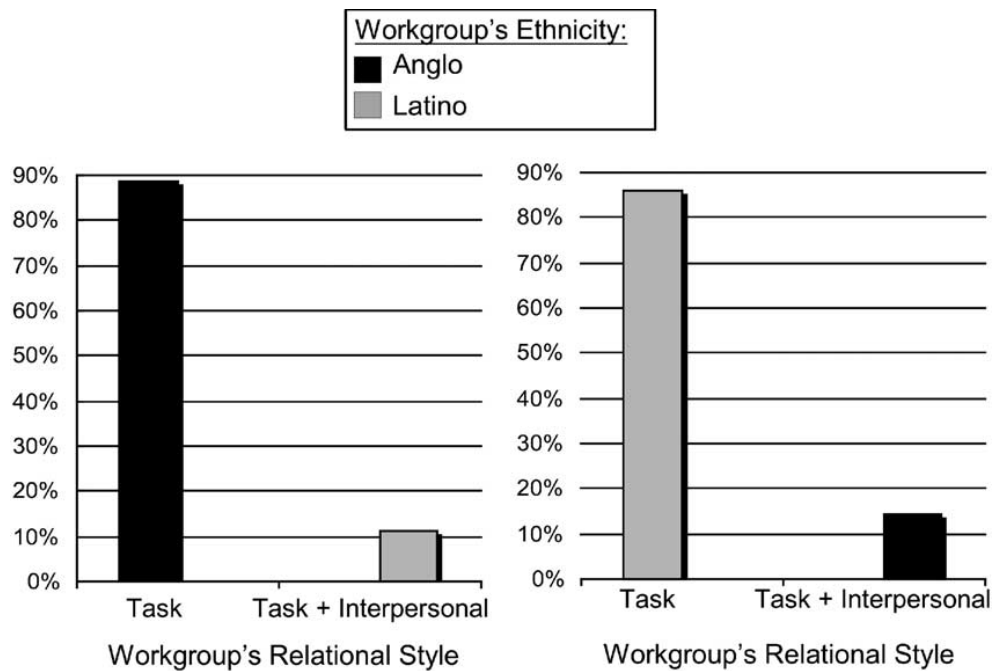


Fig. 3. Percentage of Anglo-Americans Choosing to Work with One of the Two Workgroups. *Note:* Adapted from Sanchez-Burks, Nisbett and Ybarra (2003).

Anglo-American workgroup over the Latino workgroup (see Fig. 3, Panel A). Whether this preference was driven by ethnic biases *per se* or by a bias for schema congruent workstyles was examined in a second condition (Panel B) in which it was a choice between a Latino task-focused workgroup and an Anglo-American task and interpersonal oriented workgroup. Remarkably, over 85% of the Anglo-Americans given these two options preferred to work with an ethnic out-group rather than an in-group when this meant joining a task-focused group over a socio-emotional oriented (Task + Interpersonal) workgroup (see Fig. 3, Panel B). In other words, cultural style preferences were far more important than ethnic in-group preferences.

These results highlight the importance of understanding the relational mental models people use to interpret workgroups. Moreover, they demonstrate that what passes for inter-group prejudice may sometimes be nothing more than a preference for a certain relational work style. Given that in daily life, ethnicity can be confounded with relational style (i.e. people behave in ways consistent with the norms and practices of their respective cultures); it may be difficult to assess, for example, whether a manager who overlooks a minority employee for a promotion does so because of an ethnic bias or a relational style bias. Although the negative consequences are the same, the reason, and thus the antidote can differ.

According to these results, focusing too narrowly on demographic characteristics as the source of minority disadvantage runs the risk of missing the underlying mechanism of the prejudicial behavior (i.e. relational style incongruence). The methods used to measure cultural schema differences in these studies further show that while cultural group membership may be a heuristic for cultural differences in relational style, it is not as powerful of an indicator as more direct cognitive measures of these processes.

These biases are also revealed in how Americans compared to Mexicans reason about team process improvement strategies. In another study, Mexicans from Guadalajara and Anglo-Americans living in the Midwest watched videos of workgroup meetings and then provided suggestions for how the workgroups could improve upon their work process (Sanchez-Burks et al., 2001, Study 1). Mexicans argued that improvements would result from an increase in both a task and social-emotional focus. For Americans, the majority believed an increased task focus would be beneficial whereas a social-emotional focus would be detrimental.

In the U.S., maintaining a task focus is not perceived as a way to suppress interpersonal harmony, but rather as an effective strategy for ensuring smooth and productive social interactions within the workplace. In this way, PRI prescriptions for impersonal work relations take on a sensibility as the natural manifestation of an efficient work style, not a culturally unique tradition. Indeed, advice for managing intercultural negotiations makes the argument that the “practical” solution for dealing with cultural differences is to create a “culture-neutral” environment where unique social traditions are put aside and all attention is focused on the common interest, namely the task (Zartman & Berman, 1982). The studies described in this article show that such beliefs about proper relational work styles are far from culture-neutral and instead reflect a distinct and unique American cultural tradition steeped in PRI.

The relative influence of cultural biases over ethnic biases has implications in other research domains affected by intergroup contact, for example, leader-membership exchange theory (Graen, Novak & Sommerkamp, 1982; Paglis & Green, 2002; Sherony & Green, 2002). According to this research, superiors rather quickly differentiate those subordinates with whom they will form mentoring-type relationships from others under their responsibility. Demographic group biases have been implicated as a factor that influences these decisions, whether they are made implicitly or explicitly. To the extent that group membership and relational style do not overlap completely, the present analysis suggests that supervisors’ early preferences for subordinates who share their ethnicity, gender or other affiliations, might over time become aligned with people who share their relational style regardless of ethnic congruence.

*Interethnic Interviews and Cultural Incongruence Prophecies*

The issue of intercultural relations in organizations takes on societal significance when its outcome affects minority access to jobs and career mobility. A situation ripe for this possibility is the interethnic interview. Unfortunately, overt and aversive racism continue to remain a factor here as in other organizational contexts (Brief, 2000; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Murrell, Dietz-Uhler, Dovidio & Drout, 1994; Word, Zanna & Cooper, 1974). Despite well-intentioned organizational and governmental efforts, there persist instances where an interviewer's ethnic biases create a situation of disadvantage for minority candidates. These biases need not be conscious or intentionally applied to have an influence (Dovidio, 2000; Murrell, Dietz-Uhler & Dovidio, 1994). As revealed in the classic experiment on interethnic interviews conducted by Word, Zanna and Cooper (1974), these non-conscious biases can be manifested in subtle unintentional ways; for example, as when Anglo-American interviewers ask fewer questions, remain more physically distant and make less eye contact during interviews with Black candidates versus other Anglo-American candidates. These differences are understood as a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby the interviewer's ethnic biases negatively and non-consciously affect the performance of the candidate. Thus, both explicit and implicit biases regarding differences in ethnic group membership can sabotage a minority candidate's ability to perform their best in these situations.

The culture and cognition dynamics described in this article, however, suggest that minority disadvantage can emerge in these intergroup situations even in the absence of overt or implicit ethnic biases. From this perspective, mere incompatibilities in the relational schemas used by two cultural groups create the conditions for what might be referred to as a *cultural incongruence prophecy*. Whereas a self-fulfilling prophecy describes how a target's behavior can be influenced by an evaluator's schema regarding the target's ethnicity, a cultural incongruence prophecy describes how a target's behavior can be influenced by incompatibilities between the evaluator and target's *relational* schemas.

Evidence for the idea that aside from ethnic bias, a cultural incongruence prophecy can create minority disadvantage comes from an interethnic interview field study conducted within the headquarters of a Fortune 500 company (Sanchez-Burks & Blount, 2005). The theoretical rationale for the study combined two empirical literatures: research on cognitive antecedents and consequences of non-conscious behavioral mimicry (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; LaFrance, 1979; Schefflen, 1964; Van Baaren et al., 2003) and research on culture and relational schemas used in work situations (Sanchez-Burks, 2002; Sanchez-Burks et al., 2003; Sanchez-Burks, Nisbett & Ybarra, 2000; Triandis et al., 1984). Prior research shows that people have a tendency to non-consciously mirror others' behavior in



social interactions and to have a more positive subjective experience of rapport as a function of mimicry exhibited by interaction partners (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Cheng & Chartrand, 2003; LaFrance, 1979).

Both the enactment of mimicry and its effect on perceived rapport are moderated by attentiveness to relational cues (Van Baaren et al., 2003). Sanchez-Burks (2002) has shown, however, that cultural groups differ in their attentiveness to relational cues within work settings. Consistent with a PRI orientation, Anglo-Americans, in particular, are less attentive to relational cues and as a result engage less in behavioral mimicry in work situations than in non-work social situations. Latinos, however, remain highly attentive to relational cues across these situations (DeVoe & Iyengar, 2004; Sanchez-Burks, Nisbett & Ybarra, 2000; Triandis et al., 1984).

Applying these findings to the perspective of a candidate in an interview situation, Sanchez-Burks and Blount (2005) reasoned that Anglo-Americans' relative inattentiveness to relational cues at work would reduce their vulnerability to the negative experience of not receiving behavioral mimicry in a social interaction. Conversely, Latinos' greater attentiveness to relational cues would increase their susceptibility to the negative effects of not receiving mimicry. In the highly evaluative quality of the interview situation, presumably one that enhances the importance of experiencing rapport with an interaction partner (i.e. the interviewer), the performance of Latinos more than Anglo-Americans was argued to be contingent on interviewer mimicry. In this study, Anglo-American and Latino mid-level employees of a large multinational firm participated in a mock interview conducted in the headquarters' office suite. The participants were randomly assigned to a version of a mock interview in which the interviewer mirrored or did not mirror the gestures, mannerism and posture of the naïve applicants. An independent panel of American male and female professional recruiters and interview coaches, blind to condition, later evaluated the candidate's performances using videos of the interviews. These judges evaluated each interviewee's performance on seven specific dimensions (assertiveness, impact, motivation, verbal communication skills, body language, overall impression), chosen based on a priori conversations with the judges and other HR managers. This operationalization of performance was intended to model evaluations that typically occur in company recruiting interviews.

The results of their study show the relative importance of non-verbal rapport for Latino and Anglo-American applicants and its role in interview situations more generally. The researchers found that overall, the absence of interviewer mimicry tended to negatively affect all participants (thus, Anglo-Americans relational focus at work may be reduced but it is not eliminated). However, they also found that the performance evaluations of Latinos as compared with Anglo-Americans were substantially more contingent on the non-verbal behavior of the interviewer.

Latinos were rated more poorly in the non-mimicry interviews. In addition, Latinos reported higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of self-esteem after the interviews with no mimicry compared to those with mimicry.

In considering the implications of this study for naturally occurring interviews, it is important to note that the interviewer was specifically trained to refrain from mirroring half of the candidates. The relative impairment of Latino performance and subjective well-being would not be cause for concern if it were not for prior studies showing that an Anglo-American is naturally unlikely to mirror candidates (Sanchez-Burks, 2002; Van Baaran et al., 2003). Together, it suggests that mere differences in cultural cognitions used by an Anglo-American interviewer and a Latino candidate (e.g. schemas that reflect PRI vs. *simpatía*) can adversely influence the performance, hence success of Latino candidates. Thus, this cultural schema difference, even in the absence of any ethnic prejudice, can result in an outcome that appears discriminatory. The solution may require an approach that increases the awareness of these non-conscious processes among recruiters and candidates. Interviewers may then be able to “get it out in the open” that such influences exist with the hope that this will help inoculate the interaction against the non-conscious effects. The candidate might then begin to correctly attribute unwarranted anxiety and remind the interviewer to be vigilant to unintended messages.

This cultural perspective on inter-group dynamics does indeed complicate an already complex issue. In addition to the powerful and often unnoticed negative consequences of cognitive processes directly tied to in-group and out-group biases, mere incompatibilities in relational cognitions provide additional challenges for managing diversity in organizations.

The unique influence of cultural schemas on the nature of intercultural contact revealed by these and other studies from the emerging sub-field of culture and cognition research open new avenues of research (DeVoe & Iyengar, 2004; Earley, 2002; Gelfand & Dyer, 2000; Morris, 2000). Consider, for example, the innovative study on diverse team dynamics conducted by Polzer and Swann (2002). Their research provided evidence that the prevailing dilemma over whether teams should focus on a superordinate identity or focus instead on the unique identities of each team member overlooked important variation in how individuals think about their own identities. In their study, the best predictor of high performance among diverse teams was not whether individual identities were highlighted or surrendered to the team identity but the level of accuracy of team members’ perceptions of how others saw them. Success in diverse teams appears to require of its members’ attention to others.

Polzner and Swann’s study show the benefits of using relational schemas that encode task and relational information in work settings – a tendency at odds with

a PRI orientation that restricts attention to relational concerns. Thus, exposure to PRI may serve as a moderator of such congruence between observer and target identity perceptions with greater exposure associated with less congruence. This would lead to the prediction that Americans in general, and Anglo-Americans in particular, are least likely to notice the cues required to achieve congruence in diverse teams. If this is indeed the case, then combining PRI with the work of Polzner and Swann (2002) suggests an irony in that within the society most pressed with coordinating across an increasing mosaic of cultural diversity (i.e. the U.S.) persists a relational ideology that works against the very process necessary to achieve this coordination.

## CONFLICT, TRUTH AND ASSUMED CONSEQUENCES

Two recent reviews of conflict research reaffirm the challenges inherent in collaborative endeavors. The divides and tensions that influence a group's ability to succeed in their task objectives broadly reflect two forms of conflict: task-oriented conflict and relationship conflict (Coser, 1956; Jehn, 1994, 1995). The presence of task conflict signals disagreements in ideas and opinions about the work itself. Relationship conflict focuses on disagreements and dynamics unrelated to the task and signal interpersonal tensions and personality clashes that arise from incompatibilities among group members. Although scholars disagree (in a task-focused manner) about the conditions under which task conflict might be beneficial to workgroups (e.g. De Dreu & West, 2001; Jehn, 1994; Jehn, Northcraft & Neale, 1999; Lovelace, Shapiro & Weingart, 2001), scholars express a rare unanimity that relationship conflict always has negative consequences (e.g. Carnevale & Probst, 1998; Jehn, 1995; Simons & Peterson, 2000).

This consensus received an empirical seal of approval in a recent meta-analysis (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003) showing a robust negative effect on every individual and group outcome measured, including productivity, consensus building and satisfaction. Moreover, the ubiquitous harm posed by relationship conflict was recently captured in Jehn and Bendersky's (2003) comprehensive contingency model that outlines the conditions under which each type of conflict will have a positive or negative effect. In their model, there is not a single situation imagined in which relationship conflict might avoid having a negative effect on workgroup dynamics and outcomes.

Given the bleak outlook for those workgroups likely to experience relationship conflict, it should be rare to encounter examples where people would not recognize how such conflict reliably limits a team's ability to succeed. Maintaining such disbelief would require a person to give far less weight to relational concerns

over task concerns in estimating the factors that predict project performance. Imagine, for example, being in the process of choosing a team to join for your next project assignment and having the dilemma of having an offer to join a workgroup highly likely to experience relationship conflict but whose members collectively have the best knowledge and technical skills required for success on task-specific objectives. Given the presence of highly desired talent and skill in the team, the decision to join this team rather than another will depend on the importance assigned to interpersonal dynamics regarding its likely effect on task performance. If interpersonal discord is believed to sink even a highly talented team – as described in the empirical literature – then the level of talent is a mute point. Conversely, for those who believe that interpersonal harmony may be nice but not a prerequisite for success on task objectives, the offer is an attractive opportunity. Yet, how likely is this sentiment to be encountered given the empirical evidence challenging its logic?

As described in this article, diminishing the importance of relational concerns in such work settings is the hallmark of PRI and its influence on American workways. Applying PRI theory to beliefs about conflict suggests that such a sentiment would actually appear quite rational for Americans. Neuman and colleagues (2005) recently examined this possibility and other hypotheses derived from PRI theory. They reasoned that PRI theory's focus on the relational dimension of work would restrict its influence to beliefs about conflict specifically to conflict in the interpersonal domain (i.e. relationship conflict). That is, PRI provides no basis to suspect that Americans would underestimate the influence of conflict outside the interpersonal domain, such as task conflict. This focus on relationship conflict and not conflict in general provides a framework for examining differences within the U.S. (i.e. beliefs about relationship versus task conflict). Moreover, it suggests that whereas Americans might disagree with Asians about the influence of relationship conflict, they would not necessarily disagree about task conflict. This suggests a pattern of cultural differences and cultural similarities regarding conflict beliefs: Americans are likely to share with other cultures a belief that task conflict limits team performance but differ in how important relationship conflict is to team performance.

To examine whether these beliefs are unique to conflict concerning relationships and characteristics of Americans in particular, the researchers compared these beliefs to those concerning task-related conflict and to the beliefs held by other cultural groups (i.e. Korean, Chinese and Japanese). A survey of Americans and East Asians assessed their agreement that relationship and task conflict necessarily limits a team's ability to accomplish their task-specific objectives and that to predict a team's likely performance, one would need to know about a member's ability to get along. Across two studies, Americans and East Asians similarly agreed that task

conflict is a roadblock to success on task-specific objectives. East Asians believed this was true also for relationship conflict. Americans, however, did not agree that relationship conflict necessarily affects team performance on task objectives. Moreover, when given the opportunity to join a highly talented team that will likely experience relationship conflict, Americans were twice as likely as East Asians to state that they would join such a team.

The results of these studies provide evidence that Americans have intuitions about the consequences of relational conflict that departs from: (a) what empirical studies demonstrate to be the case in actual workgroups; (b) their beliefs about task-related conflict; and (c) beliefs about conflict common among other cultural groups. This divergence from empirical reality, which stems from underestimating the importance of relational dynamics at work, also serves as a specific example of the more general difficulty people can have in understanding what effects are actually operating in workgroups (Staw, 1975). Finally, the insights of the research also complement the work of Gelfand and others showing how subjective construals of conflict, referred to as “conflict frames,” are shaped by prevailing cultural ideologies (Gelfand et al., 2001, 2002; Pinkley, 1990).

### *American Professionalism*

To be a good, valued person in a society is to convey perceptions of one’s self that are congruent with its beliefs, values and practices. Normative violations come in many forms, displaying inappropriate symbols or making a reference to a taboo subject, for example, and they exact a toll on the violator’s image in the eyes of others. In organizations, this cultural imperative is also neatly packaged in the concept, “be professional.” It’s a slogan often stated as if it were as explicit as it is laconic. The recipient of this advice is expected to recognize their breach from accepted norms and adjust accordingly. Idiosyncrasies are likely to exist between industries, organizations and even roles within American organizations. Yet, might these variations regarding what it means to be considered professional resonate with a common theme such as the PRI directions for maintaining a work/non-work divide and minimizing references to one’s personal life? If so, how might this implicit assumption be shown to exist?

Anthropologists have argued that among the building blocks of culture are historically transmitted patterns of meanings embodied in symbols – a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form (Geertz, 1973; Ortner, 1973; Sperber, 1996). This argument suggests that meanings of professionalism should be manifested through symbolic cues, for example, in the artifacts one displays in their office. This reasoning would be consistent with the work of organizational

scholars who have more recently begun to show how employees use symbols, such as dress and décor, to signal particular identities (Elsbach, 2003, 2004; Rafaeli & Dutton, 1997). Thus, both the attempts to convey identities and interpretations of other's identities rely on symbols.

A symbolic manifestation of PRI could be narrowed to those symbols that are tied specifically to a person's work versus personal life. If PRI has a role in shaping American's schema of professionalism, then restricting the amount of symbolic references to one's personal life (e.g. displaying a child's finger paintings, talking about one's current girlfriend) ought to be a significant differentiator between those considered or not considered to be professional. To examine these ideas, Heaphy and her colleagues (2005) developed a paradigm to indirectly assess people's schema of a professional and unprofessional person's workspace. In one study, the researchers collected examples of what cubicle-dwelling employees might have in their workspace. Items included common work-related things, such as a stapler, file folder, award certificate and items that referenced one's life outside the workplace, such as a family photo or a child's drawing. Images of these items were put on self-adhesive stickers and given to mid-level managers, along with a large image of an office cubicle containing only a desk and empty shelves. Managers were given a description of the person who occupied this cubicle: a middle-aged, married employee with two children who has a good performance record. Half were also told this person was considered professional, the other half were told this person *was not* considered professional. The task was to construct what they believed this person's office looked like using the images on the stickers. Thus, one might place a stapler on the desk, a photo on a shelf, a calendar on the wall, et cetera. The paradigm was designed to measure people's mental model of the symbolic markers of professionalism by having them assemble what they believe the office actually looks like for the target person.

The researchers found that the difference between a professional and unprofessional office followed a "20% rule." Someone who is considered professional restricts the number of symbols from their personal life – children's crayon drawings, vacation photos, even sports paraphernalia – to fewer than 20% of what they display. This pattern was found for men and women managers from a wide range of industries and did not vary whether the target was described as "Eric" or "Stephanie." The link between unprofessionalism and blurring the work/non-work divide is consistent with the tenets of PRI. However, this association could be a natural and universal feature of professionalism in organizations and thus does not require a culture-specific theory to account for the remarkably low threshold. To examine this possibility, Heaphy and her colleagues compared the responses of managers born and raised in the U.S. to those who varied in the amount of

time they had lived in the U.S. (from about one to 30 years). The results show that the link between professionalism and the amount of personal content in one's office only becomes obvious with increasing exposure to the U.S. There was a linear function between time spent in the U.S. and differentiating professional and unprofessional by the proportion of personal content displayed in the office. The pattern of results shows that PRI is evident in the symbolic markers used by others to differentiate the professional from the unprofessional. Moreover, this differentiator appears culturally bound and specific to the meaning of "American professionalism."

The PRI work/non-work distinction, even as part of the mental model of what it means to be professional, is culturally important only to the extent that blurring this distinction can be detrimental to one's career – that is, if it has consequences. In a second experiment, Heaphy and her colleagues examined this possibility by measuring how even subtle deviations from this ideology might influence one's likelihood of getting a second interview by corporate recruiters (Heaphy et al., 2004, Study 2). In this study, several corporate recruiters of MBAs from top business schools were asked to evaluate job application materials of one of four candidates. The materials included an essay about what the candidate would say in an initial client meeting to build rapport with the client. PRI presents a dilemma regarding how one should build personal rapport yet not be too personal. This dilemma was operationalized by having half of the candidates include in their essays statements about how they try to look for books in the client's office they had read and say, "Oh, I also read that book last year" versus "Oh, I also read that book. My girlfriend recommended it to me." In addition, the candidate either mentioned they might say "What a nice office you have" versus making reference to a photo on the client's desk and saying "What a nice family you have."

This difference, regardless of how subtle or minor, made all the difference in whether recruiters said they would invite the candidate for a second interview. Candidates whose attempts to build rapport would include such references to family or personal relationships were significantly less likely to be invited back for a second interview. The study reveals the role of institutions in selecting against those that deviate from the PRI schema of professionalism and thereby works to reinforce and reproduce particular cultural ideologies. Together, these two experiments suggest that to be professional in American organizations is, in part, to refrain from integrating work and personal spheres of life. Future research may show that it also includes a broader emotional detachment. As would be consistent with a PRI orientation, the prototypical American professional may indeed be one who maintains a polite but unsentimental impersonality in their office and organization.

## CONCLUSION

This article has identified as a cross-cultural anomaly, American patterns of giving diminished importance to affective and relational concerns in work settings and described the construct PRI to address the social-historical roots and the contemporary social-cognitive nature of this anomaly. Empirical evidence shows that PRI beliefs are associated with exposure to cultural contexts influenced by ascetic Calvinism such as in the U.S. The link to Calvinism explains between cultural differences (e.g. U.S. versus China, Mexico and Korea) and within cultural differences (e.g. European-Americans versus Mexican-Americans). The context-specific nature of PRI further provides a framework for understanding the conditions under which to expect cultural similarities (outside work settings) and cultural differences (in work settings), with the unfortunate, but important, insight that cultural differences in relational sensitivity become pronounced in work settings.

Theory about PRI and the evidence for its key propositions provide further validation for Weber's argument that traditional religious values have an enduring influence on the institutions of a society (cf. Bellah et al., 1996; Bendix, 1977; Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Lipset, 1996). In this way, PRI provides a psychological model that compliments a vibrant sociological research stream on what is referred to as "institutional imprinting." This research shows how institutions, like relational work styles, are shaped by the socio-historical context in which they are formed (Baron, Hannan & Burton, 1999; Marquis, 2003; Stinchcombe, 1965).

The nature of PRI's influence in American culture was shown to affect the relational schemas people use to navigate affective and relational concerns in work compared to non-work settings. PRI also affects attention to and memory for social-emotional cues, counterfactual reasoning about the relationship between a task and relational focus at work and non-conscious behaviors tied to relational sensitivity. The social cognitive framework of PRI is consistent with increasing calls by scholars for a schema-based approach to understanding how culture shapes organizational behavior (Earley, 2002; Morris & Young, 2002). This "culture and cognition" movement reflects the need for frameworks that specify the psychological mechanisms through which culture shapes behavior and the conditions under which to expect cultural differences versus cultural similarities (Brockner, 2003; Peng, Nisbett & Wong, 2002).

### *Contribution to Issues in Organizational Behavior*

This article reviews the contribution of PRI to several issues in the organizational literature, including workgroup diversity and prejudice, communication,



interethnic interviews, beliefs about conflict and notions of professionalism. The PRI construct provides novel insights in these areas, for example, how intergroup prejudice can occur even in the absence of in-group favoritism based on social categories. Despite the different topics, paradigms, and approaches in the research described, they converge on the idea that consistent with a PRI orientation, American workways can be characterized by a divide between work and non-work settings whereby affective and relational concerns are restricted at work. The usefulness of PRI for theory building and empirical analysis extend to any organizational behavior dynamics affected by attentiveness to emotional and relational cues.

Efforts to explain particular cultural phenomena reasonably raise questions about how unique it is to one society. The various research streams described in this article juxtapose American patterns with those in Latin American and many East Asian societies. That the U.S. differs in one particular manner from these very unique and diverse cultures indeed suggests a pattern that scholars since Crevecoeur, Tocqueville and Weber have referred to as “American exceptionalism.” Some of the most compelling evidence in support of this exceptionalism comes from the World Values Survey (WVS) described by Inglehart and Baker (2000). In this 65-country survey, there is a clear trend for industrialization to go hand in hand with a move away from traditionalism to a more secular worldview – except for the U.S.! In contrast to its presumed counterparts in Northern Europe, the U.S. is moving toward more, not less, traditional religious values. Despite shared religious ties between the U.S. and many Northern European countries, Baker (2004) argues that “many of the people who traveled to these American shores were systematically different from those who stayed behind in the old countries and set up fundamentally different practices and institutions.” In his book entitled, “*American Exceptionalism*,” Lipsett (1996) makes a similar point and reviews a cornucopia of evidence across diverse fields to illustrate the uniqueness of American patterns. All of this shows that the U.S., as with other cultures, possesses a unique, rich cultural tradition.

Countering this argument of cultural divergence in relational work patterns, others have argued that work styles are converging as the result of increasing globalization (e.g. Birnbaum-More & Wong, 1995; Zartman & Bernman, 1982). This argument stems from the observation that managers around the world are often educated within American business schools and have extensive experience in multiple cultural contexts. Presumably, this cross-fertilization reduces cultural variation and creates a universal work style. This globalization argument would suggest that PRI would have little influence in the cross-cultural dynamics reported in these studies and any differences that emerge should be smaller in work settings. Variations in relational style that may exist, according to this view, are or, currently will be, more or less trivial.

The alternative view suggested by the various research streams discussed in this article challenge this assumption. The implications of this research might aptly be summarized through the following analogy. Oceans, in a way, are like the diversity of people that inhabit their respective shores. From the Pacific to the Indian, they share a great deal in common, and yet have characteristics unique to each one. To focus on superficial characteristics – all oceans come in shades of blue-green – is to ignore more subtle, nonetheless powerful differences that distinguish them: the movements of their currents, the variation in their tides; differences that are essential to recognize if one wishes to navigate across them. The research described in this article offers insights into several such subtle differences.

## NOTES

1. Ironically this item is one of the stronger predictors of performance outcomes! (see Buckingham & Coffman, 1999).
2. Noteworthy exceptions include studies conducted by Jehn and colleagues (Jehn & Thatcher, 1997; Jehn, Northcraft & Neale, 1999) that include differences or perceptions thereof concerning organizational values.

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