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## Introduction

This study reconceptualizes the term structural tightness in order to clarify the equivocal empirical findings in cross-cultural conformity research. Structural tightness is defined as the ability to impose collective role expectations on members of a community. The results of an exploratory test of the theoretical proposal are reported and the implications for future research are discussed. In general, the findings suggest that further investigation of the theoretical proposal is warranted. Researchers working within the social structure and personality framework continue to generate useful pure and applied research hypotheses (House, 1981; Spenner, 1988; Turner, 1988). Such advances are sustained by research that emphasizes "*aspects* of societies in relation to *aspects* of individual personality" (House, 1981:526. Emphasis in original). The research reported here follows this tradition and focuses on one component of a promising cross-cultural model where equivocal empirical findings have stalled further research. This paper has two specific objectives. First, it forwards a reconceptualization of the term "structural tightness". In doing so a social structural dimension pertinent to advancing the cross-cultural research model under consideration is specified. Secondly, the results of an exploratory study testing some implications of the theoretical proposal are reported.

## The Model

For over two decades J.W. Berry and his colleagues (Berry, 1966, 1967, 1976, 1979; Berry, et al., 1974, 1976, 1986) have elaborated an ecocultural model positing the following relationship between social structure and cognitive style: members of structurally tight societies are expected to display

lower levels of psychological differentiation than members of loosely structured societies. Moreover, it is anticipated that such reduced levels of psychological differentiation will have consequences for both perception and social conduct. The anticipated relationships between the structural tightness dimension of social structure and the perceptual and behavioral aspects of personality are derived as follows.

For successful adaptation to their ecocultural demands, structurally tight societies develop harsh socialization practices emphasizing obedience and submission to authority. Such child rearing experiences are hypothesized to result in a reduced sense of separate identity that is manifest in "field dependence" in the perceptual domain and a greater "sensitivity and attentiveness to others" (Witkin and Berry, 1975:63) in social conduct. In various cross-cultural settings, Berry and his colleagues have extensively tested their ideas regarding the effect of social structure on perceptual independence and susceptibility to conformity pressures. In general, Berry's thesis for the perceptual domain receives considerable support, while evidence for the proposed relationship in the social domain is equivocal (Berry, 1966, 1967, 1976, 1979; Berry & Annis, 1974; Witkin & Berry, 1975; Boldt, 1976, 1978; Irvine & Berry 1983, 1988). For some time the lack of clear support for the hypothesis relating structural tightness to social conformity has inhibited the development of Berry's thoughtful and promising cross-cultural model. We believe that the following theoretical considerations provide a useful reconceptualization for better specifying how structural tightness affects social conformity.

**Theoretical Considerations**

A problem with Berry's thesis is that his formulation of structural tightness ambiguously specifies the term's referents. Sometimes a greater *number* and diversity of roles and role relationships is stated as the distinguishing feature of these societies, while at other times it is the *imposed* nature of the role expectations that is emphasized. The observed equivocal empirical results follow because these different dimensions of social structure have

competing implications for conduct. Increasing the number and diversity of roles in a social system expands the range of courses of action available to an actor and, therefore, enhances choice and individual autonomy (Coser, 1975; House, 1981). On the other hand, social structures that impose role expectations have the effect of reducing an actor's autonomy by narrowing the opportunities for negotiating a preferred course of action (Ford, Young and Box, 1967).

Given this conceptually ambivalent and empirically untenable usage of structural tightness, we suggest that these two analytically distinct dimensions of social structure not be confused. Specifically, we propose that "structural tightness" be defined exclusively in terms of the degree to which performance expectations are imposed on actors. Furthermore, we propose that the term "structural complexity" be reserved for the quantitative dimension of social systems indicated by the number and diversity of roles and the relationships they contain.

From this revised perspective, the qualitative dimension of structural tightness/looseness is seen as cross-cutting the quantitative dimension of structural simplicity/complexity (Roberts and Boldt, 1979). Hence, both simple and complex societies may be relatively tighter or looser although, in general, one would expect simple societies to be tighter than complex societies (Boldt, 1978). Since these two dimensions are continuous, the possible categorizations of societies using them are infinite. However, for simplified purposes, we may conceptualize four types of societies identified as: complex and loose (modern pluralistic democracies); complex and tight (urban industrial oligarchies); simple and loose (hunting and gathering groups); simple and tight (agricultural and pastoral groups).

Using this typology we propose that individual autonomy and field independence are maximized in societies that are *both* complex and loose. Here permissive socialization practices and independence training are combined with structural opportunities which permit the exercise of individual choice and discretion. These circumstances encourage field independent cognitive styles that, following Berry's argument, will display themselves in

reduced social conformity. By contrast, members of simple and tight societies should have the more field dependent cognitive styles associated with greater social conformity.

One potential advantage of this reconceptualization is that cross-cultural researchers can extend their analyses beyond subsistence-level groups to acculturating and even more urban-industrial societies (Hofstede, 1980). Gamble and Ginzberg (1981) have noted that extrapolating from Berry's unmodified formulation leads to the empirically untenable prediction that members of modern complex societies are more field dependent than their counterparts in simple agricultural and hunting groups. Berry and his collaborators do not make such an extrapolation, of course, and explicitly note that to do so "is to ignore a crucial parameter of the model" (Berry and Annis, 1974:180). Our point is that such extrapolation might be possible if structural tightness was reconceptualized along the lines we have suggested.

Accepting a conceptualization of structural tightness in terms of imposed role expectations immediately raises the further problem of specifying the *source* of these expectations. Previous research utilizing the field dependence /independence construct addresses itself primarily to the relative influence of internal versus external frames of reference, and the thesis is that external influences predominate in tight societies. External influence, however, can derive from different sources, and the question is whose (or which) role expectations are being imposed in tight societies?

One common way in which to categorize others whose expectations must be taken into account (Stokes and Hewitt, 1976) is to distinguish between (1) those discrete others whose expectations influence the individual in the process of immediate alignment of situated conduct (role-specific others), and (2) the expectations of one's larger cultural group *collectively*, which transcend individual self-interest and immediate situational constraints (the collective other). Both kinds of expectations are simultaneously operative in all societies, but their relative predominance may vary (Boldt, 1979). The expectations of role-specific others must continuously be taken into account if interaction is to proceed, and the degree to which such expectations are

imposed on individuals will vary widely from one situation to another. But since they emanate from discrete individuals in specific contexts, such variation is an unlikely basis on which to differentiate and categorize total societies. The expectations of the collective other, in contrast, ultimately represent shared cultural ideals, and the failure of conduct to correspond with these ideals represents a threat to the very basis of social order. Societies therefore develop organizational strategies and arrangements to assure such correspondence (in greater or lesser degree), one of which is the creation of a central authority with the means to impose collective ideals and interests on individual members in many different situations. Variation on this dimension does recommend itself as an appropriate basis on which to differentiate and categorize societies, and it is precisely this kind of variation that constitutes the basis of structural tightness as we have defined it. A society is tightly structured to the extent that it successfully imposes its collective role expectations on individuals; it is a society in which collective (as opposed to individual) interests are accorded a higher priority than they are in a loosely structured society.

If one accepts this conceptualization, it follows that the greater "social sensitivity and attentiveness to others" (i.e., field dependence in the social domain) which characterizes individuals reared in tightly structured societies should be similarly focussed on the collective other, and testing procedures employed to measure this attribute ought to reflect this understanding. Yet a review of the relevant literature reveals little explicit attention to the source of external influence in general, and virtually no attempt to distinguish specifically between the collective and role-specific others. We suggest that this may account, at least in part, for the inconsistent findings reported in this literature. A number of investigators, for example, have employed standard Asch-type tests (Asch, 1956) in which subjects are exposed to the contrived influence of only three or four peers temporarily assembled to perform a specific task (usually judging the length of lines). Berry and others, however, have utilized a procedure which (on critical items) includes the following instruction to subjects (tested individually):

> Here is another sheet with nine lines on it, one here at the top, and eight beneath it. This time I am going to give you a hint. Most Temne (or Eskimo or Scottish) people say this line ... is equal in length to the line at the top. Which one do you say? (Berry, 1967:416 Emphasis added).

The difference between the Asch and Berry type tests in terms of the source of influence is quite clear: the former, conventional procedure invokes the expectations of what we have termed role-specific others, while the latter invokes the collective expectations of the subject's entire cultural group. Our analysis would lead us to hypothesize that subjects from a structurally tight society would conform significantly more highly on Berry's collectivist version than on a standard Asch-type test. The following section reports on a preliminary test of this idea.

**An Empirical Test**

*Methodology*

The Berry testing procedure (see Berry, 1967 and 1979, for details) differs from more conventional Asch-type tests not only in the source of influence it invokes. Subjects are tested individually; there are no others physically present, and the contrived group norm is presented to subjects by the experimenter as he/she points out the line that "most others" have selected. The Berry procedure also contains a "hint" (i.e. a veiled endorsement of the group norm) from the experimenter, which is absent in most Asch-type tests (Mann, 1980:168-169). Given these additional differences between the two procedures, any difference in the results obtained cannot confidently be attributed to variations in the source of influence. To overcome this difficulty in our research, two versions of the Berry procedure were utilized which differed only with respect to the source of influence invoked. One version was identical to the procedure previously used by Berry, but in the second version a critical change in the experimenter's instructions was introduced. Instead of informing subjects that *most members of their group* (i.e. the collective other) had selected the false norm, subjects were told that "the last two people who

took the test" (i.e. role-specific other) had chosen the false norm.

The test employed was identical in every respect to Berry's "Independence Task" (version 2, as outlined in Berry, 1979:191-93), consisting of two practice items (each item being a sheet with one standard and eight comparison lines of varying lengths), four test items on which no norm was suggested, and four critical items on which a false norm was designated. If the subject chose the designated line, a score of 5 was assigned; if he/she chose the correct line, a score of 0 was assigned, and intermediate choices were assigned the appropriate score between 0 and 5. Since there were four critical items, the total possible score ranged from 0 to 20. However, following Berry (1979), only the last three lines of the critical items were actually scored in order to make the results comparable to those obtained in previous research which employed version 1 of the Independence Task. Hence for present purposes the total possible score ranged from 0 (low conformity) to 15 (high conformity).

*Subjects*

An experimental group of 75 Hutterite subjects, aged 18 to 43, was obtained from 6 Hutterite colonies in Manitoba, Canada. Colonies were selected largely on the basis of convenience, and the subjects (36 males and 39 females) were volunteers from the total eligible population aged 18 to 45. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of the two testing conditions.

The Hutterites are a German-speaking ethnic/religious group whose origin dates back to the Protestant Reformation and the founding of the Anabaptist movement. They lived in semi-autonomous colonies, each of which is a relatively isolated, homogeneous, rural community with a population of 50 to 150 members, practicing a Christian form of communal living. Although philosophically egalitarian, each colony maintains a centralized, clearly defined and visible hierarchy of authority with the means to assert itself in virtually every aspect of daily life. Childhood socialization, for instance, is defined as not only a particular family's responsibility but as that of the entire society. A notable lack of privacy enhances the leadership's ability to detect and punish

deviance. In short, Hutterite society appears to be relatively simple (in terms of the number and diversity of roles) and tightly structured (in terms of imposed collective role expectations) (Pelto, 1968; Peters, 1965; Boldt, 1976, 1979), both of which are presumably correlated with field dependence and hence social conformity.

A comparison group of 51 undergraduate University students was also tested, on a voluntary basis, as representative of a less tightly structured (but also more complex) society. The collective other in this case was operationalized as "most University students on this campus". Ideally, of course, we would have preferred subjects from an equally simple (but notably loose) society, such as the Inuit, as our comparison. This was unfortunately not feasible under the circumstances, but a partial comparison to Berry's samples was still possible. The testing procedure was pretested on both Hutterite and University student samples. Hutterite subjects were tested in appropriate quarters (usually the school) on their respective colonies, while University students were tested on campus.

*Hypotheses and Results*

Since our reconceptualization of structural tightness emphasizes the importance of conformity to the collective rather than role-specific others, empirical findings of the following sort are anticipated.

Hypothesis 1: Hutterites, as representatives of a structurally tight society, are expected to display greater conformity to the collective other than to role-specific others.

Hypothesis 2: Structurally tight Hutterites are expected to display greater conformity to the collective other than a structurally loose group like University students.

Hypothesis 3: Structurally loose University students are expected to show less conformity to the collective other than to role-specific others.

It should be clear from our earlier description of methodology that this study can only offer a preliminary test of these hypotheses. The purpose is

exploratory. The measurement procedures are provisional and the samples are relatively small and unrepresentative. Nonetheless, availability samples such as these have a legitimate place, especially for studies in under-researched areas (Mueller, et al., 1977:370). Moreover, if the results of this first approximation are promising, a foundation for more rigorous studies will be established.

Given these constraints, the results of the social conformity tests are reported in Tables 1 and 2. The findings are interpreted with reference to each of the three hypotheses.

Table 1
Conformity Score Means, Standard Deviations, and Sample Sizes

| Sample | Test Condition | Mean | St. Dev. | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hutterite | Collective | 6.76 | 2.82 | 41 |
| | Role-Specific | 4.50 | 2.70 | 34 |
| University | Collective | 5.57 | 3.19 | 28 |
| | Role-Specific | 5.00 | 3.36 | 23 |

The first hypothesis predicting that Hutterites would conform more to the expectations of the collective other than role-specific others is supported by the data. The means differences between these two test conditions is evident in Table 1 and statistically significant (Table 2). This result supports our conceptualization of "structural tightness" as greater sensitivity to the collective other over role-specific others. This interpretation is also supported by the results of a previous study (Boldt, 1976) in which Hutterite and non-Hutterite scores on an Asch-type (role-specific others) test were not substantively or statistically significant. Similarly, in the present study, Hutterites subjects actually conformed less (but not significantly so) than University students in the role-specific test condition ($t=-.06$, d.f.$=41$, $p=.279$). Without reconcep-

tualizing structural tightness in terms of sensitivity to the collective other, these findings about role-specific conformity would suggest that Hutterites and non-Hutterites do not differ with respect to conformity. Such an interpretation is counter-intuitive and lacks face validity to anyone who has done fieldwork in these communities. The reformulated understanding of structural tightness

Table 2
Sample and Test Condition Conformity Score t-Tests

Hutterite Collective versus Hutterite Role-Specific
$t=3.49$, d.f.$=73$, $p=.001$

Hutterite Collective versus University Collective
$t=1.59$, d.f.$=53$, $p=.059$

University Collective versus University Role-Specific
$t=0.62$, d.f.$=49$, $p=.270$

specifies the aspect of social structure that makes all of these findings more sensible.

The second hypothesis predicts that the structurally tight Hutterite sample will display more conformity in the collective other condition than the structurally loose University sample. Inspection of the mean differences in Table 1 suggests this is the case, although these differences are not quite statistically significant at the .05 level (Table 2). Although obtaining statistical significance is problematic with relatively small sample sizes like those of this study, we found this non-significance puzzling and examined the matter more carefully.

Recall that Hutterites and University students were selected as representatives of tight and loose groups. These selections were assumed to be valid, based on our fieldwork contacts with both these groups. However, closer inspection shows that our assumptions were roughly but not entirely appropriate. Berry (1979:175) ranks 21 samples that have been subjected to his conformity testing procedure. Comparing our Hutterite sample to this ranking reveals that they are sixth highest (i.e. most conforming), and are just

below the Telefol of New Guinea who score very tight on Berry's "Cultural Index" (1979:183). These findings confirm our assumption that the Hutterites constitute a structurally tight sample. However, our premise that University students comprise a structurally loose subculture is not as accurate.

The University sample, with a mean collective-other conformity score of 5.57, is in the lower-middle range of Berry's 21 sample ranking, rather than at or near the bottom. This finding suggests that the University sample is not as structurally loose as we assumed. Perhaps the apparent "individualism" of University students is more accurately interpreted as conformity to the (sometimes unconventional) demands of their membership group. In any case, the misidentification of University students as a clear instance of a structurally loose comparison group, and the relatively small sample sizes, help account for the statistical non-significance of the collective-other conformity differences reported in Tables 1 and 2, even though these differences are in the predicted direction.

The third hypothesis predicts that the structurally tight University student sample would have greater role-specific than collective conformity scores. However, as we have just observed, the University sample is not as structurally loose as originally believed and, consequently, the validity of this hypothesis is questionable. In fact, Table 1 shows the University sample tending to conform more in the collective-other condition, but not at statistically significant levels (Table 2). Small sample sizes are a deficiency here, but the fact that the significance results are not close to conventional levels suggests that the findings are not entirely artifactual. Recognizing that the University sample is in the moderately tight (rather than very loose) range might lead us to anticipate results of this sort. Because the University sample is not extreme in structural looseness terms, we might hypothesize (ex post facto) two things: first, that the collective other would continue to have some significance, which it does (Table 1); and, second, that sensitivity to the collective-other would not be much greater than to the role-specific others (hence the statistical non-significance in Table 2).

It is clear in our data that, as groups move from very to moderately tight,

the absolute amount and statistical significance of the differences between the conformity to the collective-other and role-specific others decreases. For instance, among Hutterites this difference is a statistically significant 2.26 points, while for the University sample it is a non-significant 0.57 points. Perhaps it is only when we test samples that are clearly structurally loose that the conformity to role-specific others will be greater than that to the collective other.

Unfortunately, we do not have the data to fully test this assertion on a comparison group such as the Inuit, who are structurally loose through their promotion of egalitarianism and individualism (Honigmann, 1968; Ridington, 1988; Woodburn, 1981). Nonetheless some indirect evidence is suggestive. Note that in Table 1 as the groups become relatively "looser" the collective conformity scores decrease while role-specific conformity scores increase. The trend these data suggest is that among even "looser" samples the role-specific conformity scores might cross over and become greater than the collective other conformity scores. A previous study by Berry (1979) did test Inuit (Eskimo) conformity scores using the collective other condition and reported a mean conformity score of 2.50 over two samples. This clearly identifies the Inuit as structurally loose and is the kind of collective other conformity score that supports our speculation. Unfortunately neither Berry nor anyone else has tested Inuit conformity to role-specific others, so our predictions remain theoretical. In our view, however, it is difficult to envision role-specific conformity scores that are not higher than this 2.50 level.

**Discussion**

This study reconceptualized the meaning of structural tightness in an effort to advance the development of Berry's cross-cultural model. Moreover, we conducted an exploratory empirical test of the utility of our theoretical proposal. Because of their limitations, the empirical findings are suggestive rather than definitive. Nonetheless, we find the theoretical rationale sufficiently plausible and the empirical results sufficiently credible to conclude that our proposal is promising.

This exploratory examination of our theoretical proposal provides hints about the directions for future research. Clearly more complete data are required, especially from a group, like the Inuit, that is unquestionably structurally loose. Additionally, greater effort should also be devoted to the development of testing procedures that are more appropriately designed to vary the source of external influence between the collective and role-specific others. Variation on this dimension is social psychologically at least as important as variation on the internal/external dimension, but has received relatively much less attention in cross-cultural empirical research. Our improvisation on the Berry procedure demonstrates the potential gain in information that can derive from measuring the effect of such variation, but it is also only an initial attempt to operationalize the two sources of external influence we have identified.

Our reconceptualization and test of structural tightness has centered on Berry's work. Our scheme, however, has wider substantive and theoretical applications for topics such as conformity research, Hutterite and ethnic studies, and collectivist community construction.

Regarding conformity research, Furnham (1984:71) notes that, although interest in the field "declined for most of the 1970's", recent replications of Asch's (1956) experiments (see, for example, Lamb and Alsikafi, 1980; Perrin and Spencer, 1981; Doms and Van Avermaet, 1981) have "regenerated a good deal of interest and debate in the topic of conformity" (Furnham, 1984:65). Even though interest in the topic remains, the area in afflicted by replicability problems stemming from the atheoretical nature of much of the research (Wiesenthal, et al., 1978). A recent critical review reiterates the need for theoretically informed work that specifies "wider social factors" and takes "careful consideration of cultural and societal differences" (Furnham, 1984:70). We believe our reconceptualization identifies a neglected yet important sociological dimension for comparative conformity research that has empirical plausibility. For instance, our conceptualization can be linked to the important work of Hoefstede (1980), which shows the salience of the property labelled "collectivism" for understanding societal differences.

Our framework also has implications for studies of ethnicity and multiculturalism, where the enduring concern is assimilation resistance. One important feature of groups that have successfully preserved their ethnic identities is "institutional completeness" (Baureiss, 1981). Our specification of structural tightness provides a better understanding of the social dynamics involved in establishing institutionally complete communities in a multicultural society (Roberts and Clifton, 1982). The Hutterites, in particular, are often identified as an exemplary illustration of ethnic persistence. Recent research using our notion of structural tightness suggests that the Hutterites' preeminent ability to maintain social boundaries and control social change may be diminishing (Peter, et al., 1982; Boldt and Roberts, 1981). Like the Hutterites, all successful communal societies are faced with the recurrent organizational task of satisfying the members' individual needs while ensuring that the collective interest prevails (McCall and Simmons, 1982). Our reconceptualization of structural tightness also meshes with and helps extend our appreciation of the dynamics of collectivist community construction, where organizations must demand exceptional loyalty and dedication from their membership (Kanter, 1972; Coser, 1974).

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