

# WEIRD PSYCHOLOGY

Who are you?

Perhaps you are WEIRD, raised in a society that is Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD). If so, you're likely rather psychologically peculiar. Unlike much of the world today, and most people who have ever lived, we WEIRD people are highly individualistic, self-obsessed, control-oriented, non-conformist and analytical. We focus on ourselves—our attributes, accomplishments and aspirations—over our relationships and social roles. We aim to be 'ourselves' across contexts and see inconsistencies in others as hypocrisy rather than flexibility. Though, like everyone else, we are inclined to go along with our peers and authority figures, we are less willing to conform to others when this conflicts with our own beliefs, observations and preferences. We see ourselves as unique individuals, not as nodes in a social network that stretches out through space and back in time. When acting, we prefer a sense of control and the feeling of making our own choices.

When reasoning, WEIRD people tend to look for universal categories and rules with which to organize the world, and mentally project straight lines to understand patterns and anticipate trends. We simplify complex phenomena by breaking them down into discrete constituents and assigning properties or abstract categories to these components—whether by creating types of particles, pathogens or personalities. We often miss the relationships between the parts or the similarities between phenomena that don't fit nicely into our categories. That is, we know a lot about individual trees, but often miss the forest.

WEIRD people are also particularly patient and often hardworking. Through potent self-regulation, we can defer gratification—in financial rewards, pleasure or security—well into the future in exchange for discomfort and uncertainty in the present. In fact, sometimes, WEIRD people take pleasure in hard work and find the experience purifying.

Paradoxically, and despite our strong individualism and self-obsession, WEIRD people tend to stick to impartial rules or principles and can be quite trusting, honest, fair and cooperative toward strangers or anonymous others. In fact, relative to most populations, we WEIRD people show *relatively* less favoritism toward our friends, families, co-ethnics and local communities over strangers. We think nepotism is wrong, and fetishize abstract principles over context, practicality and expediency.

Emotionally, WEIRD people are often pervaded by guilt as they fail to live up to their culturally-inspired, but largely self-imposed, standards and aspirations. In most non-WEIRD societies, shame—not guilt—dominates people's lives. People experience shame when they, their relatives or even their friends fail to live up to the standards imposed on them by their communities. Non-WEIRD populations might, for example, 'lose face' in front of the judging eyes of others when their daughter elopes with a stranger. Meanwhile, WEIRD people might feel guilty for taking a nap instead of hitting the gym even though this isn't an obligation, and no one will know. Guilt depends on one's own standards and self-evaluation while shame depends on societal standards and public evaluation.

These are just a few examples, the tip of a vast psychological iceberg that includes aspects of perception, memory, attention, reasoning, motivation, decision-making and moral judgment. We'll be probing more of this iceberg below.

But, the question of this book is, how did WEIRD populations become so psychologically peculiar? Why are they different?

Tracking this puzzle back into Late Antiquity, we'll see that one sect of Christianity drove the spread of a particular package of social norms and beliefs that dramatically altered marriage, families, inheritance and ownership in parts of Europe over centuries. This grass-roots transformation of family life initiated a set of psychological changes that spurred new forms of urbanization and fueled impersonal commerce while driving the formation of new social norms, laws and a diversity of voluntary organizations, ranging from merchant guilds and charter towns to universities and transnational monastic orders. You'll see how, in the process of explaining WEIRD psychology, we'll also illuminate the exotic nature of WEIRD religion, marriage and family. If you didn't know our religions, marriages and families were so strange, buckle up.

Understanding how and why some European populations became psychologically peculiar by the Late Middle Ages illuminates another great puzzle: the 'Rise of the West'. Why did Western European societies conquer so much of the world after about 1500 CE? Why did economic growth, powered by new technologies and the Industrial Revolution, erupt out of this same region in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, creating the globalization wave that is still crashing over the world today?

If a team of alien anthropologists had surveyed humanity from orbit in 1000 CE, or even 1200 CE, they would never have guessed that European populations would dominate the globe during the second half of the millennium. Instead, they probably would have bet on China or the Islamic World.<sup>40</sup>

What they would have missed from their orbital perch was the quiet fermentation of a new psychology during the Middle Ages in some European communities. This evolving proto-WEIRD psychology gradually laid the groundwork for the rise of impersonal markets, urbanization, constitutional governments, democratic politics, new religious beliefs, scientific societies and relentless innovation. In short, these psychological shifts created fertile soil for the seeds of the modern world. Thus, to understand the origins of the modern world we need to explore how our psychology culturally adapts and coevolves with our most basic social institution—the family.

Let's begin by taking a closer look at that iceberg I mentioned.

## REALLY, WHO ARE YOU?

Try completing this sentence in 10 different ways:

I am \_\_\_\_\_.

...

If you are WEIRD, you probably answered with words like "curious" or "passionate" and phrases like "scientist," "surgeon" or "kayaker." You were probably less inclined to respond with things like "Josh's dad" or "Maya's mother", even though those are equally true and potentially more central to your life. This focus on personal attributes, achievements and membership in abstract or idealized social groups

over personal relationships, inherited social roles and face-to-face communities is a robust feature of WEIRD psychology, but one that makes us rather peculiar from a global perspective.

Figure 1.1 shows how people from Africa and the South Pacific answer either the question “I am \_\_\_\_\_” (Figure 1.1A) or “Who am I?” (Figure 1.1B). The data available for Figure 1.1A permitted me to calculate both the percentage of responses that were specifically individualistic, referring to personal attributes, aspirations and achievements, and those that were about social roles and relationships. At one end of the spectrum, American undergraduates focus almost exclusively on their individual attributes, aspirations and achievements. At the other end are the Maasai and Samburu. In rural Kenya, these two tribal groups organize themselves in patrilineal clans and maintain a traditional cattle-herding lifestyle. They responded with their roles and relationships at least 80% of the time while only occasionally referencing their personal attributes or achievements (10% or less of the time). In the middle of this distribution are two populations from Nairobi, the bustling capital of Kenya that was founded in 1899 as a British railroad depot. Nairobi laborers, which included people from several different tribal groups, responded mostly with their roles and relationships, though they did this less than the Maasai or Samburu. Meanwhile, the fully urbanized and integrated undergraduates at the University of Nairobi (a European-style institution) look much more like their American counterparts, with most responses categorized as personal attributes or individual achievements.<sup>41</sup>

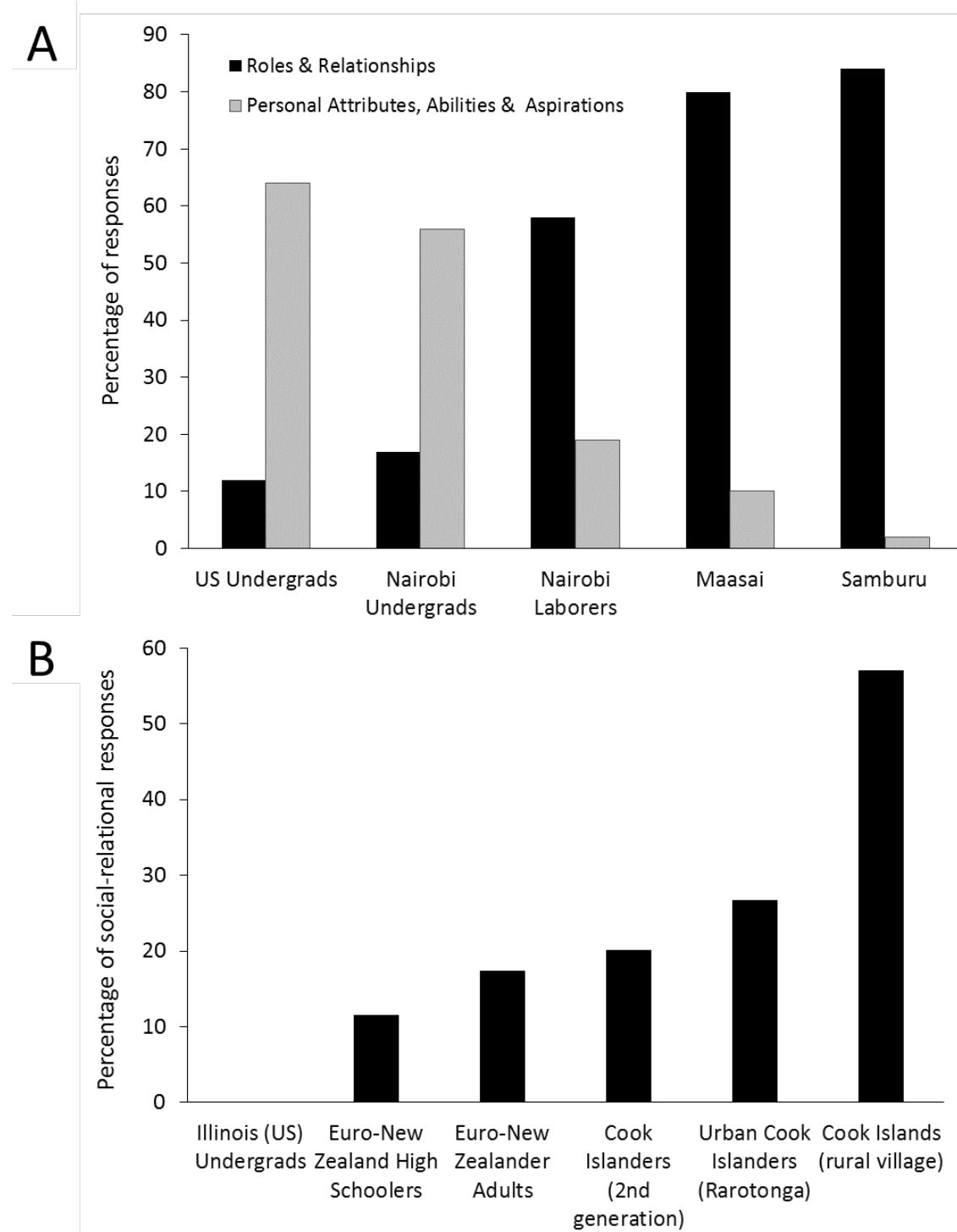


Figure 1. 1. Personal identity across diverse populations. (A) Using the “Who am I” task, the upper figure shows the diverging tendencies for people in different populations to focus on their roles and relationships vs. their personal attributes and achievements. The bars show the average percentages of responses for each person in each place. (B) Using the “I am \_\_\_\_\_” sentence completion task, the lower panel illustrates the average percentage of people’s answers that were social-relational in nature.<sup>42</sup>

On the other side of the globe, Figure 1.1B tells a similar story. The political and social ties between New Zealand and the Cook Islands in the South Pacific mean that we can compare populations of Cook Islanders who have experienced differing degrees of contact with WEIRD New Zealanders. Unlike in Kenya, the data here only permitted me to separate out the social roles and relationship responses from everything else. Starting in a rural village on one of the Cook's outer islands, where people still live in traditional hereditary lineages, the average percentage of social-relational responses was nearly 60%. Moving to Rarotonga, a popular tourist destination and the seat of the capital, the frequency of social-relational responses drops to 27%. In New Zealand, among the children of immigrants, the frequency of such responses falls further to 20%. This stands close to the average for European-descent New Zealanders, who come in at 17%. New Zealand high school students are lower yet at 12%. By comparison, American undergraduates are typically at or below this percentage, with some studies showing zero social-relational responses.

Complementing this work, many similar psychological studies allow us to compare Americans, Canadians, Brits, Australians and Swedes to various Asian populations, including Japanese, Malaysians, Chinese and Koreans. The upshot is that WEIRD people usually lie at the extreme end of the distribution, focusing intensely on their personal attributes, achievements, aspirations and personalities over their roles, responsibilities and relationships. Though, notably, American undergraduates seem particularly self-absorbed, even among other WEIRD populations.<sup>43</sup>

Focusing on one's attributes and achievements over one's roles and relationships is a key element in a psychological package that I'll clump together as the *individualism complex* or just *individualism*. Individualism is best thought of as a cluster of preferences, heuristics, biases and beliefs. This complex allows individuals to better navigate WEIRD social worlds by calibrating our perceptions, attention, judgments and emotions. I expect most populations to reveal psychological packages that similarly 'fit' with their societies' social norms, institutions, technologies, environments and languages, though as you'll see our current WEIRD package is particularly peculiar.

## MAPPING THE INDIVIDUALISM COMPLEX

To understand individualism, let's start at the other end of the spectrum.<sup>44</sup> Over most of human history, people grew up enmeshed in thick family networks that knitted together and organized distant cousins and in-laws. People's survival, identity, security, marriages and success depended on the health and prosperity of these kin-based relational networks, which often formed discrete institutions known as clans, lineages, houses or tribes in anthropological parlance. This is the world of the Maasai, Samburu and Cook Islanders. Within these enduring networks, everyone is endowed with an extensive array of inherited obligations, responsibilities and privileges in relation to others in a vast social web. For example, a man could be *obligated* to avenge the murder of one type of second cousin (through a paternal great grandfather), *privileged* to marry his mother's brother's daughters but tabooed from marrying strangers, and *responsible* for performing expensive rituals to honor his ancestors, who will shower bad luck on his entire lineage if he's negligent. In this world, behavior is highly constrained by context and the types of relationships involved. The social norms that govern these relationships, which collectively form what I'll call *kin-based institutions*, constrain people from shopping widely for new friends, business partners or spouses. Instead, they tend to channel people's investments on a well-defined, largely inherited and enduring in-group. Many kin-based institutions not only influence inheritance and the residence of newly married couples, they also often create communal ownership of

property (e.g., land is owned by the clan) and shared liability for criminal acts among members—e.g., fathers can be imprisoned for their son's crimes.

This social interdependence breeds emotional interdependence, leading people to strongly identify with their ingroups and to make a sharp ingroup-vs.-outgroup distinction based on social interconnections. In fact, in this world, though you may not know some of your distant cousins or fellow tribal members who are three or four relationship links removed, they will remain ingroup members as long as they are connected to you through family ties. By contrast, otherwise familiar faces may remain, effectively, strangers if you cannot connect to them through your dense, durable social ties.<sup>45</sup>

Success and respect in this world hinges on adroitly navigating these kin-based institutions. This often means (1) conforming to fellow in-group members, (2) deferring to customary authorities like elders or sages, (3) policing the behavior of those close to you (but not others), (4) sharply distinguishing your ingroup from everyone else, and (5) promoting your network's collective success whenever possible. Further, because of the numerous obligations, responsibilities and constraints imposed by custom, people's motivations tend not to be 'approach-oriented', aimed at starting new relationships or meeting strangers. Instead, people become 'avoidance-oriented' to minimize their chances of appearing deviant, fomenting disharmony or causing shame to themselves or others.<sup>46</sup>

That's one extreme; now, contrast that with the other—individualistic—end of the spectrum. Imagine the psychology needed to navigate a world with few inherited ties in which success and respect depend on (1) honing one's own special attributes, (2) attracting friends, mates and business partners with these attributes, and then (3) sustaining relationships with them that will endure for as long as the relationship remains mutually beneficial. In this world, everyone is shopping for better relationships, which may or may not endure. People have few permanent ties, and many ephemeral friends, colleagues and acquaintances. In adapting psychologically to this world, people come to see themselves and others as independent agents defined by a unique or special set of talents (e.g., writer), interests (e.g., quilting), aspirations (e.g., making law partner), virtues (e.g., fairness) and principles (e.g., 'my word is my bond'), though these can be enhanced or accentuated by joining like-minded groups. A person's reputation with others, and with themselves (their self-esteem), depends on their individual attributes and accomplishments, not on nourishing an enduring web of inherited ties that are governed by a complex set of relationship-specific social norms.<sup>47</sup>

For our first peak at global psychological variation, let's squash the individualism complex down into a single dimension. Figure 1.2 maps a well-known omnibus measure of individualism developed by the Dutch psychologist Geert Hofstede based initially on surveys with IBM employees around the world. The scale asks about people's orientation towards themselves, their families, personal achievements and individual goals. For example, one question asks, "How important is it to you to fully use your skills and abilities on the job?" and another, "How important is it to you to have challenging work to do—work from which you can get a personal sense of accomplishment?" More individualistically oriented people want to fully use their skills and desire a sense of accomplishment from their work. This scale's strength is not that it zeroes in on one thin slice of psychology but rather that it aggregates several elements in the individualism package. At the high end of the scale, you won't be shocked to find Americans (score 91), Australians (90) and Brits (89)—no doubt these are some of the WEIRDest people in the world. Beneath these chart toppers, the most individualistic societies in the world are almost all in Europe, particularly in the north and west, or in British-descent societies like Canada (score 80) and New Zealand

(79). Notably, Figure 1.2 also reveals our ignorance, as swaths of Africa and central Asia remain largely terra incognita, psychologically speaking.<sup>48</sup>

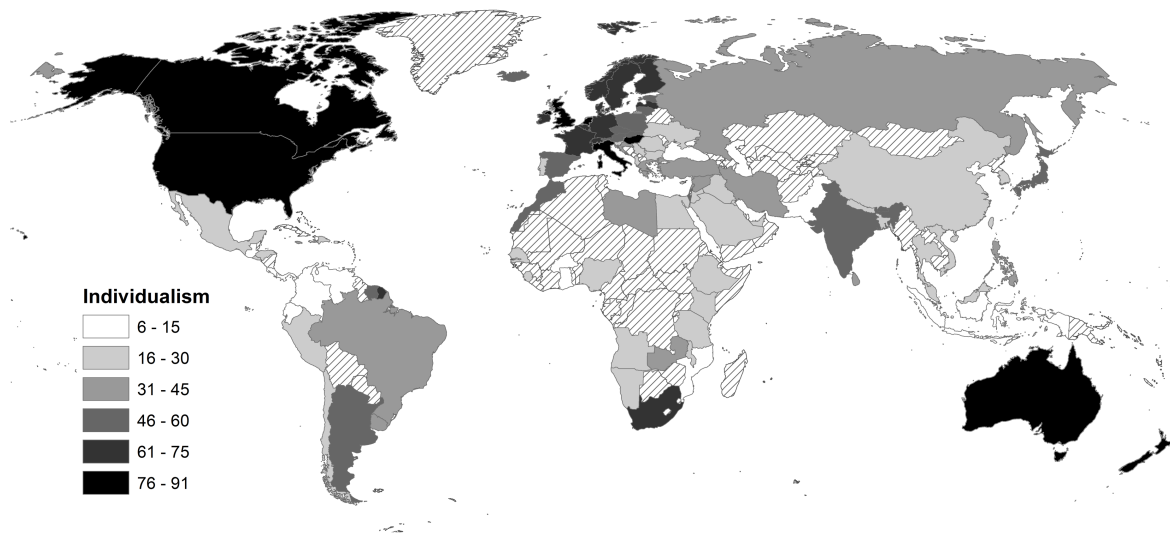


Figure 1.2. Global map of Individualism based on Hofstede's omnibus scale covering 93 countries. Darker shading indicates greater individualism. Hatched areas indicate a lack of data.<sup>49</sup>

This omnibus measure of individualism converges strikingly with evidence from other large global surveys. People from more individualistic countries, for example, possess weaker family ties and show less nepotism, meaning that company bosses, managers and politicians are less likely to hire or promote relatives. Further, more individualistic countries are less inclined to distinguish in-groups from out-groups, more willing to help immigrants, and less firmly wedded to tradition and custom.

More individualistic countries are also richer, more innovative and more economically productive. They possess more effective governments, which more capably furnish public services and infrastructure, like roads, schools, electricity and sanitation.<sup>50</sup>

Now, it's commonly assumed that the strong positive relationships between psychological individualism and measures like national wealth and effective governments reflect a one-way causal process in which economic prosperity causes greater psychological individualism. I certainly think that causality does indeed flow in this direction for some aspects of psychology, and probably dominates the economic and urbanization processes occurring in much of the world today. We've seen how, for example, moving to urban areas likely affected the self-concepts of Cook Islanders and Nairobi laborers (Figure 1.1).<sup>51</sup>

However, could the causality *also* run the other way? What if some other factor created more individualistic psychologies first, prior to economic prosperity and secular governments? Could such a psychological shift stimulate urbanization, markets, economic growth, innovation and the creation of new forms of governance? To preview the rest of the book, my answer is yes. To see how this could happen, let's first look at the broader psychological package that has become historically intertwined with the individualism complex. Once you see the key psychological components, it should be clearer as to how these psychological patterns could have had such big impacts on our economic, religious and political history.

At this point, let me pause our tour of global psychological variation to underline four important points to keep in mind throughout this book (and in your life):<sup>52</sup>

- (1) We should celebrate human diversity, including psychological diversity. By highlighting the peculiarities of WEIRD people, I'm not denigrating these populations, or any others. My aim is to explore the origins of psychological diversity and the roots of the modern world.
- (2) Do not set up a WEIRD vs. non-WEIRD dichotomy in your mind! As we'll see in many maps and charts, global psychological variation is both continuous and multi-dimensional.
- (3) Psychological variation emerges at all levels, not merely among nations. I'm sometimes stuck comparing country averages because that's the available data. Nevertheless, throughout the book, we'll explore psychological variation within countries, between regions within countries, provinces and even among villages. Even though WEIRD populations typically cluster at one end of global distributions, we'll explore and explain the interesting and important variation within Europe, 'the West' and the industrialized world.
- (4) None of the population-level differences we observe should be thought of as fixed, essential or immutable features of nations, tribes or ethnic groups. To the contrary, this book is about how and why our psychology has changed over history and will continue to change.<sup>53</sup>

#### *CULTIVATING THE WEIRD SELF*

Adapting to an individualistic social world means honing personal attributes that persist across diverse contexts and relationships. By contrast, prospering in a regulated-relational world means navigating very different kinds of relationships that demand quite different approaches and behaviors. Psychological evidence from diverse societies, including populations in the U.S., Australia, Mexico, Malaysia, Korea and Japan, does indeed reveal these patterns. Compared to much of the world, WEIRD people report behaving in more consistent ways—in terms of traits like 'honesty' or 'coldness'—across different types of relationships, such as with younger peers, friends, parents, professors and strangers. By contrast, Koreans and Japanese report consistency only *within* relational contexts—that is, in how they behave separately toward their moms, friends or professors across time. *Across* relational contexts, they vary widely and comfortably: one might be reserved and self-deprecating with professors while being joking and playful with friends. The upshot is that while Americans sometimes see too much behavioral flexibility as "two-faced" or "hypocritical," many other populations around the world see personal adjustments to differing relationships as reflecting wisdom, maturity and social adeptness.<sup>54</sup>

Across societies, these differing expectations and normative standards incentivize different psychological responses. For example, in a study conducted in Korea and the US, parents and friends were asked to make judgments about the characteristics of the study participants. Among Americans, participants who had reported greater behavioral consistency across contexts were rated as both more "socially skilled" and "likeable" by parents and friends than those who reported less consistency. That is, among WEIRD people, you are *supposed* to be consistent across relationships and you will do better socially if you are. Meanwhile, in Korea, there was no relationship between the consistency measure across relationships and either social skills or likeability—so, being consistent doesn't buy you anything socially. Back in the US, the degree of agreement between parents and friends on the characteristics of the target participants was twice that found in Korea. This means that 'the person' seen by American friends looked more similar to that seen by American parents than in Korea, where friends and parents experience the same individuals as more different. Finally, the correlation between personal consistency



across relationships and measures of both life satisfaction and positive emotions was much stronger among Americans than among Koreans.<sup>55</sup> Overall, being consistent across relationships—‘being yourself’ in all circumstances—pays off more in America, both socially and emotionally.

Such evidence suggests that the immense importance assigned by the discipline of psychology to notions of self-esteem and positive self-views is probably a WEIRD phenomenon. In contrast to WEIRD people, having high self-esteem and a positive view of oneself are not strongly linked to either life satisfaction (subjective well-being) or depression in the few non-WEIRD societies that have been studied. In many societies, it’s *other-esteem* (‘face’) that matters, not self-esteem rooted in the successful cultivation of a set of unique personal attributes that captures one’s ‘true self’.<sup>56</sup>

In WEIRD societies, the pressure to cultivate traits that are consistent across contexts and relationships leads to *dispositionalism*—a tendency to see people’s behavior as anchored in personal traits that influence their actions across many contexts. For example, the fact that “he’s lazy” (a disposition) explains why he’s not getting his work done. Alternatively, maybe he’s sick or injured? Dispositionalism emerges psychologically in two important ways. First, it makes us uncomfortable with our own inconsistencies. If you’ve had a course in Social Psychology, you might recognize this as Cognitive Dissonance. The available evidence suggests that WEIRD people suffer more severely from Cognitive Dissonance and do a range of mental gymnastics to relieve this discomfort. Second, dispositional thinking also influences how we judge others. Psychologists label this phenomenon the ‘*Fundamental Attribution Error*’, though it’s clearly not that fundamental; it’s WEIRD. In general, WEIRD people are particularly biased to attribute actions or behavioral patterns to what’s ‘inside’ others, relying on inferences about dispositional traits (e.g., he’s ‘lazy’ or ‘untrustworthy’), personalities (she’s ‘introverted’ or ‘conscientious’) and underlying beliefs or intentions. Other populations focus more on actions and outcomes over what’s ‘inside’.<sup>57</sup>

## GUILT-RIDDEN BUT SHAMELESS

Based on data from 2,921 university students in 37 countries, people from more individualistic societies report more guilt-like and fewer shame-like emotional experiences. In fact, people from countries like the U.S., Australia, and the Netherlands hardly ever experience shame. But, they had more guilt-like experiences than other societies; these experiences were more moralized and had a greater impact on both their self-esteem and personal relationships. Overall, the emotional lives of WEIRD people are particularly guilt-ridden.<sup>58</sup>

To better understand this, we first need to consider shame and guilt more deeply. Shame is rooted in a genetically evolved psychological package that is associated with *social devaluation in the eyes of others*. Individuals experience shame when they violate social norms (e.g., committing adultery), fail to reach local performance standards (e.g., flunking a psychology course) or when they find themselves at the low end of the dominance hierarchy. Shame has a distinct universal display that involves downcast gaze, slumped shoulders and a general inclination to ‘look small’ (crouching). This display signals to the community that these poor performers recognize their violation or deficiency and are asking for leniency in judgment and punishment. Emotionally, those experiencing shame want to shrink away and disappear from public view. In their behavior, the ashamed avoid contact with others and may leave their communities for a time. The public nature of the norm violation is crucial: if there’s no public knowledge, there’s no shame, although people may experience fear that their secret violations will

become public. Finally, shame can be experienced vicariously. In regulated-relational societies built on strong kin-based institutions, a crime or illicit affair by one person can bring shame to his or her parents, siblings and beyond, extending out to even cousins and other distant relations. The shame experienced by kinfolk makes sense since they are also judged and potentially punished for their relative's actions.<sup>59</sup>

Guilt is different; it's an internal guidance system and at least partially a product of culture, though it probably integrates some innate psychological components like regret. The feeling of guilt emerges when one measures their own actions, feelings or even reactions to a purely personal standard. I can feel guilty for eating a giant pizza alone in my house. I can also feel guilty for not having given my change to the homeless guy that I encountered early Sunday morning on an empty Manhattan street. I feel this because I've fallen below my own personal standard, not because I've violated a widely-shared norm or damaged my reputation *with others*.

Of course, in many cases we might experience both shame and guilt because we publicly violated a social norm—e.g., smacking a misbehaving son. Here, the shame comes from believing that others will now think less of us (we are the kind of person who hits children) and the guilt from our own internalized standards (e.g., don't hit children, even in anger). Unlike shame, guilt has no universal displays, can last weeks or even years, and seems to require self-reflection. In contrast to the spontaneous social 'withdraw' and 'avoidance' of shame, guilt often motivates 'approach' and a desire to mitigate whatever is causing the guilt. Guilty feelings from letting a friend or spouse down, for example, can motivate efforts to apologize and repair the relationship.<sup>60</sup>

It's easy to see why regulated-relational societies would experience more shame. First, there are many more closely monitored social norms that vary across contexts and relationships. This means that there are more chances to screw up and commit shame-inducing errors, which are more likely to be spotted by members of people's dense social networks. Second, relative to individualistic societies, people in regulated-relational societies are expected to fulfill multiple roles over their lives and develop a wide set of skills to at least some minimum threshold. This creates more opportunities to fall below local standards in the eyes of others. Third, when shame is experienced vicariously, one can feel shame even if they, themselves, never do anything shameful. Of course, guilt probably also exists in many societies dominated by shame; it's just less prominent, less discussed and less important for making these societies function.<sup>61</sup>

By contrast, guilt is essential in individualistic societies. As individuals cultivate their own unique attributes and talents, guilt is part of the affective machinery that motivates them to stick to their personal standards. Vegetarians, for example, might feel guilty for eating bacon even when they are traveling in distant cities, surrounded by non-vegetarians. No one is judging them for enjoying the bacon, but they still feel bad about it. Thus, in individualistic societies, those who don't feel much guilt will struggle to cultivate dispositional attributes, live up to their personal standards and maintain high-quality personal relationships. Here, relative to guilt, shame is muted because the social norms governing diverse relationships and contexts in individualistic societies are fewer, and often not closely monitored in these diffuse and mobile populations.<sup>62</sup>

## LOOK AT ME!

Psychologists have been fascinated for over half a century by people's willingness to conform to peers and obey authority figures.<sup>63</sup> In Solomon Asch's famous experiment, each participant entered the

laboratory along with several other people, who appeared to be fellow participants. These ‘fellow participants’, however, were actually confederates who were working for the experimenter. In each round, a target line segment was shown to the group alongside a set of three other segments, labeled as ‘1’, ‘2’ and ‘3’ (see the inset in Figure 1.3). Answering aloud, each person had to judge which of the three line-segments matched the length of the target segment. On certain preset rounds, the confederates all gave the same *incorrect* response before the real participant answered. The judgment itself was easy: participants got the correct answer 98% of the time when they were alone. So, the question was: how inclined were people to override their own perceptual judgments to give an answer that matched that of others?

The answer depends on where you grew up. WEIRD people do conform to others, and this is what surprised Solomon. Only about one-quarter of his participants were never influenced by their peers. WEIRD people, however, conform less than all the other populations who have been studied. The bars in Figure 1.3 illustrate the size of the conformity effect across samples of undergraduates from 10 different countries. The power of conformity goes up by a factor of three, as we move from WEIRD societies at one end to Zimbabwe at the other end.<sup>64</sup>

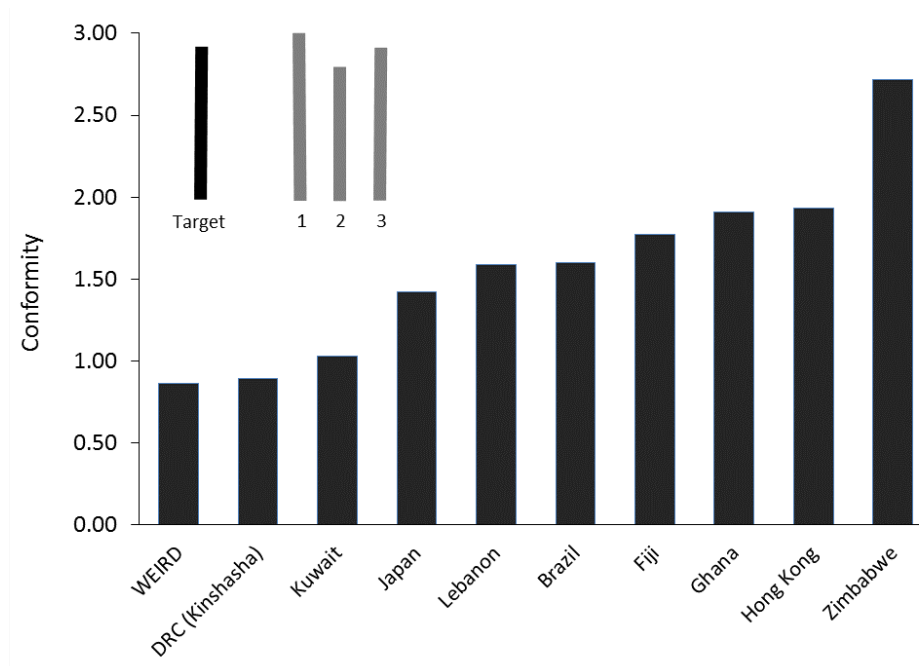


Figure 1.3. Strength of conformity effect in the Asch Conformity Experiment across 10 diverse populations. The WEIRD sample compiles data from several studies in North America and Western Europe.<sup>65</sup>

Further analyses of these experiments reveal two interesting things. First, less individualistic societies are more inclined to conform to the group (correlating the data in Figures 1.2 and 1.3). Second, over the last half-century since Solomon’s initial efforts, conformity motivations among Americans have declined. That is, Americans are even less willing to conform now than we were in the early 1950s. Neither of these facts is particularly shocking, but it’s nice to know that the psychological evidence backs up our intuitions.<sup>66</sup>

The willingness of WEIRD people to ignore others’ opinions, preferences, views and requests extends well beyond peers to include elders, grandfathers and traditional authorities. Complementing these

controlled studies of conformity, I'll discuss global survey data in later chapters showing that, relative to other populations, WEIRD people don't value conformity or see 'obedience' as a virtue that needs to be instilled in children. WEIRD people just don't venerate either traditions or ancient sages as much as most other societies do, and elders simply don't carry the same weight that they do in many other places.

To see how conformity impacts real life, consider left-handedness. In WEIRD societies today, about 10% to 16% of adults are left-handed. Outside the WEIRD world, from Asia to Africa, the frequency of left-handers is often below 6% and occasionally falls to below 1%. In China, it's 0.23% and among traditional Zulu communities in Africa it was close to zero.<sup>67</sup>

What if people became more independent and less concerned about obedience and conformity? What if people deferred less to elders, traditional authorities and ancient sages? What if there were more lefties? Could such changes influence the cultural evolution of organizations, institutions and innovation?

### ~~MARSHMALLOWS COME TO THOSE WHO WAIT~~

~~Here's a series of choices. Do you prefer (A) \$100 today or (B) \$154 in one year? If you picked the \$100 now I'm going to sweeten the deal for next year and ask you whether you want: (A) \$100 today or (B) \$185 in one year. But, if you initially said that you wanted to wait the year for the \$154, I'll make the delayed payment less appealing by asking you to pick between (A) \$100 today or (B) \$125 next year. If you now switch from the delayed payment (B) to the \$100 now (A), I will sweeten the delayed payment to \$130. By titrating through these kinds of dichotomous choices, researchers can triangulate in on a measure of people's patience, or what is variously called 'temporal' or 'delay' discounting. Impatient people 'discount' the future more, meaning they weight immediate payoffs over delayed payoffs. More patient people, by contrast, are willing to wait longer to earn more money.~~

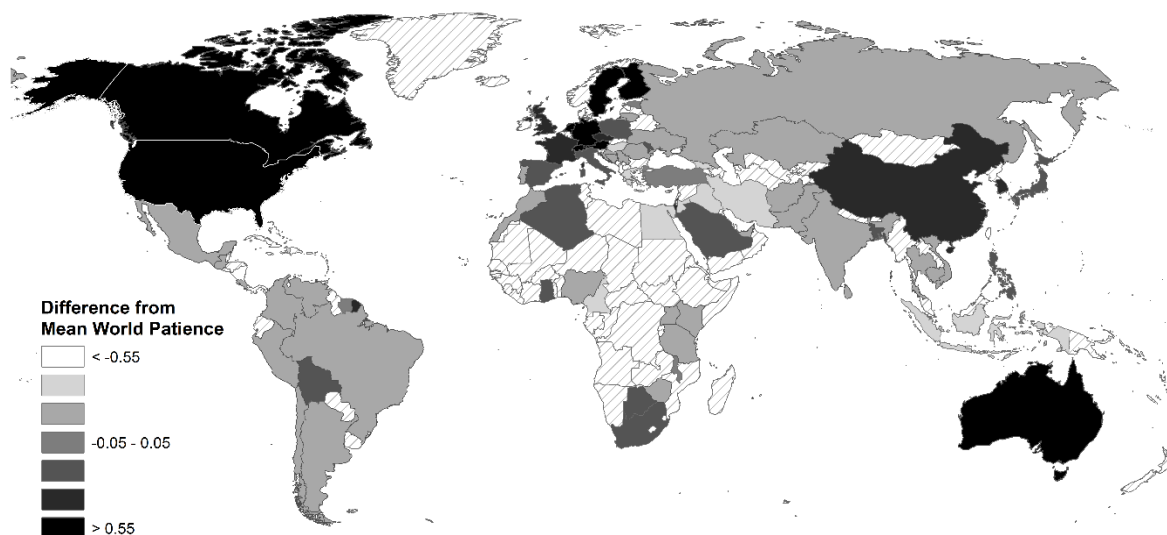


Figure 1.4. Global Distribution of Patience Across 76 countries. Darker shades indicate greater patience as measured by a delayed discounting measure. Hatched regions indicate a lack of data.<sup>68</sup>

influenced by many factors besides psychological change. But, crucially, most of these murders are precisely the ‘barroom brawl’ variety, where men (yes, not women) have to suppress their tempers, steel their self-control and just walk away. Wiping that smug smirk off that asshole’s face would feel good now, but what then? Illustrating this, a 13<sup>th</sup> century officer of the French Crown defined “homicide” as “when one kills another in the heat of a fight, in which tension turns into insult and insult to fighting, by which one often dies”. Confirming this, an analysis of homicide records from 13<sup>th</sup> century England reveals that 90% of cases began as spontaneous acts of aggression in response to insults or quarrels rather than premeditated murders. In 16<sup>th</sup> century Arras (France), 45% of murders were committed in or just outside of taverns while half or more of all violent crimes in Douai (France) and Cologne (Germany) involved booze.<sup>629</sup>

The idea here is that people were adapting psychologically to a world that was transforming from one with the external constraints of kinship ties and the incentives generated by family honor to one of independent shopkeepers, artisans and merchants. In this new individualistic world, a reputation for sudden, violent and undisciplined responses to minor insults or simple misunderstandings didn’t pay anymore. As observed by Samuel Ricard in the opening epigraph, who wants to defend, marry or do business with a hot head? In an open market of strangers, where people are shopping for relationships, you can just find a friend, fiancée or employee with better self-control.<sup>630</sup>

Tellingly, while murder rates were declining overall, the percentage of victims who were family members of the murderer rose from almost none to over half by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. So, men stopped killing strangers and acquaintances in bars, over insults and status challenges, and instead were more inclined to kill family members. Few stats could more strongly highlight the rise of impersonal prosociality and the concurrent decline in the centrality of kinship.

The gradual diffusion of self-control and patience seems to have spread outward from the merchants, artisans, professionals and civil officials to the laborers and elites. This diffusionary process can be seen in the fact that it was the urban middle class, and not the much richer aristocrats, who bought the first government bonds and invested in the early joint stock companies. In the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, for example, the stockholders of the East India Company were primarily bankers, government officials, retailers, military personnel, clergymen and merchants, both large and small.<sup>631</sup>

## BE YOURSELF, FIND YOUR NICHE: THE ORIGINS OF WEIRD PERSONALITIES

The patterns and dimensions of personality observed among Americans and other WEIRD people are largely believed by psychologists to represent the *human pattern*. I suspect this is wrong. Instead, an evolutionary approach suggests that individuals and populations will—at least partially—adapt or calibrate their dispositions to the stable and enduring features of the social and ecological worlds they confront over both their lives and across generations. Developmentally, we expect children to adapt their personalities to the contours and affordances of the worlds they encounter while growing up. More subtly, we expect cultural evolution to shape personality configurations by molding people’s world views, motivations, standards, ritualized practices and routines of life, especially as they relate to the malleability of individuals, child socialization, parental discipline and training.<sup>632</sup>

To understand the cultural evolution of personality, let’s take a stroll from the origins of farming to the growing trade cities of Medieval Europe. Since the dawn of agriculture about 12,000 years ago, there’s

been basically one primary occupation open to most people—farmer. With only a male-female division of labor, farm families had to be generalists: sowing, weeding, harrowing, harvesting, reaping, threshing, milling, herding, feeding, shearing and butchering were just some of the basics. People also often had to build houses, make tools, repair clothing, care for animals and defend their communities. As societies expanded in size and complexity, broad economic specializations did emerge, but this didn't give individuals a menu of choices. Often, particular clans, kindreds or local communities cultivated specific skills or know-how, and developed norm-governed relationships with other groups possessing complementary skills. In the complex chiefdoms of Polynesia, for example, there were clans that variously specialized in farming, fishing, canoe making and—of course—war. Whether you were a farmer or a warrior depended on which clan you were born into. As the first cities emerged, occupational specializations and the division of labor expanded, but the structure of knowledge and the manner of recruiting the next generation of specialist didn't change that much. In these communities, individuals couldn't easily pick their preferred occupations. Instead, kin-based institutions dominated, so the occupational choices of individuals were profoundly constrained by their families, clans, castes or ethnic groups. In various places, there were milk-selling clans, merchant families and sandal-making castes. Instead of finding a niche that fits you, and adapting further to better fill it, people had to figure out how to fill whatever niches they were born into. I don't want to exaggerate this, because some movement was often possible, but the options were generally few and the inherited constraints substantial.<sup>633</sup>

In Europe, however, a different world was developing during the Middle Ages. Cities and towns were growing rapidly; impersonal markets were expanding; specialized voluntary associations were selectively recruiting and training members; and, diverse occupations were sprouting and proliferating: e.g., clock maker, lawyer, accountant, printer, gunsmith and inventor. At the same time, weak kinship ties, greater residential mobility and an expanding list of rights and privileges in town charters guaranteed individuals substantial freedom to select into a growing diversity of associations, guilds and occupations. This social environment meant that individuals had to 'sell themselves' based on their personal attributes, specialized abilities and dispositional virtues, not primarily on their friendships, lineage or family connections—though, of course, the value of relationships and connections fades but never disappears.<sup>634</sup>

In this world, people could increasingly select the occupations or groups that already provided a reasonable fit to their personalities, preferences, abilities and other attributes; then, they worked to further hone their attributes in order to excel in competition against others. A man could make a living as a sociable salesman, conscientious craftsman, scrupulous scribe or pious priest. Traits got exaggerated or suppressed along the way. Of course, women had dramatically fewer options, but more than in most societies. Remember, they married late, could often pick their husbands and frequently had paying jobs prior to marriage. Unlike other societies, women could also skip marriage all together and instead follow the call of God into the Church's service. Overall, this gave individuals more latitude to pick the social roles, relationships and occupations that fit their inherited characteristics. Over time, they could adapt, specialize and exaggerate their most important traits.<sup>635</sup>

I suspect that these social and economic forces would have generated a greater diversity in personal attributes, as individuals specialized into different social niches or occupations. Or, to put this differently, the number of distinct personality dimensions would have started increasing. Over time, this process would have intensified because the larger, denser and more relationally mobile a population,

the more individuals can seek out and actually find the relationships or associations that best fit their talents, attributes, inclinations, peculiarities and preferences.

This approach runs contrary to much work on personality in the discipline of psychology. Personality psychologists have long assumed that dispositions are important and universal; and, they've sought to reduce personality to certain types or to a small set of dimensions. The most prominent approach argues that humans have five largely independent dimensions of personality: (1) openness to experience ('adventurousness'), (2) conscientiousness ('self-discipline'), (3) extraversion, (4) agreeableness ('cooperativeness' or 'compassion') and (5) neuroticism ('emotional instability'). These have often been interpreted as capturing the innate structure of human personality. Psychologists called these personality dimensions the 'BIG-5', but I'll call them the WEIRD-5.<sup>636</sup>

When psychologists have deployed this approach to personality in non-WEIRD populations, the WEIRD-5 can usually be found, though in places like Hong Kong, Japan and the Philippines only four of the five dimensions consistently emerge. Unfortunately, most of this cross-cultural work has relied on relationally mobile university students in urban centers. Using these populations effectively smashes out most of the potential variation by homogenizing these samples along precisely the institutional, occupational and demographic dimensions that we'd expect to be most important for personality. So, the rough applicability of the WEIRD-5 approach in these settings isn't surprising.<sup>637</sup>

Rather than this scattershot approach to testing cross-cultural variation, which involves using easily accessible subpopulations that are both homogeneous and non-representative, we need a sniper's rifle with a powerful theoretical scope to target the idea developed above. What we need is a detailed study of personality from a subsistence-oriented agricultural population with few occupations and little contact with global markets.

Luckily, the anthropologist Mike Gurven and his team recently shook up the status quo in personality psychology when they delivered just such a study, which landed like a cement truck in one of psychology's leading scientific journals. After adapting state-of-the-art psychological tools for use in non-literate populations, Mike's team explored the structure of personality among the Tsimane', a group of farmer-foragers who live in Bolivia's tropical forests. We briefly encountered the Tsimane' in Chapter 9: they were one of the dots in the lower left of Figure 9.2, which shows that they make low offers in the Dictator Game and aren't integrated into the market economy. Tsimane' essentially have one of two jobs, either you're a husband or a wife. Husbands mostly hunt, fish, build houses and make tools. Wives mostly weave, spin, cook and care for children. Both spouses pitch in on farming.<sup>638</sup>

The rigorous data collection and in-depth analyses conducted by Mike's team are impressive. They tested over 600 Tsimane', re-tested the same people, replicated their findings in a fresh sample of 430 couples (where people evaluated their spouses) and checked their findings in a variety of ways.

So, did the Tsimane' reveal the WEIRD-5?

No, not even close. The Tsimane' data reveal only two dimensions of personality. No matter how you slice and dice the data, there's just nothing like the WEIRD-5. Moreover, based on the clusters of characteristics associated with each of the Tsimane''s two personality dimensions, neither matches up nicely with any of the WEIRD-5 dimensions. Mike and his team argue that these dimensions capture the two primary routes to social success among the Tsimane', which can be described roughly as

'interpersonal prosociality' and 'industriousness'. The idea is that if you are Tsimane', you can either focus on working harder on the aforementioned productive activities and skills like hunting and weaving or you can devote your time and mental efforts to building a richer network of social relationships. Aside from these broad strategies, everyone has to be a generalist. All men, for example, have to learn to craft dugout canoes, track game and make wooden bows. Extroverts can't become insurance salesman or cruise directors, while introverts can't become economists or programmers.<sup>639</sup>

With the Tsimane' case under our belt, let's return to the cross-cultural data on personality. I'd suggested that it's not surprising that we see the WEIRD-5 emerging across diverse societies because psychologists have relied almost entirely on urban undergraduates in their cross-cultural studies. However, despite this homogeneity, it's still possible to detect the ongoing cultural evolution of personalities in the cross-cultural data. Recall that among WEIRD people the five dimensions of personality are usually independent and uncorrelated. This means that knowing someone's score on the 'agreeableness' dimension, for example, doesn't tell you about their 'extroversion' or 'neuroticism'. Now, imagine that the number of social niches available to WEIRD people begins contracting. As the number of options declines, there may no longer be any niches where people can successfully be both extroverted and neurotic (e.g., movie star) or both introverted and adventurous (e.g., field primatologist). This reduction in the number of social niches will gradually increase the correlations among the existing personality dimensions because the shrinking number of specialists means everyone has to be more of a generalist and certain personality combinations just aren't an option. As this process continues, some dimensions will become so correlated that they will effectively collapse into a single new dimension. Eventually, there will be 4, 3 and finally 2 personality dimensions.

To test this idea, we can examine the average intercorrelation among the WEIRD-5 personality dimensions across societies. The expectation is that societies with less occupational specialization and fewer social niches will show higher intercorrelations among the WEIRD-5 dimensions. Since the number of social niches available in any population is strongly correlated with occupational specialization and urbanization in the modern world, we should expect places with less urbanization and/or occupational specialization to show greater interdependence (intercorrelation) among its WEIRD-5 dimensions.

Using data from nearly 17,000 people in 55 countries, Aaron Lukaszewski, Mike Gurven and their colleagues found that the more urbanized a country, or the greater its occupational diversity, the lower the intercorrelations were among the WEIRD-5 dimensions. Using urbanization, Figure 12.4 shows that people from more rural countries reveal less overall independence among their personality dimensions. However, the correlations among some pairs of personality dimensions rise more rapidly with declining urbanization than those between other dimensions. In particular, as urbanization declines, the dimensions of agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness seem to collapse into each other more rapidly than extroversion and neuroticism.<sup>640</sup>



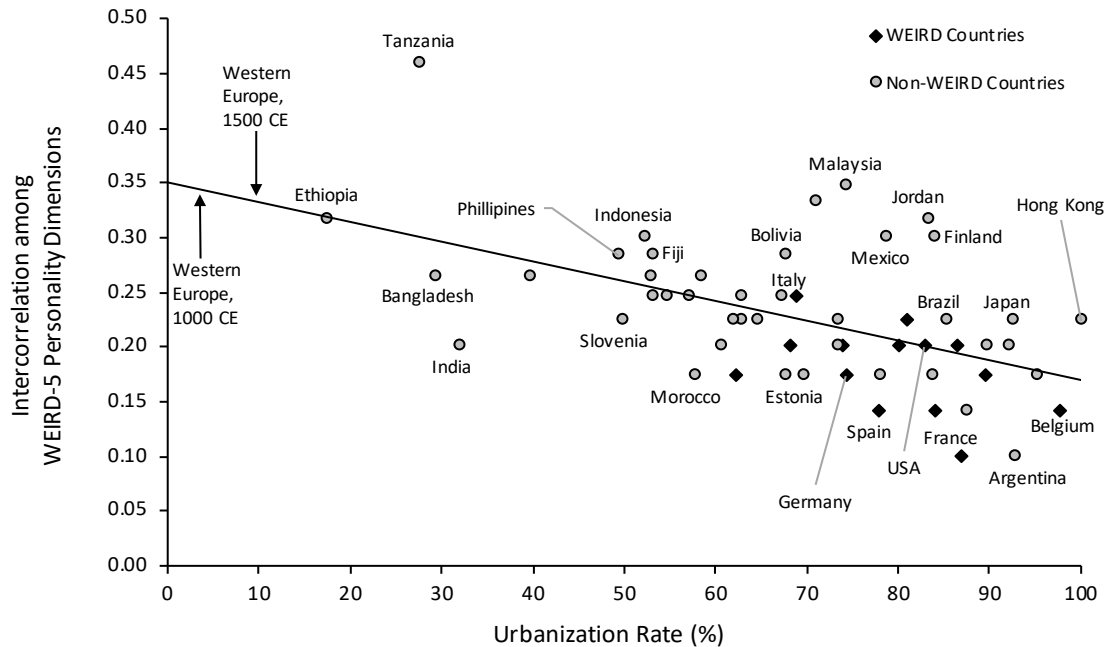


Figure 12.4. Relationship between urbanization rates and the independence of the WEIRD-5 personality dimensions for 55 countries. The urbanization rate is the percentage of people who live in urban areas. The independence of the WEIRD-5 personality dimensions is captured by the average intercorrelation of the five dimensions. The lower this intercorrelation, the more independent the five dimensions.<sup>641</sup>

These results are particularly striking because—as I noted—these studies didn’t randomly sample adults around each country. Instead, most of these samples were urban-dwelling undergraduates. If we instead randomly sampled adults from these countries, I suspect that the results would be even more dramatic.

Figure 12.4 suggests that much of the variation among WEIRD societies in personality structure actually arises from differences in urbanization or occupational diversity. However, note that most WEIRD societies are below the line in Figure 12.4—look at the black diamonds. This suggests that something, over and above the current levels of urbanization and occupational diversity, may be pushing up the interdependence among personality dimensions. One possibility is simply that these particularly WEIRD places have a longer history of widespread urbanization, relational mobility and occupational choice—so cultural evolution has had more time to mold personality configurations.

We’ve already seen how these personality patterns can be anchored in Medieval Europe, based on the dramatic increases in urbanization (Figure 9.5), market integration (Figure 9.6) and occupational guilds (Figure 11.4). These trends, together with the evidence of the psychological impacts of the Church’s MFP, suggest that urbanites had an expanding number of social and economic niches they could and did voluntarily enter. For fun, I’ve marked the estimated urbanization rates in Western Europe on Figure 12.4. As you can see, these rates were substantially lower than those found in any of the countries studied at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This suggests that personality configurations were different in the Middle Ages compared to today but were evolving in a WEIRD direction.

Of course, we shouldn’t take my backwards projection in Figure 12.4 too seriously, since we expect modern urbanization rates to integrate—in some complex way—the presence of diverse occupations,

relational mobility, labor mobility, individualistic motivations and voluntary associations. For this reason, we don't expect the urbanized areas in China or the Islamic World during the Middle Ages to possess a personality structure anything like the WEIRD-5.

Nevertheless, to the degree that historical urbanization rates roughly capture a world in which individuals could select into a diversity of social niches and occupational specializations, my backwards projection can be informative. Imagine sliding back in time along the line in Figure 12.4 towards a more agrarian society with only one main occupation—farmer. At first, the five personality dimensions found in the most urbanized populations become increasingly correlated until they eventually start collapsing into each other. Eventually, if Mike and his collaborators are correct, we'll arrive in a world with something like one or two personality dimensions that correspond to the major strategies for achieving social success based on the local ecology, technology and set of institutions.

Alongside personality configurations, there's perhaps a deeper way in which WEIRD personalities are peculiar. As suggested in Chapter 1, intensive kin-based institutions demand that individuals behave in quite different ways depending on their relationship to other people. Some relationships explicitly call for joking while others demand quiet submission. By contrast, the world of impersonal markets and relational mobility favors consistency across contexts and relationships as well as the cultivation of unique personal characteristics specialized for diverse social niches. For a millennium, these cultural evolutionary pressures fostered a rising degree of dispositionalism. Individuals increasingly sought consistency—to be 'themselves'—across contexts and judged others negatively when they failed to show this consistency. Recognizing this helps explain why WEIRD people are so much more likely than others to impute the causes of someone's behavior to their personal dispositions over their contexts and relationships (the 'Fundamental' Attribution Error) and why they are so uncomfortable with their own personal inconsistencies (Cognitive Dissonance). Reacting to this culturally-constructed worldview, WEIRD people are forever seeking their 'true selves' (good luck!). Thus, while they certainly exist across societies and back into history, dispositions in general, and personalities specifically, are just more important in WEIRD societies.<sup>642</sup>

## ~~THE ENDOWMENT EFFECT~~

~~Traditionally, Hadza hunter-gatherers engaged in no commerce among themselves and little trade with other groups. When necessary, they may have even resorted to silent trade (Chapter 9) with the surrounding agricultural and pastoralist communities to obtain steel tools and tobacco. Underlining this pattern, the long-time Hadza ethnographer, James Woodburn, writes, "Exchange with other Hadza is reprehensible. To barter, to trade or to sell to other Hadza is, even in the 1990s, really not acceptable..." Nevertheless, the inexorable expansion of global markets has begun to engulf the Hadza, often in swarms of curious tourists. How are these impersonal markets influencing Hadza psychology?~~<sup>643</sup>

~~In an elegant experiment, the anthropologist-cum-psychologist Coren Apicella and her colleagues examined a phenomenon called the *Endowment Effect* among the Hadza. Participants were randomly given one of two differently colored lighters, which are quite useful for starting cooking fires. Then, participants were given an opportunity to exchange their lighter for a different colored version. How often did they make the trade? Because Coren randomly assigned participants to receive one of two differently colored lighters, we'd expect people to trade in their lighters about half of the time, that is, if they are rational and have color preferences.~~<sup>644</sup>