

Study suggests standard personality tests may not work well outside of WEIRD cultures

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An international team of researchers has found evidence that suggests standard personality tests may not work as intended outside of mostly

white, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (WEIRD) societies. In their paper, published in the journal *Science Advances*, the group describes their analyses of thousands of personality survey responses from people all over the world, and what they found.

Prior work has led to the development of modern [personality](#) tests, and most of them are based on the assumption that all people have five basic personality traits: conscientiousness, openness, neuroticism, extroversion and agreeableness—the level of each determines the overall personality assessment of a given individual. In this new effort, the researchers suggest that while such tests might be a valuable research tool in WEIRD countries, they might be less useful for studying people in others.

To find out if there might be differences in personality assessments between cultures, the researchers looked at 90,000 personality [survey](#) responses from people in 23 countries—they note that the types of surveys varied, including standard form-filling, face-to-face meetings and information extracted from databases.

In studying the data, the researchers found discrepancies—they noticed, for example, that there were striking differences in how people responded to questions regarding [cognitive abilities](#) and conscientiousness. Prior research has shown a connection between cognitive abilities and success in complex jobs in typical WEIRD societies—while conscientiousness plays a bigger role in less-complex jobs. In many of the survey responses from non-WEIRD societies, however, the opposite appeared to be true. They also found many instances of conflicting answers in non-WEIRD responses, such as people responding "yes" to being highly organized and later responding "yes" to being careless.

The researchers suggest there are likely a number of reasons for the discrepancies they found. There could be language issues, they point out,

or even [social issues](#). Or there could be issues involved when a person is taking a [test](#) face-to-face rather than filling out a form in isolation. They also note that there might have been a tendency by test-takers to mistrust the person giving the test, and because of that, they may have attempted to give what they believed were desired responses. In any case, the group suggests that researchers should be cautious when using such tests to learn more about people in other cultures.

More information: Rachid Laajaj et al. Challenges to capture the big five personality traits in non-WEIRD populations, *Science Advances* (2019). [DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.aaw5226](https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aaw5226)

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