

How knowledge about different cultures is shaking the foundations of psychology

9 March 2018, by Nicolas Geeraert



Holistic thinking, common in Japan, leads to a certain way of memorising. Credit: mackwo7/pixabay

The academic discipline of psychology [was developed](#) largely in North America and Europe. Some would argue it's been remarkably successful in understanding what drives human behaviour and mental processes, which have long been thought to be universal. But in recent decades some researchers have [started questioning this approach](#), arguing that many psychological phenomena are shaped by the culture we live in.

Clearly, humans are in many ways very similar – we share the same physiology and have the same basic needs, such as nourishment, safety and sexuality. So what effect can culture really have on the fundamental aspects of our psyche, such as perception, cognition and personality? Let's take a look at the evidence so far.

Experimental psychologists typically study behaviour in a small group of people, with the assumption that this can be generalised to the wider [human population](#). If the population is considered to be homogeneous, then such inferences can indeed be made from a random

sample.

However, this isn't the case. Psychologists have long disproportionately relied on undergraduate students to carry out their studies, simply because they are readily available to researchers at universities. More dramatically still, [more than 90% of participants](#) in psychological studies come from countries that are Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (W.E.I.R.D). Clearly, these countries are neither a random sample nor representative for the human population.

Thinking styles

Consider which two of these objects go together: [a panda, a monkey and a banana](#). Respondents from Western countries routinely select the monkey and the panda, because both objects are animals. This is indicative of an analytic thinking style, in which objects are largely perceived independently from their context.

In contrast, participants from Eastern countries will often select the monkey and the banana, because these objects belong in the same environment and share a relationship (monkeys eat bananas). This is a holistic thinking style, in which object and context are perceived to be interrelated.



Holistic thinking is prevalent in Asian cultures, such as India. Credit: Biswarup Ganguly/wikipedia, CC BY-SA

In a [classic demonstration](#) of [cultural differences](#) in thinking styles, participants from Japan and the USA were presented with a series of animated scenes. Lasting about 20 seconds, each scene showed various aquatic creatures, vegetation and rocks in an underwater setting. In a subsequent recall task, both groups of participants were equally likely to remember salient objects, the larger fish. But the Japanese participants were better than American participants [at recalling background information](#), such as the colour of the water. This is because holistic thinking focuses on background and context just as much as foreground.

This clearly demonstrates how cultural differences can affect something as fundamental as memory – any theory describing it should take that into account. Subsequent studies have shown that cultural differences in thinking styles are pervasive in cognition – affecting memory, attention, perception, reasoning and how we talk and think.

The self

If you were asked to describe yourself, what would you say? Would you describe yourself in terms of personal characteristics – being intelligent or funny – or would you use preferences, such as "I love pizza"? Or perhaps you would instead base it on [social relationships](#), such as "I am a parent"? Social psychologists have long maintained that people are

much more likely to describe themselves and others in terms of [stable personal characteristics](#).

However, the way people describe themselves seems to be culturally bound. Individuals in the western world are indeed more likely to view themselves as free, autonomous and unique individuals, possessing a set of fixed characteristics. But in many other parts of the world, people describe themselves primarily as a part of different social relationships and strongly connected with others. This is more prevalent in [Asia](#), [Africa](#) and Latin America. These differences are pervasive, and have been linked to differences in social relationships, motivation and upbringing.

This difference in self-construal has even been [demonstrated at the brain level](#). In a brain-scanning study (fMRI), Chinese and American participants were shown different adjectives and were asked how well these traits represented themselves. They were also asked to think about how well they represented their mother (the mothers were not in the study), while being scanned.

In American participants, there was a clear difference in brain responses between thinking about the self and the mother in the "[medial prefrontal cortex](#)", which is a region of the brain typically associated with self presentations. However, in Chinese participants [there was little or no difference](#) between self and mother, suggesting that the self-presentation shared a large overlap with the presentation of the close relative.



Zulu people are more likely to think of themselves in terms of social relationships. Credit: South African Tourism/Flickr, CC BY-SA

universal. But only by knowing about these effects will we ever be able to identify the core foundations of the human mind that we all share.

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Mental health

Another domain that was originally dominated by studies on W.E.I.R.D. samples is mental health. However, culture can affect our understanding of [mental health](#) in different ways. Because of the existence of cultural differences in behaviour, the framework – based on detecting deviant or non-normative behaviours – isn't complete. What may be seen as normal in one culture (modesty) could be seen as deviating from the norm in another (social phobia).

In addition, a number of culture-specific syndromes have been identified. [Koro sufferers](#) (mostly in Asia), are men which have the mistaken belief that their genitalia are retracting and will disappear. [Hikikomori](#) (mostly Japan) is a condition that describes reclusive individuals who withdraw from social life. Meanwhile, the [evil eye](#) syndrome (mostly in Mediterranean countries) is the belief that envy or other forms of malevolent glare will cause misfortune on the receiver.

The existence of such culture-bound syndromes has [been acknowledged](#) by both the World Health Organization and the American Psychiatry Association recently, as some of these syndromes have been included their respective classifications of mental illnesses.

Clearly culture has a massive effect on how we view ourselves and how we are perceived by others – we are only just scratching the surface. The field, now known as "cross-cultural psychology", is increasingly being taught at universities across the world. The question is to what extent it will inform psychology as a discipline going forward – some see it as an extra dimension of it while others view it as an integral and central part of theory making.

With more research, we may well find that cultural differences pervade into even more areas where [human behaviour](#) was previously thought of as

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