

Henrich, Joseph. 2020. *The Weirdest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*

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The Weirdest People in the World can be considered as two books. The first book presents, in a lively manner, what Joseph Henrich and collaborators famously identified as the “WEIRD problem” in psychology. Psychologists have tended to use so-called WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) participants in their studies and have taken such participants (usually from the United States or other Western countries) to be representative of humanity tout-court. Drawing on cross-cultural researches and, especially, on theoretical principles of cultural evolution (Henrich 2016), Henrich and colleagues have shown that this conjecture is problematic. Moreover, WEIRD participants tend to cluster at the extremes of distributions when one aggregates the outcomes of experiments from different societies. In sum, psychologists have not only unduly generalized; they have chosen the worst sample from which to generalize.

The second book tries to explain *how* Western societies ended up at the extremes of these distributions and, as a consequence, how they became, at least within the last few centuries, “particularly prosperous,” as in the subtitle of Henrich’s book. Henrich presents a wealth of rich and fascinating detail, but the basic thesis—which builds on previous anthropological research (in particular, Goody 1983)—can be expressed in a sentence: The Catholic Church’s prohibition of marriages with close kin, such as cousins, generated a cascade of cultural—and as a consequence, psychological—changes, which made WEIRD people particularly individualistic, anti-conformist,

“obsessed with intentions” (49), and, ultimately, successful.

It is a safe bet that the second book will attract the most commentary and criticism. Henrich’s hypothesis is solidly based on (his brand of) cultural evolution and on an impressive amount of empirical research. All the same, one can imagine specialists from the disciplines involved in Henrich’s work expressing concerns: Did the Christian church really have sufficient control of family relationships in Medieval and pre-Medieval Europe to generate (even inadvertently) these changes? Is positing a single prime motor to account for such complex dynamics really useful, let alone warranted? Can we really talk of a European “collective brain” resulting from such dynamics? For my own part (but I have no primary research expertise in this field), I find Henrich’s ideas compelling and surely fertile for generating, and testing, further hypotheses, and I find his big picture both helpful and useful.

What about the first book? The “WEIRD problem” has become common currency in psychology. The original target article in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, where the acronym was first presented (Henrich et al. 2010), has accumulated around 8,000 citations. The article rightly caused a sensation. While cross-cultural differences were certainly not an unknown topic in psychology, Henrich and colleagues put such differences at the very center of the discipline and, armed with cultural evolution theory, they provided an attractive theoretical foundation to their conceptualization. (I’d be surprised, too, if

the catchy acronym did not have a role in the impact of the article.)

Another discipline, however, had previously faced the same problem. Almost a century ago, anthropologist Franz Boas warned that

a critical examination of what is generally valid for all humanity and what is specifically valid for different cultural types comes to be a matter of great concern to students of society. This is one of the problems that induces us to lay particular stress upon the study of cultures that are historically as little as possible related to our own. Their study enables us to determine those tendencies that are common to all mankind and those belonging to specific human societies only. (Boas 1930, 261)

What happened then? Let me give a cursory (and heavily biased) examination of the anthropological struggles with the problem. This will provide some valuable context for the current situation.

Anthropologists, in general, took very seriously the issue of cultural differences. After all, “culture” was their privileged domain of study (as it is for cultural evolutionists), and it is understandable that they were especially eager to explore the consequences of an assumption that gave to it a prominent causal role. They took the issue of cultural difference so seriously, though, that they ended up highlighting, paradoxically, some shortcomings of the enterprise. One is that—given the notoriously slippery definition of culture—if you look for cultural differences, you will always find some. “Western culture” is obviously a loose label that groups together Sweden and the south of France. (To complicate the picture even more, what about Japan? Or Argentina? Are they Western?) Similar complications arise within the same country: An “Italian culture,” for instance, is an impressionistic definition for sets of behaviors and ideas that are often very different in different areas of the same country. And why stop here? What, for example, about different economic classes in the same area, or city?

Henrich recognizes this problem and adopts a pragmatic attitude. We are “stuck” with some data, and we use what we have (31). Anthropologists, however, have not been satisfied with such pragmatic solutions. In fact, they ended up criticizing the underlying notion of “cultures” as well-defined objects of study itself, even when the boundaries were pragmatically set and considered as overlapping (Hirschfeld 2018). Following this logic, anthropology has seen a flourishing of ethnographies of small groups, single families, and even autoethnographies, where researchers analyze culture through their own experience (Ellis et al. 2011).

This shift has been accompanied by a disquietude about, or an outright rejection of, generalizations. This, again, seems a logical, if maybe disappointing, development. If culture is a causal force that mostly determines the behavior of individuals, and if we cannot pinpoint or characterize with any real precision the culture in which individuals are embedded, the best we can do is describe and interpret local culture and behavior, not make general inferences about human behavior or try to explain it.

From this perspective, the relatively recent insistence on the importance of panhuman cognitive similarities, offered by a minority of anthropologists (Sperber 1985, 1985b; Boyer 1990; Atran 1993), can be seen also as an attempt to give back to anthropology its explicative power and focus. Sperber and colleagues willingly accepted that culture could not be essentialized; a quasi-motto of the research tradition inspired by their work (today often referred as “cultural attraction theory”) is that “culture is a property, not a thing” (Scott-Phillips et al. 2018). The price to pay to avoid essentializing culture was, however, depriving it of its causal power. The explicative strategy proposed for anthropology, then, was not to explain a behavior in terms of its underlying “culture,” but to explain why some behaviors and ideas were called “cultural” in the first place; that is, why they were relatively diffuse and stable.

Simplified as it is, this is an old story for anthropology. It may, however, also be useful to psychologists and cultural evolutionists today. With that in mind, it is time to go back to *The Weirdest People in the World*.

Some of the prominent examples of cross-cultural variations used in the book are, in fact, understood as interactions between psychological invariants that operate in different ways in different circumstances. Take the case of shame and guilt, another traditional anthropological topos (from Benedict 1946). Henrich describes how WEIRD people are “guilt-ridden but shameless” (34), in contrast to the majority of other populations, for whom shame is the rule and guilt the exception. To explain this difference, Henrich refers to the fact that shame “is rooted in a genetically evolved psychological package that is associated with *social devaluation in the eyes of others*” (34, emphasis in the original), whereas guilt is the result of a private evaluation, when one feels that one has failed according to one’s own standards. In WEIRD, individualistic societies, then—given that the evaluation of others is less critical than it is in more collectivist societies—guilt is more important than shame. The opposite happens in collectivist societies. Of course, everybody can feel both and, as Henrich reports, the emotions have different, universal, functions. Shame is a way to signal regret to and ask for forgiveness from group members; guilt is “part of the affective machinery that motivates [individuals] to stick to their personal standards” (36).

Evolutionary psychologists have empirically investigated this functional conception of shame. Indeed, their predictions about shame tracking the magnitude of social devaluation—the bigger the devaluation, the more shame felt—have been tested and confirmed both in Western and non-Western countries (Sznycer et al. 2016, 2018). Applying a similar logic, robust cross-cultural similarities have been proposed for other emotions such as pride (Sznycer et al. 2018; Durkee et al. 2019). The goal of this exer-

cise is not to label various emotions (or any other behavior) as either “universal” or “variable,” however. Depending on the granularity of the analysis and on what we are interested in explaining, research needs to move from a focus on functional, possibly universal, psychological mechanisms to their specific, locally variable, expressions, and vice versa (Wertz and Moya 2019; Lukaszewski et al. 2020).

The analysis of the interplay between evolved psychological mechanisms and local cultural conditions is a recurrent explicative strategy in *The Weirdest People in the World*. Henrich explicitly notes that “not all social norms are equally likely to evolve or remain stable,” and observes that it depends on “innate anchors and core institutions” (71). New cultural forms exhibit “strong *path-dependence*” (88, emphasis in the original), that is, they are constrained by the previous cultural forms from which they evolved. In fact, the central argument of the second part of the book—WEIRDs are as they are because of the Catholic Church’s prohibition of marriages with close kin—fully depends on pan-human assumptions about the power of kin-based institutions or on tendencies that make moralizing gods a cognitively appealing cultural trait, such as our over-reactive mentalizing abilities or a natural inclination toward dualism.

Unfortunately for the reasoning in this review, what is probably the most important universal psychological adaptation for Henrich’s argument—our innate capacities for cultural learning, capacities that are supposedly calibrated toward what to learn, when to learn it, and from whom to learn it—is unconvincing to me, at least as it is presented in its details by Henrich. The empirical evidence regarding the existence of these capacities—in cultural evolution usually called “transmission biases” or “social learning strategies”—points to a decision-making system that is more flexible than Henrich suggests (Morin 2016; Acerbi 2019). Likewise, Henrich’s distinction between mechanisms that deal specifically with social information and mechanisms that deal with individual

information has been questioned by recent experimental work (Atkinson et al. 2020).

The Weirdest People in the World is an ambitious and rewarding book, and I have used up my sticky note block in marking passages I found enthralling, informative, or with which I disagreed. I applaud the book's focus on cultural dynamics, but it would be unfair to use the book to fetishize cultural variability. The importance of data and experiments representing broader samples of humanity than WEIRD populations is uncontroversial in psychology and elsewhere,

but this research should be put in a historical context and motivated by solid theoretical reasoning, as Henrich does. *The Weirdest People in the World* is also an exposition of this theoretical reasoning, and, more generally, an impressive depiction of the current state of cultural evolution theory. The book is already on its way to success, and with this success may come a perception that there is one Cultural Evolution theory—Henrich's theory—on which everybody agrees. That is certainly not the case. Luckily, cultural evolution is still a dynamic and contested field.

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