

THE WEIRDEST PEOPLE IN THE WORLD

JOSEPH HENRICH

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 “a scientist,” “a surgeon,” or “a kayaker.” You were probably less inclined to respond with things like “Josh’s dad” or “Maya’s mom,” 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 in Africa and the South Pacific respond to the “Who am I?” (Figure 1.1A) and the “I am _____” tasks (Figure 1.1B), respectively. 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 patriline-

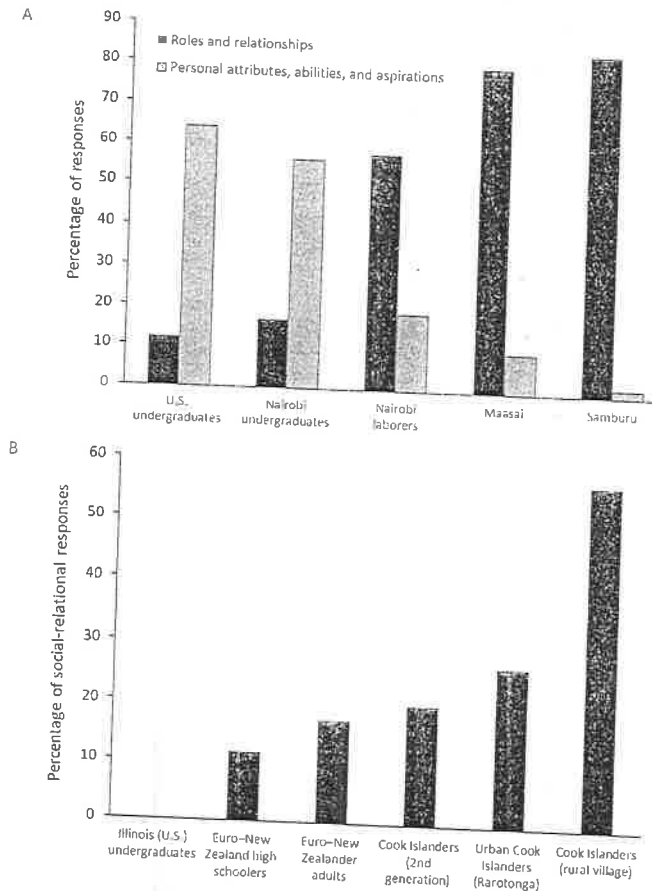


FIGURE 1.1. Personal identity across diverse populations. (A) Using the “Who am I?” task, the upper figure shows the tendencies for people in different populations to focus on their roles and relationships vs. their personal attributes and achievements. The bars show the average percentages of responses 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.²

al clans and maintain a traditional cattle-herding lifestyle. Their responses referenced their roles and relationships at least 80 percent of the time while only occasionally highlighting their personal attributes or achievements (10 percent or less of the time). In the middle of this distribution are two

populations from Nairobi, the bustling capital of Kenya. Nairobi laborers, including participants from several different tribal groups, responded mostly by referencing their roles and relationships, though they did this less than the Maasai or Samburu. Meanwhile, the fully urbanized undergraduates at the University of Nairobi (a European-style institution) look much more like their American counterparts, with most of their responses referencing their personal attributes or individual achievements.³

On the other side of the globe, Figure 1.1B tells a similar story. The close political and social ties between New Zealand and the Cook Islands allow us to 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 outer islands, where people still live in traditional hereditary lineages, the average percentage of social-relational responses was nearly 60 percent. Moving to Rarotonga, the national capital and a popular tourist destination, the frequency of social-relational responses drops to 27 percent. In New Zealand, among the children of immigrants, the frequency of such responses falls further, to 20 percent. This stands close to the average for European-descent New Zealanders, who come in at 17 percent. New Zealand high school students are lower yet, at 12 percent. 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. American undergraduates, in particular, seem unusually self-absorbed, even among other WEIRD populations.⁴

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 to-

gether as the *individualism complex* or just *individualism*. Individualism is best thought of as a psychological cluster that allows people to better navigate WEIRD social worlds by calibrating their perceptions, attention, judgments, and emotions. I expect most populations to reveal psychological packages that similarly "fit" with their societies' institutions, technologies, environments, and languages, though as you'll see the WEIRD package is particularly peculiar.

MAPPING THE INDIVIDUALISM COMPLEX

To understand individualism, let's start at the other end of the spectrum.⁵ Throughout most of human history, people grew up enmeshed in dense family networks that knitted together distant cousins and in-laws. In these regulated-relational worlds, people's survival, identity, security, marriages, and success depended on the health and prosperity of kin-based networks, which often formed discrete institutions known as clans, lineages, houses, or tribes. 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 dense social web. For example, a man could be *obligated* to avenge the murder of one type of second cousin (through his 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. 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 channel people's investments into a distinct and largely inherited in-group. Many kin-based institutions not only influence inheritance and the residence of newly married couples, they also 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 sons' crimes).

This social interdependence breeds emotional interdependence, leading people to strongly identify with their in-groups and to make sharp in-group vs. out-group distinctions 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 in-group members as long as they are connected to you through family ties. By contrast, otherwise familiar faces may remain, effectively, strangers if you cannot link to them through your dense, durable social ties.⁶

Success and respect in this world hinge on adroitly navigating these kin-based institutions. This often means (1) conforming to fellow in-group members, (2) deferring to authorities like elders or sages, (3) policing the behavior of those close to you (but not strangers), (4) sharply distinguishing your in-group 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 bringing shame on themselves or others.⁷

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., "no one is above the law"). These can be enhanced or accentuated

if a person joins a like-minded group. One's reputation with others, and with themselves (self-esteem), is shaped primarily by their own individual attributes and accomplishments, not by nourishing an enduring web of inherited ties that are governed by a complex set of relationship-specific social norms.⁸

...norms, religious, and political identity.

Before continuing our global tour of psychological variation, let me highlight four important points to keep in mind:¹³

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 multidimensional.
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 often examine psychological differences within countries—between regions, provinces, and villages, and even among second-generation immigrants with diverse backgrounds. 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 evolve.