

The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous

Joseph Henrich

Modern psychology assumes we are normal. Wrong! We are the outliers.

Nature versus nurture has been the primary point of contention with regard to the differences between people and between peoples

Henrich proposes a third: the way our brains wire themselves after birth is to a significant degree determined by culture. Genetics gives us a generalized capacity to develop. Culture, which is part of environment, determines how we develop.

We know that the brain continues to wire itself for years after birth. Newborns have many more neural connections than adults. The unused connections simply die out, the useful ones are strengthened.

Our brains are wired for language, but which language they learn is a matter of environment. Though Henrich doesn't point it out, this is evolutionarily very recent. Most agree we only started to speak about 170,000 years ago, twice as far back as our first exodus from Africa.

One of Henrich's strongest contentions is that our brains now wire themselves for reading. This process apparently employs some parts of the brain that would otherwise be used for recognizing faces. There is a trade-off: better reading, worse facial recognition. Henrich says it is cultural and not genetic.

Henrich's contention is that European Christian people, those of the Western Educated Industrialized Rich Developed (WEIRD) countries differ from the rest of humanity in significant ways.

The most significant difference is the marriage and family pattern (MFP) under Christianity. Unlike the rest of the world, we in the West were mostly monogamous. The church did not allow polygamy. The church frowned on adultery and premarital sex. The church repressed homosexuality. The upshot was that most men were able to find mates.

The implications were huge. The fact that most had mates led to less sexual competition among men.

Henrich notes that in almost every other part of the world there is a large pool of unmarried, or marriageable men. Prominent men take multiple wives, and the poor are left with nothing.

If these men are to have any evolutionary success – leave progeny – they have to take chances. We see those chances played out in today's Middle East, where conflict is endemic and rape is epidemic.

Though Henrich doesn't make the claim, the same might apply to modern American society. How many members of Antifa and BLM are Incels, involuntary celibates and due to the fact that women don't feel any pressure to marry. Not wanting marriage, they are free to be lesbians, simple man haters, or pursue hypergamous flings with the most attractive men.

Christianity posited an all-seeing God observing our every action and judging whether or not we merited acceptance into the kingdom of heaven. He presents strong evidence that belief in such a God led to prosocial behavior.

The Dunbar number, a cap on the size of a social group, is one of the constants in evolutionary psychology. When groups of any primates, including tribal men, reach 150 they tend to split. 150 is the maximum number of individuals that a single individual can recognize by personality.

For civilized men there was a great deal of advantage in forming larger societies. If you transcend the Dunbar number you get bigger armies, more accumulated wealth, more specialization among tool makers and the like. Henrich says there was constant pressure to find mechanisms for creating larger societies.

Most of the mechanisms involved extensive kin groups, bands of cousins. The Slavs and the Latin Americans even today will call anybody with any degree of blood affinity a cousin.

Grouping by kin had a couple of disadvantages. It limited the number of potential marriage partners. Although Henrich doesn't dwell on it, it leads to inbred depression: lower intelligence and more susceptibility to disease. Moreover, however it is structured, it limits the size of the society.

As people became specialized, trades were passed down along kinship lines. The son of a blacksmith would become a blacksmith; the son of a shepherd would become a shepherd. Specialized knowledge would be jealously guarded within the family, a trade secret.

When Christianity forbid kin marriages, up to the 6th degree of relatedness (great great-great-great-great-grandparents), it forced people to marry from the general community. This had several beneficial aspects.

First, men had to attract mates rather than having some female relative forced to marry them. The status of women improved since their affection had to be won.

Groups of men would affiliate by friendship and mutual respect rather than by kinship. Kevin MacDonald writes extensively about this Männerbund, or brotherhood of men among Europeans in his book "Individualism and the Western Liberal Tradition."

Expertise would not be hoarded within a family but shared among the unrelated in-laws and others in the group.

Henrich cites some highly informative experiments showing that the collective improvement of machines, strains of edible foods, or almost anything happens much more rapidly generation by generation if the group can capitalize on the best ideas of the whole society rather than simply the best ones within individual families.

The Christian societies, freed from the constraints of kin relations, develop several non-kinship associations that aided in the spread of knowledge: guilds, monasteries, universities and town councils all brought together largely unrelated people to pool their knowledge and abilities for the common good.

Learning to deal with strangers was a great boon to commerce. Starting in the late middle ages a number of institutions and organizations developed to allow expanded trade. There was the Hanseatic league stretching from England to the Baltics. The individual cities under the Magdeburg charters competed for experts in ironwork, weaving, pottery, weaponry, jewelry and other forms of manufacture and trade. Cities competed in offering favorable terms to attract tradesmen. Among the attractions was freedom from the obligations to feudal lords that had restricted their mobility in previous ages.

Taken together, these changes permitted the genius of individuals, which on average probably did not surpass that of other peoples such as the North East Asians, to be pooled for the collective benefit. Europe rose from being a backwater, lagging the Muslim and East Asian worlds at the turn of the millennium, to economic leadership about five centuries later.

Monogamous marriage and a broader sense of society brought psychological changes to the WEIRD peoples. Marriage alone, and responsibility for children, is shown to bring testosterone levels down significantly. A constant interaction with strangers also favored people with low testosterone, people who didn't get angry easily.

Other writers note that somewhere on the order of 2% of the men of each generation were either killed in testosterone-fueled fights or by execution. In the 50 generations or so making up a millennium, this had a remarkably pacifying effect. See Steven Pinker "The Better Angels of our Nature."

Paradoxically, the ability to get along smoothly with men within our own societies made us more formidable warriors when societies competed. The inventiveness mentioned above, and the ability to come together in large groups with a common purpose, led to large military forces which in turn led to increasing consolidation of political units throughout Europe. See "How Europe Conquered the World."

Henrich contends that psychology has erred in generalizing the results of experiments performed on limited groups of people, most commonly American college undergraduates. Those results may not be representative even of all Americans, and certainly not of all the world.

As an example, psychologists have long agreed that personality can be defined by five mostly independent constructs with the acronym OCEAN: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. Henrich contends that this system of measurement works reasonably well with WEIRD peoples, but that the number and composition of the components simply doesn't apply to others.

Why not? For one thing, the OCEAN system is premised on a kind of individuality that is simply not present among other peoples. American Indians tend to be much more communally oriented. The notions of openness and extraversion work differently in a society in which consensus is highly valued.

The themes Henrich presents demonstrate how Europe rose to prominence, laying the foundations for the Industrial Revolution and vaulting us to world supremacy by the turn of the 20th century.

Every success contains the seeds of its own destruction. There is another book to be written about how the successes chronicled here have led to a lack of fertility and a decline in ethnocentrism that may imperil the WEIRD peoples. But that's a topic for another book.

Although I tend to believe that genetics is more responsible than he would acknowledge for the developments Henrich cites, that can be a subject for future research. The studies he has brought together are numerous, well-conceived and constructed, and very informative. Whatever directions the discussions take, this book will be frequently cited. Five stars.