



Reviews: Culture and citizenship

International Sociology Reviews
2021, Vol. 36(5) 780–789
© The Author(s) 2021
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/02685809211057670
journals.sagepub.com/home/iss



Joseph Henrich,

The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous, Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 2020; 656 pp. (without index): ISBN 9780374173227, US\$35

Reviewed by: G David Johnson, *University of South Alabama, USA*

Keywords

Cultural evolution, modernity, religion, social change, western

In 2010, Joseph Henrich and his co-authors, S. J. Heine and A. Norenzayan, published two important papers, one in *Nature* and the other in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, which challenged the methodological foundations of the discipline of psychology. They argued that the purported universal generalizations from contemporary experimental psychology were actually drawn from massively biased samples. In their overview of psychological studies at that time, 96% of subjects were drawn from North America, northern Europe, or Australia, and about 70% of these were US undergraduates. Henrich and his colleagues presented data from several of their own experiments taken from non-western populations which showed that findings from studies of western subjects do not generalize to people from other parts of the world. They argued that the psychology of western populations is in fact peculiar, or in other words, WEIRD: Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic.

There are at least two significant implications of their findings. First, and most obviously, the discipline of psychology needs to be rethought and reorganized to contextualize its theories and generalizations in light of variation among cultures and societies; second, we need to understand how and why WEIRD psychology evolved in western societies. This book, *The WEIRDest People in the World*, is Henrich's attempt to address this second, very large project.

His work should be important to multiple disciplines, including psychology, economics, anthropology, and I argue especially to sociology. Henrich's theory and his evidence is directly relevant to the foundational sociological problem raised, in particular, by Max Weber: What forces caused the development of the social institutions that are particularly western, including market economies, industrialization, relative economic prosperity,

democratic political systems, the rule of individually centered law, and western values like individualism? My view, which is also acknowledged by Henrich, is that his theory is very much in the Weberian tradition. Henrich was trained in anthropology, and therefore it is not surprising that like Weber, he emphasizes the role of culture. Like Weber, he also emphasizes the role of psychological states in social change. And finally, like Weber, his theory is ultimately multidimensional in that material forces, in addition to ideational ones, play a key role.

The WEIRDest People in the World is a big book in multiple respects. It runs for more than 600 pages, covers the history of Europe for more than a millennium, and offers an interdisciplinary theory of social change that is vast in scope. There are, no doubt, many details that can and will be criticized by scholars from many disciplines. But it offers an intriguing theory worthy of such critical engagement.

Henrich offers a cultural evolutionary theory based on the understanding that human societies throughout history evolved systems organized first and foremost around kin ties. Social norms emerged in hunting and gathering societies which regulated 'exchange, childrearing, kinship, and cooperation'. These norms evolved for group members to preferentially interact and learn from those who share 'one's own ethnic markers'. These norms developed further to 'prohibit marrying people from other tribal or ethnic groups'. As sedentary agriculture developed, kinship institutions intensified with the development of 'clans, patrilocal residence, segmentary lineages and ancestor worship'. Even in premodern states, kinship institutions still dominated most of social life. While substantial variations no doubt existed in the psychologies of populations in kin-based societies, their psychologies were clearly not WEIRD. Through a series of studies conducted around the world, including China, other Asian societies, Africa, and in the Amazon of South America, Henrich provides evidence that non-western subjects are less individualistic, self-obsessed, non-conformist and analytical.

So what happened in the west to produce its unique psychology? One important clue is the well-established existence of the European Marriage Pattern (EMP), which included monogamous nuclear families with neo-local marital residence (where the couple could choose to locate independent of kin), late age at marriage, high levels of females who never marry, smaller families and lower fertility, and a premarital labor period (where young adults often relocated to other households to provide service as a life stage). The EMP emerged in the late Middle Ages and into the Early Modern Period in much of Europe. Henrich argues that the EMP was crucial in the formation of WEIRD psychology. A key prerequisite for the emergence of the EMP is that the authority of kin-based institutions had to be demolished. So what force, unique in human history, caused the emergence of the EMP?

Henrich's answer is the Roman Catholic Church's Marriage and Family Program (MFP). Beginning in the fourth century, and continuing for more than a millennium, the Church prohibited marriage to blood relatives, marriage to close affines, polygyny, and marriage to non-Christians. It also created spiritual kinship (Godparents), discouraged adoption of children, suppressed arranged marriages, and encouraged neo-local residence and inheritance by personal testament (rather than keeping ownership within the kin group). This MFP was gradually imposed by the Church across much of Europe over several centuries. Regardless of the reasons that the Church

imposed the MFP, it did impose it, and according to Henrich, the unintended effects of the program were huge. One way to formulate Henrich's argument is the strong claim that the Church's MFP was a necessary cause of the emergence of western modernity. The Church did not intend to create capitalism, representative democracy, and WEIRD psychology, but it played a critical role nonetheless. Henrich further argues, following Weber, that Protestantism sealed the deal by cementing many of the changes initiated by the Roman Catholic Church's MFP, especially by facilitating the spread of literacy across European populations. Accordingly, Henrich dubs Protestantism as the WEIRDest religion.

There is much more to Henrich's theory than I can summarize here, including the rise of independent cities and towns in the Middle Ages (also following Weber's lead), and the roles played by monasteries, guilds, other voluntary associations, and universities. As I mentioned, the argument and the evidence presented to support it need to be assessed carefully by scholars from many disciplines. I have some expertise in the emergence of the western family system in the Early Modern period and Henrich's use of that historical evidence appears appropriate. One key criticism that will no doubt be posed is that in attempting to explain the emergence of the unique cultural and psychological characteristics of the west, Henrich glosses over its history of 'slavery, racism, plunder, and genocide'. Henrich's glib response is 'that there are plenty of books on these subjects'. To be fair to the author, I believe that Henrich is ultimately a cultural relativist and that, at least in this already long book, his role is to develop a very ambitious attempt to explain what is clearly a very important set of phenomena in world history. He will leave it to others to sort out the costs and benefits of the development of western societies, cultures, and psychologies. I encourage others to evaluate this provocative and important work for themselves.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Author biography

G David Johnson is Professor of Sociology at the University of South Alabama in Mobile, Alabama, USA. For the last 20 years, I have served in academic administration as Provost and Dean, but prior to that conducted research on the Early Modern family and cross-cultural patterns of gender stratification and gender roles. E-mail: djohnson@southalabama.edu

Shuai Man,

寻找安全食品：一项信任演化逻辑的社会学考察 [Search of Safe Food: A Sociological Study of the Evolutionary Logic of Trust], Social Sciences Academic Press (社会科学文献出版社 Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe): Beijing, 2020; 234 pp. (including Index): ISBN 9787520159722, 89 RMB

Reviewed by: Zixi Liu, *Xiamen University, China*