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# Culture and personality: Brief for an arranged marriage

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## Abstract

Many popular theories of personality are culture-specific. They are rooted in Western philosophical and religious assumptions about persons. They have not been adopted after being empirically evaluated and compared to alternative models of individual action. Yet such theories become real and true as they are reflected and instituted in everyday practices, social interactions, and institutions. Pairing psychology and culture can lead to a rethinking and broadening of the scope of personality. A cultural psychology of personality asks: What is a person? What is the source of individual variation in behavior? And what meaning is attached to this variation in behavior? Depending on the cultural context (e.g., national origin or social class) these questions are answered differently.

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## 1. Introduction

A marriage between culture and personality will never be a love match. Having been pitted against each other for years, these two are an odd couple. Yet an arranged marriage has the potential to bring out some hidden qualities in both parties. Most notably such a union will inevitably reveal the importance of individual and collective meaning systems, factors that have received surprisingly little attention in the ongoing debates about the relative role of context and personality in understanding behavior.

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### *1.1. Beyond the usual questions*

Most of the energy in the culture and personality relationship has focused on the question of the universality of personality traits. For example, in the last few years a variety of studies have found that factor analyses of self-ratings on personality adjectives show reasonable agreement across culture. These studies have been used to argue for the universality of personality traits (e.g., McCrae, Costa, & Yik, 1996). While such agreement is an interesting finding, it does not by itself imply that personality, as understood within the European American framework, is a universal aspect of human behavior. Nor does it imply that the variability that appears as an obvious feature of human life is a function of an internal package of attributes called a personality. And finally, it does not imply that this individual variability is universally regarded as significant in understanding social behavior (Markus & Kitayama, 1998). The difficulties with drawing conclusions from such factor analytic studies underscore why a long term relationship between personality and culture, a relationship in which the parties reflect on their own natures and underlying assumptions and ask each other hard questions, could be productive.

To begin with, and it is the question of focus here, personality can reasonably ask: why should I care, i.e., what can the consideration of culture do for me? The answer is that it can lead to a rethinking of the definition and a broadening of the scope of personality. A cultural psychology of personality begins with an acknowledgment that individual variation in behavior is very commonly marked and given significance, and that people do have patterns of behavior that are specific and somewhat distinctive from each other. The question posed by a cultural perspective is whether patterns of within-culture variability are similar in divergent cultural contexts. But first, as background and foundation for this question, a cultural psychology of personality asks a number of questions including: What is a person? What is the source of individual variation in behavior within a cultural context? And what significance is attached to individual variation and/or what role does it play in social life?

For example, as personality is explored a cultural perspective it becomes much easier to understand personality as ongoing social process, as something people do, and to see ways to go beyond the false dichotomy between person and situation that has hampered theorizing in both personality and social psychology. A focus on the cultural context highlights that many common assumptions about personality, its source and its role in behavior, are not based in empirical observations (Cross & Markus, 1999). That is, they have not been adopted after being empirically evaluated and compared to alternative models of individual action. Instead, they are rooted in Western philosophical and religious assumptions about persons. Yet such theories become real and true as they are reflected and instituted in everyday practices, social interactions, policies, and institutions (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Ichheiser, 1943). These popular theories then are not just in heads, they are also in worlds.

## 1.2. *Revealing tacit models of the person*

The implicit cultural models that are prevalent in cultural contexts can be extracted from various cultural products. And increasingly investigators are analyzing cultural products including policies, laws, media accounts, stories, songs, and advertisements to reveal these models (Cohen & Nisbett, 1997; Kim & Markus, 1999; Vandello & Cohen, 2004). For example, take *Joe Millionaire*, a run of the mill reality television show featuring one man and 20 women. All the women believe that the man has recently come into 50 million dollars and that he will pick one of the 20 women to marry. The dramatic tension that fuels the 10-week long drama comes from the fact that Joe is just a construction worker. He is not a millionaire. But for the purpose of extracting cultural models for explaining behavior, that is beside the point. Over the episodes, Joe takes each of the women on several dates so he can decide which one he should marry. What is on display is Joe's and America's (or at least those millions of Americans who watch the show) theory of personality. Joe asks the women what they like to eat and what they like to do. He studies their moods, wonders about whether they are uptight and fearful, whether they are optimistic, whether they have drive and energy, whether they are self-confident, whether they like him, and whether they seem genuine or real. He never asks about their educational experiences, jobs, their families, their politics, and he gets very upset if the women appear to behave differently in different situations. The fact that the context—20 women in a chateau taking turns dating the same man—is bizarre and might afford unusual behavior never enters into the deliberations.

The show is ridiculous but it nonetheless showcases a common American model of what matters about a person and how to explain variation in behavior. Want to understand or explain a person or pick someone to marry? Forget the context, forget the roles and social relationships, it is the attributes that matter. Personality is the source of behavior and personality is defined as a bundle of internal traits. That this model is so prevalent may explain why celebrity, stardom, and the cult of personality are so pronounced in American contexts.

More evidence for the most prevalent model of the person can be found in American personal advertisements. Consider the following set from *The San Francisco Chronicle* that are described in Cross and Markus (1999):

- 28, SWM, 6'1", 160 lbs. handsome, artistic, ambitious, seeks attractive WF, 24–29, for friendship, romance, and permanent partnership.
- Very attractive, independent SWF, 29, 5'6", 110 lbs., loves fine dining, the theater, gardening, and quiet evenings at home. In search of handsome SWM 28–34 with similar interests.
- Where shall I kiss thee? Across Sierra shoulder, skiing. Between acts of Aida, sharing? Forthright, funny, fiery, fit, seeking perceptive, profound permanent partner.

Now compare these with a set of personals from *The India Tribune*, a newspaper for Indian families in Northern California:

- Gujarati Vaishnav parents invite correspondence from never married Gujarati well settled, preferably green card holder from respectable family for green card holder daughter 29 years, 5'4", good looking, doing CPA.
- Gujarati Brahmin family invites correspondence from a well-cultured, beautiful Gujarati girl for 29 years, 5'8", 145 lbs. handsome looking, well-settled boy.
- Patel parents invite professional for their U.S.-raised daughter 26 (computer science) and son 24 (civil engineer), family owns construction firm.

Both sets of ads appeared on the same day. The people described in all ads are of similar ages. Both groups of ads presumably convey what is most significant to know about a person being considered for marriage or a long-term relationship. Four of six personals note that the target person is handsome, good-looking, or attractive. In the Indian ads, it is the parents who are inviting the contact, not the individual, and it is the sociocultural positioning of the family that is clearly specified. Gujarati refers to a state of India; Vaishnav and Brahmin refer to castes. Patel refers to the last name of a Gujarati family. Someone who is a green card holder has permanent residence in the United States. Knowing about a person means knowing how they are located in social space, knowing, for example, about the qualities of the family—respectable, owns construction firm.

In the American ads, the only sociocultural information provided is race and marital status. Instead, it is the attributes of the individual who will engage in the relationship that are most salient (e.g., ambitious, independent, and artistic). Moreover, the European-American ads include references to preferences and to ways of spending one's time and seem written to draw attention to what is special and unique about the person. In contrast, distinguishing individual characteristics are not described in the Indian ads. In the European American ads, the writers seek other people with matching traits and preferences; nothing is proffered about the roles or positions in society of these people. Do they work? What is their educational level? Do they have families? Where are they from?

Both television programs and personals ads are everyday cultural products that reveal underlying cultural models of the person and the source of the person's behavior. These models incorporate a web of tacit understandings and implicit assumptions that are shared by researchers and respondents alike (Bruner, 1990; Markus & Kitayama, in press; Quinn & Holland, 1987). Cultural models include a blend of normative beliefs and moral prescriptions about human nature that are so obvious and taken for granted that they are typically never articulated. Yet, the observation, analysis, and measurement of people, their actions, and their personalities necessarily engages these interpretive structures. These models give form and substance to experience, although there is little phenomenological awareness of their role in the construction of social reality. They are typically invisible to those who engage or enact them.

Cultural models are not just a matter of individual attitudes, beliefs, and values; they are also materialized and objectified in policies, practices, symbols, and social institutions or situations. In this way, individuals are not opposed to contexts for control over action. Very often individuals and contexts make each other up such

that individuals actively produce and reproduce cultural contexts that reflect their understandings and then further influence their actions.

### 1.3. What is a person? *clue: There is more than one right answer*

Table 1 reveals some elements of the normative person in European American contexts. The good, authentic, or genuine personality is one in which attributes are unified or integrated into a system or a whole with strong boundaries, one that is stable over time and that can resist influence. In this model, others are typically cast as part of the situational context that should not have much influence. The idea of a bounded individual who is separate from others leads to a powerful consistency ethic in which the self should be the same relatively unchanging self across situations.

Table 1 also reveals some elements of the normative person in Asian cultural contexts. As in the Indian personals ads, this model incorporates a much more social definition of a person, one in which the person is understood to be in constant transaction with the context. It is the person in relation to others that is the unit to be understood. From this view, a person can only be understood in role and while engaged in particular social activities. Out of role or distinctive behavior is not diagnostic of the “real” person. (See Markus & Kitayama, in press for a comprehensive analysis of these models.)

In the models prevalent in East Asian contexts, people are judged by their relationships or the nature of their role in the context, not by their attributes. For example, studies of Chinese organizational behavior reveal that employees are selected not on the basis of scores or interviews that tap underlying traits but instead on basis of the applicants’ ties to current employees (Redding & Wong, 1986; Cross & Markus, 1999). A large and growing volume of data reveal that respondents in East Asian contexts are much more likely than those in European American contexts to make situational attributions for behavior (e.g., Kanagawa, Cross, & Markus, 2001; Miller, 1984; Morris & Peng, 1994).

A comparison of these sets of models reveals that a number of the assumptions that are basic to the study of personality in European American contexts are not universally held. The American view is a particular view that has been taken as a general

Table 1  
The normative person is...

European American models	East Asian models
–A bundle of attributes, preferences, etc.	–A node in a set of relations
–Independent from others	–Maintains relations with others
–Expresses and affirms an independent self	–Affirms an <i>interdependent</i> self and one’s social position
–Actions are “freely” chosen contingent on one’s own preferences, goals, intentions	–Actions are responsive to obligations and expectations of others; preferences, goals interactions are interpersonally anchored
–Actions are diagnostic of the self	–Actions are diagnostic of the nature of relationships
–Actively controls, influences others	–Actively references, adjusts to others

or basic model. These particular assumptions include the idea that: (1) social behavior is rooted in and determined by underlying dispositions or traits; (2) that the person's behavior can and should be understood apart from the person's particular social experiences and roles in society, and; (3) that positively distinctive or non-normative behavior is particularly diagnostic and "good" in the sense of valued (see Cross & Markus, 1999 for an extended discussion of these points). Most research in personality assumes a consensual understanding of what is included in the psychological signature of an individual and consensual answers to questions such as what or where is the person? What is critical or significant for defining a person?, and What is individual behavior and how do we categorize it? Such questions can result in different answers depending on the cultural context in which they are asked. If a personality is something that characterizes a person, and if what it means to be a person varies with context, then a cultural perspective on personality provides both important affordances and constraints on theorizing about personality. If, for example, individual behavior is understood as fundamentally relational such that it is interpersonally anchored and responsive to others, researchers may be less concerned with seeking the "natural," internal, for example, genetic sources, of this behavior, and may be more likely to seek the wellspring of behavior in the structure and meaning of the interpersonal environment.

#### *1.4. Variations on the European American normative model*

The model that is inscribed in many theories of personality does not reflect "human" nature; instead it reflects the ideas and practices of European American contexts. Recent studies suggest, however, that the scope of the model may be even more restricted. The model delineated in Table 1 best matches the meaning system inscribed in middle class European American contexts. Working class contexts which are different in many respects—in income levels, in occupations, and in relational networks—appear to engage somewhat different models of the person (Lamont, 2000; Lott, 2002; Markus, Ryff, Curhan, & Palmersheim, 2003; Wiley, Rose, Burger, & Miller, 1998). Ethnographic accounts and recent empirical studies suggest that the very notion that one's behavior "expresses the self" and reveals "distinctive" attributes is much less commonly held in working class contexts. Instead, people are likely to see the task of being a person in terms of defending and protecting themselves from influence by others. The task is not one of expression but instead one of maintaining or defending the integrity of the self and of standing by one's convictions.

This work, which is quite recent, is of heuristic value in that it suggests that person and thus personalities develop within the social contexts and dynamics that provide blueprints for meaningful action. For example, in a comparative study of the socialization of children's self-concept in working class and upper middle class communities in Queens, New York, Kusserow (1999) outlined a number of important understandings of what it means to be a person. She found that in the lower-working class community there was an emphasis on "hard individualism." This includes an emphasis on autonomy in the sense of defending one's self, being tough, standing

one's ground, and also on not being too "full of oneself" or too "puffed up." Kusevich contrasted this style of individualism with a "soft individualism" in which the goal is "to puff the delicate layers of the child's self out, so that the child could open out into the world and realize his or her full potential. Raising an individualistic child was akin to gently assisting the child in emerging, unfolding, flowering, and self-actualizing his or her own unique qualities, thoughts, and feelings" (p. 223). With the practices of hard individualism the self of the child is socialized to be "tight, dense, vigilant, and ready for obstacles." With the practices of soft individualism, the self will be relatively "loose and willing to pour itself into the world" (p. 223). Consistent with this view in an analysis of self concepts in working class and middle class contexts, Markus and colleagues (Markus et al., 2003) find that middle class respondents compared to working class use many more personal attributes to describe themselves, even though their self-descriptions do not differ in word count. Moreover, working class respondents are more likely to describe themselves as regular and average and to include in their self-description their social relevant categories such as gender and age.

### *1.5. Fruits of the union*

Models of how to be a person are the tacit cultural matrix within which personalities take form, and it is likely that the content and function of personality will reflect these models. Looking at personality within a cultural perspective leads then to a much more social and contextually sensitive view of personality. Personality is only imagined to be "separate" from the environment or the context in middle class American models of personality. Thus American personalities are as they are, and as they are theorized to be, in some important part, because scientists and lay people alike engage the model of how to be a person that is prevalent in their social context. A marriage between culture and personality and the comparative perspective it affords illuminates the presence and influence of these culture-specific models. The marriage then can inhibit a variety of universalistic fallacies in which theorists operate from the limited perspective of a powerful but invisible meaning system, e.g., that associated with the European American middle class, and assume they are observing "basic" human behavior.

The view of personality as an blend of individual tendencies dynamically shaped by social requirements and expectations is an idea that can be found in European American personality tradition. It finds its clearest expression in the work of Mischel, Shoda, and Cervone (Cervone & Shoda, 1999; Mischel, 1990; Mischel & Shoda, 1995) and in the work of Cantor and Snyder (Cantor, 1990, 1994; Snyder & Cantor, 1998). This is a view of personality that places relatively greater emphasis on the social and on what is required and expected by others in the context. Personality then is an active process of meaning-making. Personal meaning systems function like collective or cultural meaning systems to lend structure and coherence to behavior. Cantor, in fact, argues that "We too often act as if individuals "have" personalities, forgetting that what people 'do' or try to do, and with whom they do it, can define and redefine who they are and who they will become" (quoted in Pervin, 1996, p. 297).

Similarly, and here is how the analysis of culture can benefit from the analysis of personality, those involved in the theoretical analysis of culture and concerned with developing a concept of culture that suitable for psychology and that does not obscure the role of psychology in the study of culture are struggling with conceptual challenges that personality theorists have also tackled. Most specifically the problem of entification.

Culture is not an entity; it is not something that people “have” like membership in a group (Adams & Markus, 2004). Rather culture, like personality, involves doing. It consists of loosely bounded, continuous patterns of meaning-making that are selected and derived from history (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952). Just as the entity view of personality has lead perceivers to exaggerate the possibility of situational invariance, the entity view of culture can promote a view of cultures as “internally homogeneous, externally distinctive objects” (Hermans & Kempen, 1998, p. 1113). An entity conception of personality had led to the search for internal traits that organize behavior, and an entity view of culture will promote the view that people in a setting share some communal essence. Such a view of culture sees the culture as inherent in the members of the group rather than as in the circumstances of the group and as the product of the engagement of patterns of ideas and practices (Adams & Markus, 2004).

A final advantage of the union of personality and culture is that it will become clear that there are some obvious limits to what can be explained about either personality or culture by an appeal to evolution, to economics, or to biology. As this realization unfolds, both personality and culture will seek the sources of their individual conceptual difficulties, not within themselves as presently formulated, but in the further exploration of the human processes of interpretation and in the systematic analysis of meaning systems and their material products.

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