



Diversity of historical ancestry and personality traits across 56 cultures

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ABSTRACT

Prior research has found that the diversity of a culture's ancestry over the previous 500 years—its *historical heterogeneity*—has an impact on existing cultural differences in social behavior in adaptive ways. The present paper examined whether historical heterogeneity, which reflects the degree to which a culture's population has a long-term legacy of interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds, would be related to individual personality traits in that culture. Using a large sample of respondents from a variety of world cultures, the results found that historical heterogeneity was associated with greater openness to experience. The findings suggest that openness to experience may have been socialized more strongly in diverse societies because this trait promotes tolerance of differences and facilitates cooperation. These results highlight the importance of considering social–historical factors in understanding the origin of cultural traits.

1. Introduction

When visiting a new country for the first time, visitors often form theories about how and why the locals they encounter are different from themselves and people from other countries. Such lay cultural theories have recently been put to systematic testing by psychologists, who explain cultural variation in traits as adaptive responses to particular ecological and social conditions people have faced in their environments (Murray & Schaller, 2008; Nettle, 2009).

In this paper, we seek to understand the influence of one such factor: the degree of social contact occurring among different cultural groups throughout a country's history. Recent research has measured this factor using a variable termed *historical heterogeneity*, defined as the number of countries that have contributed to a culture's current population, based on where their ancestors lived in the year 1500 CE (Putterman & Weil, 2010). At one extreme, *heterogeneous* cultures are made up of a more diverse ancestry (e.g., Australia, Canada), with their current inhabitants descending from a wider range of countries around the world. In these environments, then, people were historically more accustomed to encountering people from unfamiliar cultural backgrounds. Conversely, people in *homogeneous* cultures descend primarily from ancestors who have lived in that same region over the past 500 years (e.g., India, Taiwan), and whose social interactions have occurred predominantly with people having a similar cultural background and language.

Historical heterogeneity has been used to understand some

important features of contemporary culture (Niedenthal, Rychlowska, & Wood, 2017). For example, heterogeneity is thought to influence why emotions are expressed more strongly in some nations than in others (Wood, Rychlowska, & Niedenthal, 2016). Because members of heterogeneous societies were more likely to speak different languages and hold different norms and behavioral practices, they would have needed to rely on clearer and stronger displays of non-verbal expressiveness to communicate with their fellow countrymen (Niedenthal et al., 2017). As a result, people in heterogeneous cultures today agree that expressing one's true emotions openly is more socially appropriate, and their actual emotional expressions are more animated and more easily identified by people in other cultures (Rychlowska, Miyamoto, Matsumoto, Hess, et al., 2015; Wood et al., 2016). In contrast, people living in homogenous cultures have depended on a shared language and assumptions to communicate, with less concern about having to amplify their expressiveness to people who come from different backgrounds (Rychlowska et al., 2015).

Beyond emotional expressivity, we propose that historical heterogeneity may also influence basic personality traits. First, consistent with the aforementioned findings, inhabitants of heterogeneous societies might exhibit greater *extraversion*, because a stronger motivation to socially engage with others would have helped to overcome communication barriers between those speaking different languages and holding different customs (Parker & McEvoy, 1993).

Second, we expect heterogeneous populations to be higher in *openness to experience*, in response to their recurring contact with

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members of diverse cultural groups. Under many conditions, regular exposure to unfamiliar customs and ideas increases people's acceptance of these differences, and importantly, leads to greater openness toward novelty more generally (Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013). Furthermore, early heterogeneous environments may have led to elevated openness because this disposition facilitates cooperation with people from different backgrounds. Whereas people low in openness find comfort in routines and distrust things that are unfamiliar, those high in openness respond more favorably to new people and ideas, and are more likely to consider views that run counter to their own (Brandt, Chambers, Crawford, Wetherell, & Reyna, 2015). Because individuals high in openness tend to be more accepting of people's differences and more receptive to new information (Thompson, Brossart, Carozzi, & Miville, 2002), they are also less likely to rely on outgroup stereotypes and report less prejudice toward other groups (e.g., people of different ethnicities, religions, and nationalities; Brandt et al., 2015; Flynn, 2005; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). As a result, people high in openness are more likely to forge trusting relationships with individuals of different cultural backgrounds (Jackson & Poulsen, 2005; Thompson et al., 2002).

Intergroup cooperation would have been particularly important in historically heterogeneous societies, providing more economic opportunities, exposure to new ideas, reductions in intergroup hostilities, and the creation of alliances to defend against outsiders. Individual traits that promoted this cooperation, such as openness and extraversion, may have grown stronger in these societies through a process of cultural selection (Boyd & Richerson, 2005; Cohen, 2001). Behaviors that produce successful outcomes are more likely to spread via social learning, and in the process, shape norms that favor corresponding behavioral dispositions, expressed as personality traits (Mesoudi, 2008; Shariff, Norenzayan, & Henrich, 2011). Although norms may be slow to proliferate in a culture, once established they can persist over for long periods of time, even after the conditions that gave rise to them have changed (Triandis, 1994). By contrast, in homogeneous societies where people rarely encountered cultural outgroups, increased extraversion and openness would have had less instrumental value, keeping these trait levels lower.

In one study consistent with these ideas, Camperio Ciani, Capiluppi, Veronese, and Sartori (2007) compared the personality traits of people with varying degrees of contact with outside cultures. They examined three cultural groups: inhabitants of one of several small islands off the western coast of Italy, whose ancestors resided on their island for about 20 generations in isolation (islanders); mainlanders living on the nearby coast of Italy, who had the same geographic origins and spoke the same language as the islanders (mainlanders); and former mainlanders who had immigrated to the islands at some point in their life, typically when they were adults (immigrants). Camperio Ciani et al. found that the islanders scored lower in extraversion and openness to experience than both mainlanders and immigrants to the islands. For islanders, whose homogeneous cultural history gave them little contact with outsiders, there was probably less benefit in socializing and maintaining greater extraversion or openness over the preceding generations. Conversely, greater openness and extraversion would have adaptive byproducts of a social legacy of heterogeneous contact for the descendants of people growing up on the mainland (Camperio Ciani et al., 2007).

Their study also found that the mainlanders and immigrants to the islands were similarly high in openness and extraversion, indicating that the immigrants did not simply adopt the typical trait levels of their new environment. This finding suggested that *long-run* intergroup contact may be a more potent influence on these traits than recent contact, for a couple of reasons. First, personality traits are relatively stable once they take shape during a person's formative years of development, rather than mere reflections of one's current social environment (Costa Jr. & McCrae, 1997). Second, cultural differences in traits tend to arise from values and experiences that accumulate over generations of socialization, and early conditions sometimes exert disproportionate influence on existing cultural traits (Cohen, 2001;

Putnam, 1993).

The present study examined whether historical heterogeneity—the number of source countries from 1500 CE contributing to the present-day population—would be related to increased extraversion and openness across a much larger sample of cultures. Using personality data gathered from respondents in 56 cultures (Schmitt, Allik, McCrae, Benet-Martinez, et al., 2007), we tested whether the mean levels of openness and extraversion would be predicted by a culture's historical heterogeneity and several control variables (infection level, per capita GDP, and two measures of contemporary cultural diversity), which were included to rule out alternative explanations.

2. Method

We employed ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses in which each personality trait were regressed on historical heterogeneity and our control variables.

2.1. Personality traits

Schmitt et al. (2007) collected data by administering the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John & Srivastava, 1999; Soto & John, 2009) to 17,837 respondents in 56 cultures spanning six continents (mean sample size per culture, $M = 319$). Most of these cultures used college student samples, and the remaining ones used either community-only respondents or a mix of community members and college students.

The BFI is a 44-item self-report questionnaire that measures a person's standing on the five core dimensions of personality (Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism). Each item was assessed on a 5-point scale. For the entire sample, the internal reliabilities (Cronbach's alphas) of the five trait measures were 0.77, 0.76, 0.70, 0.78, and 0.79, respectively. There was some variation in the alphas across cultures, but Schmitt et al. did not report separate alphas for each culture. Schmitt et al. transformed all the raw scores into standardized T -scores—giving them a mean of 50 and standard deviation of 10—to facilitate interpretation of the scores and make them easier to compare to the results of other cross-cultural findings (see Schmitt et al., 2007). Schmitt et al. reported each culture's overall mean T -score for each of the five personality traits.

Although we had no hypotheses about whether heterogeneity would be related to the three other Big Five traits (agreeableness, neuroticism, conscientiousness), we included them in our initial analysis to examine whether historical heterogeneity was specific to the hypothesized traits, rather than having some generalized effect on personality.

2.2. Historical heterogeneity

Humans have been migrating across the planet for many thousands of years (Diamond, 1997), but only over the past 500 years has it been possible to compile migration records to and from many parts of the world. Putterman and Weil (2010) used genetic and historical records to estimate the proportion of a country's present-day population whose ancestors lived in their own and all other modern-day country's territories in the year 1500 CE. A cultural index based on the *proportion* of foreign descendants, however, can mask the variety of multi-cultural inputs into the population (e.g., whether a large non-native proportion consists of just 1 or 2 cultural groups, as opposed to 20 or 30 different groups). Instead, the historical heterogeneity index counted the *number* of source countries (including one's own), a measure that better reflected the historical likelihood of encountering unfamiliar cultural outgroups (see Rychlowska et al., 2015; Wood et al., 2016).

Historical heterogeneity values ranged from 1 to 83. For example, Taiwan and India descend from relatively homogeneous populations (scoring 2 and 3, respectively), whereas Australia and Canada have populations descending from many parts of the world, scoring 46 and 63, respectively. Values were available for all 56 cultures used in the

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