

Beyond East vs. West: social class, region, and religion as forms of culture

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In this article we seek to further broaden the focus of the psychological study of cultural differences beyond the predominant focus on ethnicity and nationality. We highlight ways that other forms of culture, including social class, region, and religion, sometimes have psychological consequences that parallel those of ethnicity and nationality, and are sometimes more unique. For example, we review recent work that working class culture is more interdependent, holistic, empathic, and vigilant; that regional cultures vary in honor, individualism, conformity, and tightness-looseness; and that religions differ in attributions, cognition, working styles, and the bases of morality. We conclude with some recommendations for future work on culture, including the origins of cultures, the multiple forms of culture, the uniqueness and similarities of cultures, and how multiple forms of culture interact.

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Here we highlight some of the most exciting recent developments in the study of culture, by focusing on advances regarding three forms of culture that are distinct from the ways culture has generally been operationalized: social classes, regional cultures, and religious cultures. In each section we highlight novel research findings on how these different forms of culture shape human psychology as well as some of the broader implications of these lines of research for understanding culture in general.

Social class

Although culture is often operationalized as nationality or ethnicity, social class can also be thought of as a form of culture [1]. Working-class and middle-class contexts

provide systematically different affordances and constraints which lead to different suites of psychological adaptations [2]. Researchers use a number of indicators to assess social class, including educational attainment, income, and subjective social status [3]. Researchers also sometimes use combinations of these indicators to assess social class [4–5].

In many ways, social class also has parallel effects to those observed in traditional East–West cross-cultural research. For example, working-class people tend to be more interdependent than middle-class people, viewing the self as interconnected and overlapping with close others on a variety of measures which have previously shown differences between East Asians and Westerners [6]. In a similar vein, working-class people show weaker preference for choices that express uniqueness [7,8], and lower levels of narcissism and entitlement [9]. These types of effects have been observed not only the US, but also in Russia [10], China [11], and Japan [12]. In fact, temporal variations in American individualism over the past century appear largely driven by changes in levels of average SES [13**].

Social classes also have also parallel effects to previously found cultural dynamics (East vs. West) in terms of their effects on the tendency to think holistically vs. analytically [6]. For example, working-class people tend to place more emphasis on the role of context and situational influences and constraints when reasoning about the causes of events in society [14], and the actions of individuals [10], whereas middle-class people are more likely to emphasize the role of individual actors and internal factors. Similarly, working-class people are more likely to endorse explicitly situational accounts of what drives human behavior, whereas middle-class people are more likely to endorse explicitly dispositional accounts [15].

Class has also been linked to effects that do not necessarily find direct parallels in East–West comparisons. People lower in SES are higher in empathic accuracy [16], and show stronger responses to others' suffering in terms of both self-report and physiological responses [17]. Interestingly, class has also been linked to differences in general prosocial tendencies [18], and more ethical behavior [19].

Newer research using approaches from neuroscience has shed further light on the effects of social class. Consistent with findings that working-class people are more attuned

to others, a recent EEG study found that lower SES is linked to stronger Mu-suppression during observation of others' actions (Mu-suppression is a marker of activation of the mirror neuron system; [4]). Similarly, lower SES is associated with greater activation in brain regions linked to mentalizing when presented with images of people while reading social (vs. non-social) passages describing people (vs. objects) [20], and stronger neural responses to others' pain [5]. Another study, using ERP (evoked response potentials), demonstrated that people from middle-class backgrounds engage in spontaneous trait inference, whereas those from working-class backgrounds do not appear to do so [15]. This finding suggests that previously observed differences between working- and middle-class people in terms of attribution may stem from differences in an initial tendency to infer traits. Research using fMRI has also documented social class differences in vigilance to threat. Specifically, lower SES is associated with stronger amygdala response to angry faces [20,21].

Taken together this work is important because it demonstrates that cultural contexts can vary systematically within communities to such an extent that it leads to vary different suites of psychological adaptations. Further this work suggests that social class may be a key factor in understanding how cultures change over time in terms of emphasis on individualism-collectivism. It has been hypothesized that greater affluence might be linked to increases in individualism [22] and recent empirical work has demonstrated that increases in individualism appear to be driven by shifts toward more white-collar occupations [13**]. An important future direction is to investigate whether existing work has allowed social class to be confounded with other forms of culture, such as region or religion.

Region

Although cultural psychologists have typically compared people from vastly separated geographical regions, recent studies have also found systematic regional variations within societies. One early and classic line of work explored how Northern and Southern regions of the US differ in terms of honor culture (e.g., [23**]). Further supporting the notion that the US is not one homogenous culture, other important work in this area has shown that states vary in their individualism and collectivism [24*], and in their tightness-looseness [25*].

More recently, cultural psychologists have explored regional variations within countries that are linked to other migratory trends and ecological conditions. One line of research has focused on how the history of settling the frontier has an enduring legacy that is still apparent in contemporary America. The voluntary settlement hypothesis [26] holds that frontiers attract people with a more independent orientation and that the conditions of

life on the frontier (weaker institutions, novel environments, lower pathogen prevalence) foster independent norms which have persisted into the present.

Several lines of evidence are consistent with this proposition. Residents of states that were more recently settled (like Montana) more strongly endorse values reflecting individualism than those from the East Coast [27]. Similarly, in newer states popular names are less common [28], suggesting a stronger preference for uniqueness, people are more likely to vote for 3rd party candidates [29], and effect sizes in conformity experiments tend to be smaller in frontier states [30]. In addition, a systematic comparison of themes in newspaper headlines, and the corporate statements of venture capital firms and hospitals, in San Francisco (a newer frontier city), with those in Boston (an older, east coast city), found that novelty and freedom were more emphasized in San Francisco, whereas establishment and tradition were more emphasized in Boston [31].

Frontier settlement may explain why levels of individualism in the US as a whole and other countries like Australia and Canada that were more recently frontiers are higher than levels of observed in Europe [28,32]. Effects consistent with the voluntary settlement hypothesis have also been observed comparing Hokkaido, a northern Japanese island that was settled by ethnic Japanese relatively recently, with the rest of the country, suggesting that migration to and settlement of frontier regions can produce effects in vary different societies [33–35].

Another line of research has explored how regional variations within cultures may stem from differences in economic activity. To the extent that economic activities in a community require greater coordination, one might expect such communities to be characterized by more interdependent views of the self and more holistic cognitive tendencies. These predictions have been confirmed in studies comparing residents of farming vs. herding communities in Turkey [36], as well as a recent study comparing regions of China where rice agriculture (a type of farming requiring a relatively high degree of cooperation and coordination) was historically predominant with those where wheat farming was historically predominant (a type of farming requiring relatively less cooperation and coordination; [37]).

Economic activities are one kind of ecological variable that affect culture. In work that is complementary in a theoretical way, ecological threat (e.g., natural disasters) predicts tightness at the state level [25*]. In fact, tightness has distinct outcomes at the state level which can be noted (e.g., greater self control and stability in tight than loose states, but greater creativity and lower ethnocentrism in loose than tight states).

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