Varieties of Experience

Culture rewires our brains and shapes how we think

T. M. Luhrmann

September 23, 2020

chepté cormani/Pexels

***The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous* by Joseph Henrich; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 704 pp., $35**

There is a puzzle at the heart of my academic work. I am an anthropologist, and among other things, I study the voices (or auditory hallucinations) of people in different countries who have schizophrenia. Their voices are clearly shaped by local culture. In Shanghai, the hospital patients hear politicians, and in Chennai, they hear their kin. But the voices reported in the United States stand out from the rest—more violent, more alien, more mean. It's weird.

The puzzle of that weirdness is the point of this big book. Joseph Henrich, a professor of human evolutionary biology at Harvard, is the lead author (with coauthors Steve Heine and Ara Norenzayan) of a famous 2010 article in Brain and Behavioral Sciences that demonstrated that people who were Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic—or WEIRD—were often outliers on all kinds of basic psychological measures, compared with other people across the globe.

Take the Müller-Lyer illusion, in which viewers perceive two identical lines to be of different lengths because one has arrowheads pointing in, the other arrowheads pointing out. The illusion is sometimes presented in psychology textbooks as an illustration of basic human cognitive processes. The problem is, people in Evanston, Illinois, are significantly more vulnerable to this strange error in perception than the Central African Fang, the Filipino Hanunoo, the Kalahari San foragers, and others outside Europe and

the United States. Henrich and his coauthors march through many other examples, from spatial reasoning and cooperation to categorization and the heritability of IQ. Again and again, the WEIRD participants are shown to be outliers. And yet, most of what we know experimentally about human psychology is based on studies of WEIRD undergraduates, as if they were proxies for all humans—as if psychologists went searching for human nature and decided that they had found it when they looked under a streetlamp in the dark.

In *The WEIRDest People in the World*, Henrich sets out to explain something the journal article did not: why the WEIRD are so peculiar, as indeed they are. He is not the first to have noticed the phenomenon. Scholars in this area generally agree that Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic people are, compared with others, more individualistic, more analytical in their thinking, more mentalizing (they care more about mind and intention), and more oriented toward an impersonal prosociality, or what philosophers like John Rawls might call fairness. Why? Thinkers have pointed to secularism, to the prosperity of the Industrial Revolution, to John Calvin's grim vision of God. Henrich is an anthropologist. He points to kinship.

He argues that in pre-Christian Europe, most people lived within extended family groups that owned property collectively. Marriages were often arranged, sometimes polygamous, and preferably between close relatives, like cousins. This was more or less the way people lived everywhere—within the sheltering world of those to whom they were related. Then came Christianity, and soon the Latin Church, which put forward a series of proscriptions that emerged as social norms and profoundly changed the behavior of its flock. Over time, the church insisted that marriages be monogamous, freely chosen, and not between close kin. The church also insisted on private ownership, likely a device to allow Christians to distribute property to the needy—and to the church. Married couples lived by themselves, rather than with someone's parents, and held property individually.

This shift in the basic structure of the household (not for all people, but for most people in most marriages) led to some striking changes, including the weakening of ties to family and land, and thus to greater mobility and urbanization; the creation of social safety nets not organized by kin; and increased emphasis on individual rights, manifested in the adoption of laws that applied equally to everyone. From this emphasis on universal principles, at least in part, came an orientation toward analytical thinking and toward intention and mental states. If your social relationships are made up of your relatives, and your family determines your life, thinking about someone else's thoughts and feelings isn't as important as when you are able to choose whom to marry and decide where and with whom you'd like to live.

Again, this argument is not new. British social anthropologist Jack Goody, one of my own teachers at Cambridge, laid out some version of it 40 years ago. But Henrich brings to the argument the same intensity of detail that made the WEIRD article stand out like neon among its peers. Moreover, whereas Goody had a historian's sensibility, Henrich is also making the case that cultural evolution alters human psychology.

He opens the book with a remarkable discussion of literacy (another Goody theme) in which he points out that someone who is literate has, compared with the nonliterate, a thicker corpus callosum (a structure that connects the two brain hemispheres), improved verbal memory, a diminished ability to recognize faces, and a more analytical way of thinking. Literacy spread around Europe with Protestantism, which held that Christians should develop a personal relationship with God and Jesus through individual reading and interpretation of scripture. Henrich is interested in the way social change alters the deepest, most intractably bodily dimensions of the human: "You can't separate 'culture' from 'psychology' or 'psychology' from 'biology' because culture physically rewires our brains and thereby shapes how we think."

Where a historian might turn to lives, Henrich turns to experiments. Rather than recounting the experiences of early Protestants to illustrate how they became the WEIRDest of all, Henrich offers experimental evidence to demonstrate that they really are. He describes an experiment in which Adam Cohen of Arizona State University asked students to consider the story of a man who did not like his parents but nonetheless called them and sent them birthday gifts. Protestant students disapproved more vigorously of this man than Jewish students did. The latter judged the man more by his actions, whereas Protestants cared more about his internal mental state. They are, therefore, WEIRDer. The effect of Henrich's approach is a bit like listening to figure skating commentary from someone with an acute sense of equipment and technique but a relative lack of interest in the personal lives of the skaters themselves. It's not the way NBC usually does things. But it is fascinating, and it does create a very clear structure to the argument. For example: "Due to the complex history of Europe, some regions received relatively small dosages of the Church's Marriage and Family Program."

This will likely agitate some readers. I say this because over dinner, in the course of reviewing this book, I learned that my husband, Richard Saller, a scholar of Roman history at Stanford, has written that the family structure Goody attributes to the rise of Christianity was already in place during the Roman Republic, and therefore the church's edicts did not change family structure, at least in Roman territory.

Scholars will contest different steps in the argument, and that's fine. Anthropology—particularly American anthropology—was deeply shaken by the postmodern and postcolonial turn. The field steered away from the kinds of bold arguments that Goody made. Young anthropologists began to write in-depth, intimate accounts of one particular place, often bearing witness to suffering and injustice. Such accounts are important. Yet these days, few anthropologists are willing to put their data on the table, make a claim, and welcome challengers. We need more big books like this one. It is very much worth reading.

T. M. Luhrmann is a professor of anthropology at Stanford University. She is the author of several books, including *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship With God* and, most recently, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others.*

T. M. Luhrmann
Varieties of Experience
Culture rewires our brains and shapes how we think
September 23, 2020

<www.theamericanscholar.org/varieties-of-experience>