

# A cultural evolutionary approach to understanding the development of Individualism in the Western world.

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Steve Heigham

I am taking as a starting point the recent criticisms that have been levelled at Western psychology as being limited and biased, because most of the research had been done using Western undergraduates as participants, from populations that are WEIRD – Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic. Though this is not seen as negating all the findings of this previous research as such, it is a call for us in the west to reinspect our current methodologies and their generalisability. Interestingly, this is something that researchers in Cultural evolution have been more familiar with for quite a long time, so I have based this article on the recent work of authors such as Jo Henrich, Jared Diamond and Steven Pinker, who have published work over a number of years about cultural evolution, and explored the ways in which we in the West tend to differ from other cultural groups around the world. In this article I will try to summarise key points from this literature to show how certain values and traits have evolved over time, that have led us to accelerate our economic development, develop individualistic models of motivation and ‘within-person’ psychological treatment for mental health issues.

Jared Diamond was the first to show why highly dense population groups have tended to spread across the world in ways that were determined by where agriculture could be easily established, due to climate and topography. This created civilisations spreading from the middle east, south east Asia etc, creating different cultures in different places. (Diamond 1997). This is conceptualised as gene-culture co-evolution, one of the principal epigenetic factors that led to our further development of language and complex technology. Shared ‘Social norms’ of behaviour became an important part of this accumulated cultural knowledge, and they are usually learnt early and affect the way we conduct relationships throughout life. In our cultural co-evolution, the strength of adherence to the specific social norms within groups clans, tribes, city states, etc., have tended to make them more successful. In a sense, we mostly only know about those groups which have been successful, because failure has led to annihilation or integration into more successful groups. Indeed, it can be said that much of recorded history is a narrative of competition between groups in terms of migrations and warfare (Turchin 2016), and that strongly cohesive groups almost always tend to be more successful and outcompete weaker groups.

Thus we can see that social norms of behaviour have increasingly acted as a selection pressure on survival and overall fitness, and furthermore, at an individual level, more peaceable personality traits have been increasingly preferred for mate selection, prestige, success, and status within communities/groups, as they directly affect cohesiveness of the group (Henrich 2017). Internalisation of norms of behaviour has been complex, but often a sense of supernatural observation by omnipotent gods, as well as an increasing awareness of community and familial disapproval have been important. Later, in settled groups after the advent of agriculture, strong leadership and bureaucracy emerged as important mechanisms to reinforce social norms, particularly over matters of justice, marriage, property ownership and heredity, exchange and trade relationships, and people’s contribution to communal co-operative endeavours.

The rise of Western cultural groups

In Europe, after the fall of the Roman Empire, the Western tribes began a different and separate trajectory from other parts of the world. In traditional history, this era has been called the Dark Ages, and even though historians tend to see this as a long fallow period where society seemed to move backwards technologically, monotheistic religious belief was spreading slowly, and by about a thousand years ago, the populations were mostly Christian. As the social norms of Christianity became more powerful, particular church policies led to the breakup of the tribal structures and tight kinship networks that had previously been in place (Henrich, 2020). The huge effects of the Christian church was because it placed particularly severe limits on extended kinship obligations, and imposed strict prohibitions on cousin marriages, and these widened progressively over time (Henrich, 2020). Cousin marriages is something that many other cultures still allow, though this is changing more recently. Though it seems an unimportant matter to us now, a 1000 years later, legally limiting the field of potential partners for marriage, and changing their familial obligations, had a profound effect on the structure of society, and the psychological profile of individuals. It greatly affected parents' strategic intentions in the arrangement of marriages, the location and obligations of couples after marriage, the settlement of dowry rights, and the overall pattern of inheritance of wealth and property. This brought a great emphasis on living in independent, nuclear, monogamous family households, whose behaviour was closely monitored by church attendance and gossip. This impacted on the psychological development of these populations: greater cognitive control of the emotions and social behaviour, increasing a sense of personal responsibility, self-discipline and self control (Foucault, 1971; Pinker, 2011).

This led to the start of a culture of individualism through a focus on encouraging a greater willingness to co-operate, trade, move location and inter-marry with strangers, and take part in more distant and complex financial dealings through the money economy. This is an important point, in that openness to interacting so much, and so closely, with non-kin is a big break from the millions of years of mostly kin based cooperation and decision making in humans. It is also quite different from other animal species where threat from other members of the same species is a major source of fear and violent reaction, for example in Chimpanzees. These changes, coupled with the rise of urbanisation led to, amongst other effects, the formation of guilds and other associations, which conferred many rights and privileges to tradesmen, and supported greater specialisation of skills and emphasized individual achievement (Henrich, 2020). Overall, it also led to an increasing emphasis on freedom to choose, which was later reflected in the splitting off of protestant congregations from the catholic church.

Those countries that embraced Protestantism moved more quickly towards greater social mobility, in terms of increased rates of literacy, book publishing, guilds of skilled trades and university learning, as well as pursuing personal ethics of moral behaviour. Thus, these mostly Northern and Western nations in Europe were then predisposed to emphasise economic development as an overriding value, which led on, 200 years ago, to the era of meteoric economic rise through industrialisation. Thus, this phase was initiated to a large degree by the more individualistic interpretation of morality and self improvement that had been developing in Western Europe, supported by the establishment of overseas trade and agricultural plantations (the slave trade). This transition period has been described by traditional historians as driven by 'the Protestant ethic', but by taking a more cultural evolutionary approach, it becomes obvious that this is part of a longer phase of evolution.

#### The effects of industrialisation

The Industrial revolution further led to increasing emphasis on individual achievement in the increasingly competitive world of economic production, with individuals in these societies needing

to have greater responsiveness to external pressures in the workplace and in the home, and less dependence on tradition and extended family. This phase was also driven by the many technological innovations that arose during this period. What was remarkable here was that these were taken up in a much more wide spread and business like way in the west than in other parts of the world, like China, where some of the innovations originated, but were not economically exploited. This seems to support the notion that it was mostly due to the western social norms of hard work and aspiration, and a growing scientific approach to problem solving – for instance predominance of rationality in the enlightenment (Pinker, 2018).

This phase brought in social norms of working in external workplaces, selling through impersonal markets, investing through complex financial capital arrangements and voting for centralised democratic governments (Henrich, 2020). This tended to produce societies where people are judged more on their 'functional' adequacy – having a job, controlling children through discipline and sending them to school, keeping a tidy house, paying your bills, etc., increasingly developing a more 'individual' model of motivation of behaviour. This in turn led to an emphasis on freedom of choice, competition, aspiration and personal determination to fulfil one's potential, and social norms based more on 'selling' oneself in relationships and the economy through personal attributes, specialised abilities and dispositional virtues.

In the more recent, neo-liberal phase of global capitalist economic organisation, this trend has increasingly gravitated towards 'post-modernist' values of increasing individualism: self as project, consumption as personal statement, truth being relative to perception, etc. (Dunn & Castro, 2012). This trend has been greatly swelled by the advertising industry and media in the last 30 years. In this output, there is often an over-focus on celebrity culture, which, in its most basic form, is imitation of the most prestigious individuals, which has been a social learning norm in cultural evolution for a lot longer than the modern era. However, in a modern consumerist society, it increasingly reinforces the impression that anyone can achieve what they dream of through money, and be noticed as standing out from the crowd through maximising exposure. Even more recently, the social media 'attention economy' has amplified this power of the projected self. Some authors refer to this as hyper-individualism.

Effects on social relations and mental health.

This brief summary has, I hope, shown a plausible explanation for why we in the west have increasingly developed 'within person' models of motivation, personality and relating, and shown how we have developed such an emphasis on freedom and choice in all relationships – economic, familial, community, religious. In the West, our models of care and relating are overall less embedded in community, family, and religious obligations, and are more 'instrumental', and economically based.

Thus models of mental health and disorder have followed a similar model, firstly through creating a situation where society was less obliged to care for the more vulnerable, and later through the establishment of asylums as urbanisation spread rapidly, leading to a more medicalised model of mental health care. This approach has been supplemented by the many breakthroughs in the development of our medical sciences in the 20th century, leading to the establishment of diagnostic and classificatory systems based on observation of within-person symptoms, with little regard for the social, religious and familial environments of the patient. The development of individualised talking therapies, and pharmaceutical treatments, are particularly well aligned with this 'self model' of individuals choosing life-styles and relationships in an independent and fragmented social environment. Interestingly, Western psychological models of personality structure, which, over time,

have tended to coalesce towards adopting The big five factors, are increasingly being shown as not being present in the same way in many cultures. They have also been seen to have very different correlations between the factors, illustrating different values in different cultures, and differing models of how individuals relate to their families, communities and society in general (Henrich, 2020).

So far, this summary has also tended to emphasise homogeneity of development in the Western world. In fact, working class culture has tended to retain more collectivist values (though this is more recently changing), as have populations from the many ethnic minority cultures that have settled in the UK and the west generally. This has had repercussions on mental health treatment: less motivation towards, and perseverance within, psychological therapies for members of these sub-cultures, and emerging preferences for different types of mental health interventions.

### Conclusion

This article was conceived of as part of a Psychotherapy section conference about different cultural approaches to mental health and wellbeing. The point, therefore, of providing a cultural evolutionary narrative of Western psychological thinking is so that the reader may contemplate ways in which clients from other classes and cultures may differ in their conceptualisation of themselves in relation to their families, their careers, their sense of purpose and their mental health and wellbeing. My hope is that this narrative may prompt a wider perspective on how we may provide mental health interventions that are more class and culturally sensitive and so become more holistic.

Steve Heigham. 2022.

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