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# Personality *in* culture: A neo-Allportian view<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Culture and personality researchers have long grappled with two inter-related issues: (a) Are cultural constructs merely cultural stereotypes and (b) Where are individual differences and individuality in culture and personality research? Based on Allport (1961), I present a model that delineates how individual differences can emerge even under strong cultural influences. I then review recent studies that simultaneously demonstrate within-cultural heterogeneity/individuality and between-culture differences.

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## 1. Introduction

“Culture and personality” is one of the fashionable slogans of contemporary social science and, by present usage, denotes a range of problems on the borderline between anthropology and sociology, on the one hand, and psychology and psychiatry, on the other. However, the phrase has unfortunate implications. A dualism is implied, whereas “culture *in* personality” and “personality *in* culture” would suggest conceptual models more in accord with the facts. Moreover, the slogan favors a dangerous simplification of the problems of personality formation. Recognition of culture as one of the determinants of personality is a great gain, but there are some indications that this theoretical advance has tended to obscure the significance of other types of determinants. “Culture and personality” is as lopsided as “biology and personality” (Kluckhohn & Murray, 1948, p. 44).

Culture and personality has a curious history similar to personality psychology itself. It was embraced as one of the most promising research topics in all social sciences in the first half of the 20th century, its participants ranging from anthropologists

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to sociologists, psychologists to psychiatrists (McCrae, 2000). Despite its early vitality, the field was nearly abandoned after 1960, as both anthropology and personality lost their intellectual influence on other disciplines. Although culture and personality has become a popular topic again lately, the field has been plagued by two inter-related questions: (a) Are cultural constructs merely cultural stereotypes and (b) Where are individual differences and individuality in culture and personality research?

In “The cultural background of personality,” Linton (1945) already recognized the important distinction between “real culture” and “cultural constructs.” For instance, we say, the Japanese culture is serene (although many Japanese are not; just look at my sisters!), or the American culture is fast-paced (although many Americans are laid-back; just look at students in my personality course!). Recently, several researchers (e.g., Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002) called into question the characterization of Japanese as collectivists and Americans as individualists, and argued that these are cultural stereotypes in the mind of cross-cultural researchers rather than cultural reality. Interestingly, Gordon Allport made this exact point in his 1961 book, “Pattern and growth in personality.” Although Allport is not known for his research on culture and personality, his chapter on culture offers, in my opinion, great insight into the two outstanding questions in culture and personality (see also Kluckhohn & Murray, 1948).

### 1.1. Real culture is flexible

While recognizing the importance of culture in shaping personality, Allport (1961) was quick to point out that individuals actively *select* their own way of life that suits their temperament, values, and philosophy of life. Allport believed that real culture is flexible (i.e., there are a wide range of individual differences in any given culture) because individual members like or dislike different aspects of their culture, and internalize them differently. Similarly, the effect of role or situation cannot be uniform across individuals, because some like their role (e.g., leader), actively seek it, and view it as their central self-concept, while others dislike it, actively avoid it, and do not view it as their central self-concept, even when in that role. Even when there is consistency and homogeneity in cultural messages, the individual level process of liking/disliking and internalization can lead to diverse individual differences within any given culture. An important implication of this distinction is that the analysis of cultural products such as magazine ads might reveal larger cultural differences than the analysis of individual members’ self-reported values (e.g., compare Han & Shavitt, 1994 with Oyserman et al., 2002). Thus, Allport stated that “no individual is a mirror-image of the modal or average culture pattern. We are molded by *real* culture and not by the anthropologist’s distilled image of it. To apply this image directly to people is to falsify the diversity of personality found within any single culture” (p. 167). Simultaneously, Allport recognized that no matter how strong individuals’ needs, temperaments, and values are, culture, role, and situation still have a substantial influence on their personality, limiting the range of its behavioral expression. Also important, culture defines and gives meaning to social roles and

situations. Thus, according to Allport, personality should be understood as a product of active negotiation between biological predispositions and cultural demands.

The schematic presentation of the key processes can be seen in Fig. 1. First, individuals' temperament (e.g., fearfulness) and biological state (e.g., dopamine-inducing drug) can predispose them to feel, think, and behave in a certain way. However, this predisposition can be constrained or amplified by socio-cultural factors such as parenting (e.g., arranging lots of play dates), situation (e.g., party), role (e.g., host), and culture. Also, the degree to which individuals internalize socio-cultural demands is influenced by their liking or disliking and perception of these demands, which is in turn determined in part by individuals' temperament and biological states. Thus, individuals' feeling, thinking, and action are a function of both biological and socio-cultural factors. Furthermore, individuals observe their own behaviors and others' reactions to them to form their self-concept and a unified philosophy of life over time. Self-report measures of personality, needs, and values capture this. The self-concept in turn modulates the impact of biological and socio-cultural influences on their behaviors, as many individuals strive to achieve and maintain a certain self-concept (e.g., calm). Fig. 1, therefore, delineates the dynamic interaction between personality and culture: culture plays an important role in constraining or amplifying personality expression (e.g., the experience and expression of pride in Japan

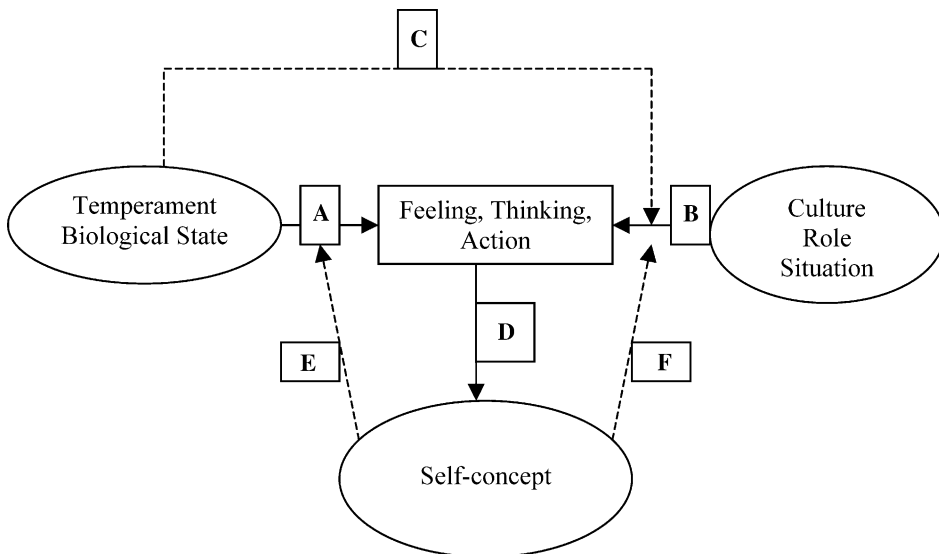


Fig. 1. A neo-Allportian model of culture and personality. (A) Temperament influences observable behavior (e.g., fear). (B) Culture/role/situation also influences observable behavior. (C) However, temperament influences an individual's liking/disliking of cultural/role/situational demands and the degree of internalization of these demands (i.e., the emergence of within-cultural variation). (D) Their own behaviors and other's reaction to them lead to one's self-concept (e.g., fearful, but wants to be a less fearful person). (E/F) The self-concept in turn modulates the influence of temperament/biological factors and culture/situation/role.

vs. the US), while individuals' temperament and personality set limits on the degree to which culture influences individuals as well as the aspects of culture which individuals internalize. Conceptually, there is no contradiction in recognizing diverse cultural effects (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001) and sizable within-culture individual differences.

In my opinion, there is one major weakness of Allport's model. That is, Allport seems to assume that individuals can consciously control most, if not all, cultural influences on their lives. However, the way we perceive certain objects and emotionally react to some events (e.g., cherry blossoms → hanami party in Japan, Labor's Day → BBQ in the US) is so deeply ingrained and automatic that our perception, cognition, and emotion are sometimes influenced by culture outside of our conscious awareness (cf. Kitayama, Duffy, Kawamura, & Larsen, 2003). In the neo-Allportian model, therefore, it is recognized that cultural influences can be beyond one's active control. That is, because default behavioral and affective reactions to certain events and objects (e.g., cheery blossoms) are often automatic, even individuals who actively distance themselves from their culture might nevertheless be unconsciously influenced by it (see also Rozin, 2003).

### *1.2. Where are individual differences in culture and personality research?*

Although personality psychology is the science of individual differences and individuality, individual differences often take a backseat in cross-cultural research. For instance, a study that shows Americans scoring higher in extraversion than Chinese does not speak to individual differences in extraversion among Americans or Chinese. Similarly, a study that shows Americans showing more self-serving attribution than Japanese does not speak to individual differences among Americans or Japanese in these tendencies. This type of cross-cultural study including my own (e.g., Oishi, 2002), has been criticized as homogenizing culture and ignoring intra-cultural variations. However, this critique does not always apply to cross-cultural studies of personality that investigate cultural differences *in* inter-individual differences. For instance, Schimmack, Radhakrishnan, Oishi, Dzokoto, and Ahadi (2002) found that the frequency of positive emotion was highly correlated with life satisfaction among Americans and Germans, but that was not the case among Japanese, Ghanaians, and Mexicans, presumably because the latter groups did not pay attention to emotional experiences (e.g., how happy was I?) when evaluating their lives (how good is my life?). In other words, Germans and Americans who frequently experienced positive emotions evaluated their lives as more satisfying than others, whereas Japanese, Ghanaians, and Mexicans who frequently experienced positive emotions did not. Studies such as this (e.g., Suh, 2002) reveal cultural differences in the *patterns* of inter-individual differences.

A more explicit way of delineating cultural and individual differences is multi-group latent class analysis. Using this technique, Eid and Diener (2001) demonstrated the existence of a culture-specific "class" (e.g., 16% of Chinese said all positive emotions are undesirable, while this class did not exist among Americans, Australians, and Taiwanese), cultural differences in the size of a "class" (e.g., 83%

of Australians and Americans indicated all positive emotions are desirable, compared with only 9% of Chinese and 32% of Taiwanese in this class), and the existence of intra-cultural variations (each sample had four to five distinct “classes”). This is an exciting development because the traditional *t* tests would have shown only the mean difference in the endorsement of desirability of positive emotions across cultures (and inadvertently would have perpetuated cultural stereotypes), whereas the latent class analyses clearly showed the existence of intra-cultural as well as inter-cultural variations. Thus, it is now possible to conduct cross-cultural research on personality without homogenizing and stereotyping cultural groups.

Finally, yet another type of cross-cultural study of personality investigates cultural differences in *intra*-individual process. Beginning with Allport (1937), personality psychologists have explored individual differences in intra-individual variations in mood, self-esteem, and behavior (e.g., Fleeson, 2001; Mischel & Shoda, 1995). This research paradigm can be extended to cultural differences, as well. Watson, Clark, and Tellegen (1984) conducted a 90-day daily diary study of moods, analyzed the structure of moods within each individual, and found that Americans felt sleepy when they felt other negative moods, whereas Japanese tended to feel *nemui* (sleepy) when they felt other positive moods. Namely, the experience of “sleepy” was qualitatively different across cultures. Similarly, we (Oishi, Diener, Scollon, & Biswas-Diener, in press) examined intra-individual variation in moods across situations using the experience sampling method in Japan, India, and the US. We were able to examine the relationship between situation (e.g., alone, with stranger) and mood at the individual as well as at cultural levels because each participant recorded their mood in various situations when signaled at random moments. Fig. 2 indicates the positive mood of two American participants and two Japanese participants in each situation. For example, American Subject 1 felt positive moods strongly when with a

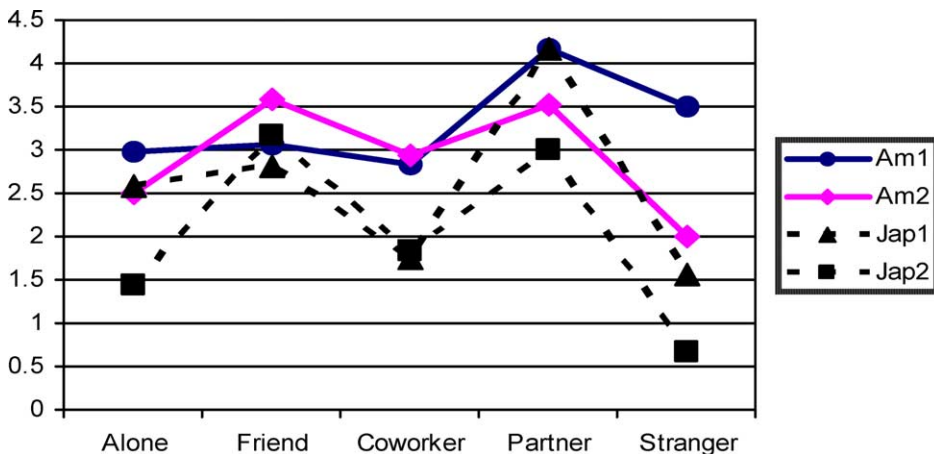


Fig. 2. Average positive moods in each situation for two American and two Japanese participants in Oishi et al. (in press). They rated moods on the 7-point scale, ranging from 0 (not at all) to 6 (with maximum intensity) when signaled at random moments.

romantic partner and a stranger, and moderately when with friends and co-workers. Japanese Subject 1 felt positive moods strongly only when with a romantic partner, and did not feel much positive mood when with a co-worker or a stranger. This study allowed us to look at each individual's mood profile and observe unique "if...then..." patterns of relations between situation and mood at the individual level (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Using multi-level analysis, furthermore, we found that the situational effect of being with a friend on positive moods was stronger among Japanese and Hispanic participants than among Americans. Most important, our study indicates that even when two individuals from two different cultures have the same mean level of positive moods, the patterns of positive moods (when they feel good or they don't feel good) of these individuals can be quite different. These "if...then..." patterns of relations between situation and mood shed light on individuality, and provide a nuanced understanding of culture. In short, research on intra-individual processes presents a wonderful opportunity to delineate important cultural differences without losing sight of individual differences and individuality.

### 1.3. Conclusion

In the present paper, I argued that two inter-related issues have been central problems in culture and personality research: within-culture heterogeneity and individual differences. Recent cross-cultural research has found compelling effects of culture on cognition and emotion. Conceptually speaking, however, the individual level processes such as liking/disliking and internalization can generate individual differences even when cultural messages are powerful. Recent data analytic techniques such as multi-group latent class analysis and multi-level analysis allow researchers to explore cultural differences while attending to individual differences and individuality. As envisioned by the pioneers of our field (e.g., Allport, Murray), the primary goal of culture and personality research should be to understand how "real culture" influences individuals who have different biological endowments, life experiences, and circumstances (e.g., how certain temperaments, traits, needs, and values might manifest themselves differently in different contexts across cultures, and to what degree and in which domains individuals can or cannot consciously control cultural influences). Such investigations will make a contribution not only to personality psychology, but also to its neighboring areas such as social, developmental, and cultural psychology.

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