

Culture and Personality Program Transcript

[MUSIC PLAYING]

MALE SPEAKER: Personality is a complex phenomenon. Doctor David Matsumoto shares insights about the role of culture in shaping personality.

DR. DAVID MATSUMOTO: Scholars have been interested in the relationship between culture and personality for many years. And it's really interesting, because there often is an assumption that if you are in a certain culture that the people in that culture are like that. And so many people-- scholars, psychologists, anthropologists, and lay person-- have equated culture with personality.

So it's as if you studied culture-- and if you know what a culture is like, people tend to assume that the people are like that. So for example, the United States is typically thought to be a very individualistic culture. There are many icons about that focus on the self, and I, and personal choice. And that's very true of American culture. But is that true for every single person in this culture? Probably not. Just as that kind of characterization is not true for every single member of any other culture.

In every culture there's a huge amount of individual differences of personalities. And quite frankly, I think we run a delicate balancing act sometimes, because we study cultures and we're talking about cultures, and then we're trying to describe average tendencies of individuals in their cultures. And sometimes we lose sight of the fact that there are people in those cultures, and there's a wide variety of people in every culture.

So when we study culture and personality, we want to remember that personality is something that's different. It refers to individual differences. Culture is not necessarily personality. There's really a close relationship between the two, but they're not the same, and we don't want to stereotype on the basis of our understanding of culture.

In psychology today, the study of personality is dominated by the study of traits. Traits are dispositions that we have to act, or behave in a certain way, or interact with the world. And the study of traits is really interesting, because it allows for cross-cultural studies to be conducted very easily.

So in the last five or 10 years there have been many studies across cultures, examining the structure of traits in our minds. And one of the most important findings that have been generated from this line of research is that there seems to be a universal structure of traits-- that is, that people all around the world seem to have certain basic traits that is consistent. You might hear of these traits, like

extroversion, neuroticism, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. And these five traits in particular have been found in every culture that's been studied. And so in psychology this is called the big five. Of course, there are many sub-traits, but psychologists have been able to put them all together in five major domains, or dimensions, of personality.

Recent cross-cultural research has also shown that certain cultures have other traits, as well. So for example, in Filipino culture there seems to be the big five, plus a couple more. And so there are some questions as to whether there are five traits that are universal, six traits that are universal, or seven traits that are universal. That's something that's going to be uncovered by research, and I'm sure that in the next five or 10 years we'll get that answer.

What's a more interesting question is, where do these things come from? Now many cross cultural psychologists will want to say that, well, cultures facilitate people having certain types of traits. So one way to think about the United States, for example, is that individualism fosters people to be very extroverted, and sociable, and friendly, and that's why the United States has a high number of extroverts, and scores high in extroversion.

And it may be true that cultures facilitate or shape the traits. But there's a lot of evidence to suggest that there's a biological component to traits, as well, that there may be some trait genes. Now it's true that science has not yet found what genes those are, but there is evidence suggesting that that may be the case. If that's the case, it's really interesting, because then it would suggest that the United States is more extroverted, not because of the individualism as a cultural product driving it, but because there's more people with these genes, for the extroversion to come out. And it may be that the cultural factor of individualism is a result of these genes, and not the other way around.

Now these are speculations, and we really don't know the answer to which way it goes. And it's probably a combination. But these are some interesting speculations that occur, because of these cross-cultural differences that you can find, in traits around the world.

So as I mentioned earlier, personality is a very large construct. And traits are a part of this construct. But it's very clear that there are other aspects of personality that make us unique individuals-- things like our identities, and our narratives, and our life histories, and our experiences, and our values. These are all just as important aspects of our personalities. Culture influences these aspects of personality much more than they do traits, probably.

So while on one hand, if you look at the trait aspects of personality, you probably find consensus in the field that there's some of it that's biologically based, and some of it that's influenced by culture. When you move away from the trait aspects of personality, what you find is that there's probably greater consensus,

and more of that is influenced by culture than by biology. But it is true, also, that we don't have as much research on these non-trait aspects of personality across cultures, and hopefully we'll have that in the future.

One of the most important messages I think students should take away from this course is that we should never equate culture with the person. There are so many individual differences out there, and we use culture as a guideline to understand people, but we don't equate culture with people. Doing that is basically stereotyping, and we have to recognize the vast amount of individual differences that exist in every single culture. And when we're out there dealing with culture in our world, whether it's in sales, or marketing, or in the health professions, or in business, we want to understand cultural differences and cultural similarities. We want to understand culture, but we also want to recognize individual differences, because there are many individual differences in every culture.

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