

PERSONALITY, VALUES, CULTURE

An Evolutionary Approach



RONALD FISCHER

CULTURE AND PSYCHOLOGY

Personality traits and value orientations have been studied in separation. Ronald Fischer overcomes this separation and demonstrates convincingly how much these two strands of scholarship can learn from each other. He synthesizes a vast multi-disciplinary literature in a most competent way. This book is a new classic in cross-cultural psychology.

–Christian Welzel, Leuphana Universität Lüneburg, Germany

Ronald Fischer, a giant in the field of cross-cultural psychology, has produced an intellectual masterpiece. Drawing on fields as diverse as genetics, neuroscience, psychology, and evolutionary biology, he provides a marvelous integration of research on personality, values and culture, tackling age-old questions and identifying new frontiers along the way. This book is a must for anyone interested in understanding human behavior.

–Michele J. Gelfand, University of Maryland

Humans are complex social beings. To understand human behavior, an integrated perspective is required – one which considers both what we regularly do (our personality traits) and what motivates us (our values).

Personality, Values, Culture uses an evolutionary perspective to look at the similarities and differences in personality and values across modern societies. Integrating research on personality and human values into a functional framework that highlights their underlying compatibilities (driven by shared genetic and brain mechanisms), Fischer describes how personality is shaped by the complex interplay between genes and the environment, both over the course of human evolution and within the lifespan of individuals. He proposes a gene-culture coevolution model of personality and values to explain how and why people differ around the world and how genes, economics, social conditions, and climate jointly shape personality.

Ronald Fischer is a Reader at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

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Ronald Fischer

Victoria University of Wellington



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Ronald Fischer is a Reader at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. He is Associate Editor of *Applied Psychology: An International Review* and serves on the editorial boards of a number of psychology and business journals. He has published more than 100 articles in psychology and related disciplines. He coauthored the second edition of *Understanding Social Psychology across Cultures* (2013) and has received a number of awards and prizes, including the Otto Klineberg Intercultural and International Relations Award, the Gordon Allport Intergroup Relations Award, and the Best Paper with International Application Award from the Academy of Management.

CULTURE AND PSYCHOLOGY

Series Editor

David Matsumoto, *San Francisco State University*

As an increasing number of social scientists come to recognize the pervasive influence of culture on individual human behavior, it has become imperative for culture to be included as an important variable in all aspects of psychological research, theory, and practice. *Culture and Psychology* is an evolving series of works that brings the study of culture and psychology into a single, unified concept.

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Introduction: The Quest to Understand the Person

Tina's hand is twitching furiously. Small pearls of sweat are forming on her forehead under the hot morning sun, providing a glistening contrast to her dark hair carefully tight up in a knot. Her dark eyes are wide open, her gaze fixated in trance on a distant point in the colorful crowd. Her nostrils are flaring wildly; was there not so much noise in the temple grounds, we could hear her heavy breathing. With a determined push, the priest breaks her skin and pushes the metal rod through her right cheek until it comes out through her open mouth; the only response from Tina is a hardly noticeable blink of her eyes. With a short prayer, the official inserts the next metal rod into Tina's left cheek, piercing her skin right next to one of the tiny scars from previous years and pushes it until this rod also emerges through her open mouth. Her family and friends are gathered around her, with her husband holding up a black prayer flag over her head, obscuring her from the multitude of curious onlookers. Only the shining ends of the rods protruding from her open mouth are now visible. The priest is attaching some carefully folded money and a bright-red ceremonial fruit to the end of each of the rods still innocently glistening in the early morning sun. The procedure only takes a few minutes, and Tina is now ready to perform her duties. With her hand firmly clenching the snake whip, she rises up determinedly from the plastic chair to face the crowd. In the following hours, she will wander around town, barefoot on burning-hot asphalt, blessing countless spectators and uttering short prayers in people's houses and shops. Only after having finished the prescribed route will she return with her small support group consisting of family and a few friends to the shrine to get the piercings removed. She has a long day ahead of her.

The very same day, half a world away, Sandra is also getting ready for her workday. She looks over her desk as the winter sun is slowly pushing through the clouds. The friendly faces of her parents and her brother are smiling from the framed pictures placed right next to the binders that hold all those papers related to the case she has been working hard on over the last year. Sandra pauses for a moment and smiles back at them. She has a brief flashback to last weekend, when they met at her house for dinner. She is so proud of her younger brother and his little daughter. Sandra quickly reminds herself to ask him for a photo of her niece she can put on her desk. Her eyes wander further along her desk. Piles of notes are neatly folded on the left-hand side. A tiny speck of dust is coming to rest on the black leather folder holding her application. She takes out a tissue from her handbag and wipes it off, using the moment to also quickly wipe down the rest of the neatly organized space in front of her. Her mind wanders. Five more minutes and she will face the committee. As usual on days like this, she has prepared her favorite tea and put it into the special cup that her mom gave her when she left home to go to college. After taking a final sip, she goes to the office kitchen, carefully washes the cup with soap, rinses off the soap with plenty of water, and then takes her personal towel from the drawer to wipe off the water. She hurries back to her desk and places the cup back into her locked drawer. It is time to go; it will take her three minutes to get to the meeting hall, and she wants to be there before the other committee members arrive.

Two individuals, separated by continents, one walking the streets of southern Asia, the other stepping into a meeting room in Europe. For us, Tina's behaviors may appear strange and exotic. Confronted with such behaviors, we might be shocked, revolted, mesmerized, fascinated. We may wonder what Tina is like as a person and whether she holds the same values as does Sandra. Do individuals like Tina value the same things as we do, are they motivated by the same things that makes us tick, do they think and feel about all sorts of daily activities in the same way we do? The "we" here includes you – the reader – and me, the author and observer of such fascinating rituals. Tina's behaviors seem different from ours, the cultural practices alien and hard to understand, making it more than plausible to assume that people like her have very different values and personalities from those of Sandra and our friends and colleagues back home.

In these descriptions, it is easy to focus on the specific behaviors that are richly colored through local customs and traditions. You may wonder about the meaning of Tina's holding a braided leather whip with an elaborately carved snake head. Or what Sandra's memories attached to the teacup are. My quest is to move to a different level of analysis, zooming out from

specifics to detect some general patterns of human personality, searching for more or less stable predispositions that describe people across situations and for psychological processes that form the core of who we are as individuals. On this journey we may find that Tina and Sandra are actually more similar than not, even though their behavior at first glance seems so radically different.

In this book, I focus on personality traits and values. There are a number of different psychological processes I could focus on when trying to describe individuals, so I had to make choices. I define these terms more properly later, but right now it suffices to say that personality traits refer to habitual behavioral tendencies that people manifest in different situations, whereas values are goals that people find desirable and use as guides for their behavior across different situations. I use psychological research on traits and values as snapshots to glean a picture of the underlying structure of human personality. To visualize this process, let's use cars as a metaphor. Cars vary widely in colors, design, and build: some go fast; others are slow. But rather than focusing on those external features, I want to explore the differences in how they move around. In other words, what is happening under the hood? To do that we raise the hood and examine the engines that make different cars move.

Peeking under the hood of a person and examining the engines of personality, we may also wonder why people in one place of the world hold different values and show different personality traits than people in another part of the world. What motivates both Tina and Sandra to behave the way they do? You may even wonder why humans have personality at all. Why do we show such differences in our personality? Why do we value different things? Would it not make sense for us to all want the same things and behave in the same way?

The book is concerned with these and other questions about personality, values, and culture. In tackling these questions, I connect and bring together different literatures that have been used to describe individuals. There are equally rich research traditions that focus on personality traits and on values. If we want to understand what people are like and why they are behaving and acting the way they do, we need to look at both traits and values. My first question is how similar or different values and personality traits are from each other. As will become clear, even though they are studied by different research traditions that have thrived independently, traits and values are actually quite similar in many aspects. Therefore, my challenge is to bring them back together conceptually and discuss how they are related to each other.

To link values and personality traits, I must answer a second question. What are the underlying mechanisms that give rise to both values and personality traits in individuals and populations? I draw on a diverse literature in personality and social psychology research, evolutionary biology, genomics, cognitive science, and neuroscience to explore these mechanisms. Bringing these literatures together, I propose a model that can account for the similarity of values and personality traits as commonly studied in psychology. Many interesting insights have been found in recent studies investigating the role of genes, so I need to cover a lot of genetics along the way. Yet the story is even more complicated, which raises my third question. Are your values and personality traits primarily your own, or is part of who you are shaped by the complex social and cultural environment in which you live? We humans live in complex social and cultural worlds in very diverse climatic habitats around the world, which provide us not only with lots of options, opportunities, and resources but also many challenges, threats, and dangers. How does this rich tapestry influence brain processes, and how do genes regulate human psychological functions?

STUDYING PERSONALITY AROUND THE WORLD

I take a scientific approach to describing personality. My quest is to understand persons and what they are like in their environment. To that end I have gathered data from studies conducted in different parts of the world to tackle the questions of what people are like and what makes them similar and different. What kind of data are available for the science of the person? There are two methods that have been used frequently. First, researchers use systematic observations. This method is followed traditionally in the field of anthropology. Western-trained individuals observe locals in their daily behavior and report what they find interesting, striking, or theoretically relevant. However, as it may be immediately apparent, there are multiple problems with this approach; for example, can we observe all relevant behavior across multiple contexts, how do we interpret behavior like I described at the beginning of the chapter if it lies outside our personal experience, what do we pay attention to, and what do we consider worth recording? By basing our research only on our observations, we miss the personal meaning and interpretation that the protagonists give to their actions. Yet, these observations can be useful for contextualizing behavior, and so I draw on some of these studies later in this book.

A second approach is to ask people themselves what they are like as a person: this is the most popular approach taken by psychologists (Allik &