National Character and Personality

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ABSTRACT—*People in all cultures have shared perceptions about the personality characteristics of the typical member of their own culture and of typical members of other cultures. Recent collaborative work has provided validated assessments of the personality profiles of over 50 cultures, and judged by these criteria, perceptions of national character are unfounded stereotypes. An appreciation of that fact by the public might improve international relations, so research is needed to understand the origins and persistence of national-character stereotypes. Psychologists have begun to explore the utility of aggregate personality profiles, which reflect subtle but real differences between cultures in mean levels of personality traits.*

KEYWORDS—*personality traits; stereotypes; Five-Factor Model; cross-cultural comparisons*

How do you get Canadians out of a swimming pool? You ask them.

Both Canadians and Americans get this joke, which relies on shared perceptions that Canadians are docile and compliant, in contrast to "ugly Americans," who are rude, arrogant, and self-centered. Popular thought characterizes the Chinese as industrious, Latins as hot-tempered, and Scandinavians as somber. Although Americans may not have clear ideas about the typical Ethiopian or Indonesian, Ethiopians and Indonesians surely do.

Such beliefs have been studied by anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists as *national character*, the shared perception of personality characteristics typical of citizens of a particular nation. As we use this term, it is both broader and narrower than the *national stereotype* often studied by social psychologists. It is narrower in the sense that it excludes abilities, physical characteristics, and other features that people may associate with a particular nationality (e.g., Germans are good

engineers, Japanese have brown eyes). We have no data on the accuracy of such stereotypes. As we assess them, perceptions of national character are broader than national stereotypes in the sense that they include not only the distinctive characteristics that spontaneously spring to mind (e.g., the English are reserved) but all personality-related characteristics about which people have a shared opinion if asked to make a judgment (e.g., the English are average in irritability). The use of a standard set from a comprehensive taxonomy of personality traits allows comparisons across many different groups, and interrater reliabilities (agreement among judges) document that these are indeed shared perceptions of groups—and, thus, stereotypes.

Until recently, the most comprehensive study of national character was Peabody's (1985) analysis of data on 20 countries. Peabody showed that people do hold shared beliefs about national character and that there is consensus across cultures: The French view of Germans is similar to Germans' view of themselves, and vice versa. Despite the possibility of ethnocentric biases, in-group and out-group stereotypes generally agree, at least when characterizing personality traits.

Terracciano et al. (2005) substantially extended these findings. They created a National Character Survey (NCS) with 30 scales corresponding to the traits (or facets) measured by the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R; Costa & McCrae, 1992), the most widely used measure of the comprehensive Five-Factor Model (FFM) of personality traits. (The facet scales represent specific aspects of the five personality factors: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness.) They administered the NCS to 3,989 respondents, mostly college students, in 49 cultures, asking them to describe the typical member of their own culture and subsequently asking them to describe the typical American. (Respondents were not initially told they would rate Americans, or be compared to other cultures, to avoid contrast effects.) Agreement between any two raters was relatively modest, but by averaging across large groups of raters, highly reliable scores were obtained. In Italy and Ethiopia, ratings were obtained from adults as well as from college students, and the

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different age groups showed very similar results, so it seems likely that the same conclusions would have been drawn if more representative samples of raters had been used.

Terracciano and colleagues (2005) showed that NCS scores were meaningful. The 30 items were interrelated in much the same way as the FFM traits are related in ratings of individuals. A contrast of American and Filipino NCS profiles showed good agreement with data from an earlier study contrasting perceptions of those groups (Church & Katigbak, 2002). Perceptions of Americans by other cultures matched Americans' perceptions of themselves (Terracciano & McCrae, 2005). And results often made sense: Canadians were judged to be agreeable, the English reserved, Australians extraverted, and Germans industrious.

ASSESSING AGGREGATE PERSONALITY PROFILES

But reliability is not validity, and consensus is not accuracy. As early as 1837, an anonymous critic of national-character studies claimed that descriptions of national character were collective fallacies: "How shall a man, to whom all characters of individual men are like sealed books . . . decipher . . . the character of a nation? . . . He courageously depicts his own optical delusions . . . and each repeats his precursor; the hundred-times-repeated comes in the end to be believed; the foreign nation is now once for all understood" (cited in Inkeles, 1997, pp. 161–162).

Such a view of stereotypes is widely shared by contemporary social scientists, but the question of stereotype accuracy is an empirical one (Lee, Jussim, & McCauley, 1995). In some areas, there is substantial evidence for a kernel of truth. Williams and Best (1990) showed that gender stereotypes were widely shared across cultures, and we (Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001) showed cross-culturally that many of these stereotypes corresponded to measured gender differences in personality traits, albeit rather small ones. The accuracy of perceived national character could similarly be evaluated by a comparison with measured national differences in personality traits.

That seemingly simple research design is beset by a host of problems. Can the same traits be used to describe personality in all cultures? Are the same methods of measurement and assessment instruments valid in all these different contexts? Are scores from translated versions really comparable? Can samples of college students adequately represent a national profile? Research conducted over the past 10 years suggests that when carefully developed personality measures are used, the answers may be affirmative.

Beginning in the 1990s, researchers around the world began to translate and conduct research on the NEO-PI-R. It quickly became clear that the organization of traits in the NEO-PI-R was replicable across a wide range of cultures (McCrae & Costa, 1997), so both the model and its operationalization could be used within any culture.

But use across cultures requires evidence of scalar equivalence. All cultures have members varying along the common dimension of Extraversion, but that does not necessarily mean that an Extraversion score of, say, 86 on the American NEO-PI-R is equivalent to a score of 86 on the Malay NEO-PI-R. Yet such equivalence is necessary if we wish to compare Americans and Malays on the mean national levels of Extraversion. Cross-cultural methodologists have pointed to a number of threats to scalar equivalence: Translations may introduce mean level shifts; response styles like acquiescence may vary across cultures; norms for self-enhancement may differ.

We (McCrae et al., 2005) argued that scalar equivalence across cultures could be assessed by evaluating the construct validity or accuracy of aggregate scores, and culture-level correlates can provide evidence. In culture-level analyses, the culture is the unit of analysis, and the value of the variable is the average of the values for individual members of the culture. For example, one could correlate the average Extraversion score in each country with mean subjective well-being to see if more extraverted countries were happier. Given a meaningful pattern of correlates of Extraversion at the culture level, one could conclude that the Extraversion scales in all nations must have at least rough scalar equivalence. After all, if they did not, national differences on Extraversion scores would be meaningless, and meaningless data do not give rise to meaningful patterns of correlations.

This approach requires data from a large number of cultures and a set of culture-level criteria against which to validate the aggregate personality scores. Recent advances were made possible only by the emergence of personality psychologists around the world who could translate, administer, and score the NEO-PI-R, and who were willing to collaborate in large-scale projects. In the first of two projects, one of us (McCrae, 2002) conducted secondary analyses on self-report data generously provided by researchers from 36 cultures. In the second project, we asked collaborators in 51 cultures to obtain college students' observer ratings of adults or college-age individuals from their culture whom the raters knew well (McCrae et al., 2005).

In both studies, aggregate personality scores were generalizable across age and gender groups and showed meaningful correlations with culture-level variables such as individualism/collectivism. They also followed generally predictable geographical patterns: Germans and Austrians, South Koreans and Chinese, and Nigerians and Burkinabé had very similar personality patterns (see Fig. 1). Perhaps most impressive were correlations across the two studies. As the third column in Table 1 shows, aggregate personality profiles based on self-reports from one sample in a country generally resembled aggregate personality profiles based on observer ratings from a different sample in that country. In a different analysis of individual traits across cultures, correlations for 26 of the 30 facets were significant and most were substantial, and 25 remained significant after controlling for Gross Domestic Product per capita and for acquiescence. These aggregate personality scores provided criteria by which the accuracy of perceptions of national character could be evaluated.
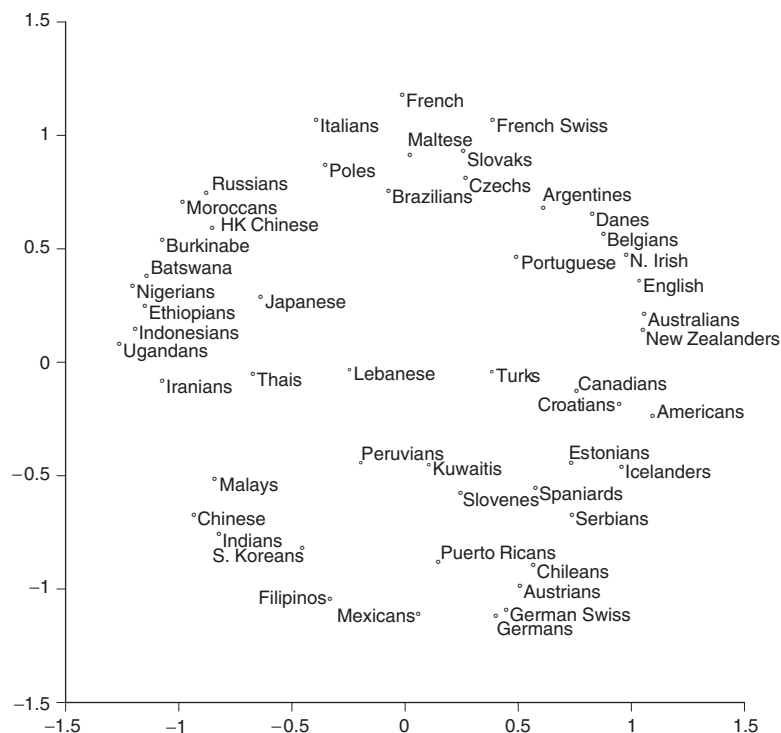
Fig. 1. Multidimensional scaling plot of 51 cultures for the 30 facet scores of the Revised NEO Personality Inventory, standardized across cultures. The vertical axis is maximally aligned with the Neuroticism factor, the horizontal axis with the Extraversion factor. In this plot, cultures are arranged such that the closer they appear, the more similar are their personality profiles. For example, the profile for the French closely resembles that of the French Swiss, and is quite different from the profile of Mexicans. On average, the French are relatively high in Neuroticism and Mexicans relatively low. From McCrae et al. (2005).

THE (IN)ACCURACY OF NATIONAL CHARACTER STEREOTYPES

Terracciano and colleagues (Terracciano et al., 2005) standardized both NEO-PI-R traits and NCS scales and compared the profiles. The top panel of Figure 2 shows results for Canada; the bottom panel presents American data. It should be clear from Figure 2 that Canadian national-character stereotypes are quite different from assessed aggregate personality traits: Canadians see themselves as much lower in Neuroticism and higher in Agreeableness than they actually are. The same discrepancies are found for Americans, though in the opposite direction.

Stereotype accuracy within a country can be assessed by calculating an intraclass correlation (*ICC*) across the 30 facets.[1] The last two columns of Table 1 report *ICC*s between aggregate personality traits and NCS scales. Twelve of them are significant—but six of these are negative, suggesting that there is as much evidence against the accuracy of stereotypes as there is for

it. Across the 47 cultures with both NCS and observer-rated NEO-PI-R data (column 4 in Table 1), *ICC* was lowest for the English and highest for Poles, with a median value of 0.00, meaning no association at all. Across the 30 cultures with both NCS and self-reported NEO-PI-R data (column 5), the median *ICC* was −0.02. What this means is that personality profiles for assessed individuals generally do not resemble profiles for perceived typical culture members.

It might be argued that the approach to scalar equivalence adopted here does not guarantee that the NEO-PI-R scores showed scalar equivalence in every culture, and in fact the third column of Table 1 shows that the *ICC* between aggregate self-reports and aggregate observer ratings was nonsignificant for eight cultures. However, if we restrict the evaluation of national-character accuracy to the 20 cultures in which the criteria are themselves validated by a significant *ICC*, the conclusions are unchanged: The median *ICC* based on observer ratings is .00; based on self-reports it is −.01.

It is possible, however, that there is accuracy for some subset of traits. We correlated each NCS scale with the corresponding self-reported and observer-rated NEO-PI-R scale across cultures. There were no significant correlations at the level of the five major domains of personality, and of the 11 significant

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[1]*ICC*s are similar to Pearson correlations, and their magnitude can be similarly interpreted, but they are sensitive to both the shape and the elevation of the profile.

TABLE 1

Cultures, Languages of Administration, and Intraclass Correlations (ICCs) Between NEO-PI-R Forms and NCS Scales

Culture	Language	ICC_{RS}	ICC_R	ICC_S
Argentina	Spanish	—	−.08	—
Australia	English	—	.38*	—
Belgium	Flemish	.74***	−.45*	−.17
Botswana	English	—	−.11	—
Brazil	Portuguese	—	.00	—
Burkina Faso	French	.88***	−.16	−.40*
Canada	English	.42*	−.03	.19
Chile	Spanish	—	−.33	—
China	Chinese	.28	−.02	−.02
Croatia	Croatian	.44*	−.16	.11
Czech Republic	Czech	.45*	−.16	.20
Denmark	Danish	.31	−.40*	−.01
Estonia	Estonian	.43*	−.10	−.08
Ethiopia	English	—	−.09	—
France	French	.66***	.27	.35
Germany	German	.25	−.04	−.18
Hong Kong	Chinese	.29	.29	−.05
Hungary	Hungarian	—	—	.24
Iceland	Icelandic	—	−.06	—
India	English	.72***	−.06	−.05
Indonesia	Indonesian	.34	.06	.05
Italy	Italian	.44*	.05	−.01
Japan	Japanese	.49**	.05	.41*
Kuwait	Arabic	—	−.07	—
Lebanon	English	—	.39*	—
Malaysia	Malay	.75***	.13	.31
Malta	English	—	.25	—
Morocco	English	—	.25	—
New Zealand	English	—	.36*	—
Nigeria	English	—	−.12	—
Peru	Spanish	.58***	.13	.07
Philippines	Filipino	.45*	.14	−.18
Poland	Polish	.66***	.40*	.46*
Portugal	Portuguese	.51**	−.01	−.19
Puerto Rico	Spanish	—	.10	—
Russia	Russian	.51**	−.35*	−.46*
Serbia	Serbian	.66***	.08	−.02
Slovakia	Slovak	—	.14	—
Slovenia	Slovene	—	.25	—
South Korea	Korean	.06	−.09	−.21
Spain	Spanish	.30	−.10	−.18
Sweden	Swedish	—	—	.11
Switzerland	German	.31	.06	−.18
Switzerland	French	.79***	−.29	−.29
Turkey	Turkish	.60***	.00	−.09
Uganda	English	—	.28	—
UK: England	English	—	−.57**	—
UK: N. Ireland	English	—	.29	—
United States	English	.67***	.23	−.01
Median		*.47*	*.00*	*−.02*

Note. NEO-PI-R = Revised NEO Personality Inventory. NCS = National Character Survey. Data from the NEO-PI-R are self-reports or observer ratings of real individuals; data from the NCS are judgments about a hypothetical ''typical'' member of a culture. Dashes indicate missing data. ICC_{RS} = intraclass correlation between aggregate NEO-PI-R Form R (observer ratings) and corresponding aggregate NEO-PI-R Form S (self-reports) across 30 facets; ICC_R = intraclass correlation between mean NCS scores and NEO-PI-R Form R; ICC_S = intraclass correlation between mean NCS scores and NEO-PI-R Form S. Data from McCrae et al. (2005) and Terracciano et al. (2005). ICC_{RS} for Poland added.
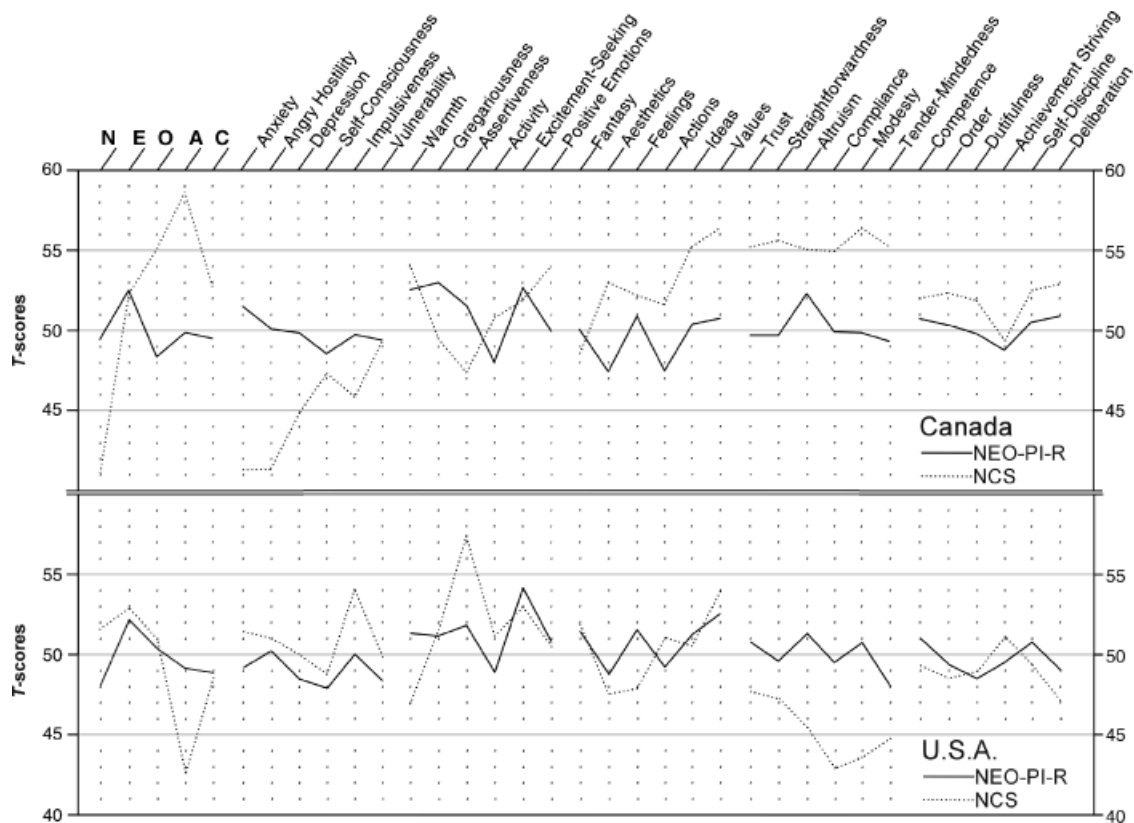*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

Fig. 2. Mean profiles for National Character Survey (dotted line) and observer-rated Revised NEO Personality Inventory (solid line) in Canada (top panel) and the United States (bottom panel). N = Neuroticism; E = Extraversion; O = Openness to Experience; A = Agreeableness; C = Conscientiousness. Scores for the five factors are given on the left; scores for the 30 facets, grouped by factor, are given toward the right. All values are *T*-scores, with means of 50 and standard deviations of 10, based on international norms. Adapted from Terracciano et al., 2005. NEO-PI-R profile form reproduced by special permission of the Publisher, Psychological Assessment Resources, Inc., 16204 North Florida Avenue, Lutz, Florida 33549, from the *Revised NEO Personality Inventory* by Paul T. Costa, Jr., and Robert R. McCrae. Copyright 1978, 1985, 1989, 1991, 1992 by Psychological Assessment Resources, Inc. (PAR). Further reproduction is prohibited without permission of PAR.

correlations at the facet level, 5 were negative. The median correlation was .04.

There does not appear to be even a kernel of truth in the stereotypes of national character assessed by the NCS. In-group perceptions of national character are not generalizations about personality traits based on accumulated observations of the people with whom one lives; surely out-group perceptions are even more likely to be "optical delusions." National-character stereotypes appear to be social constructions that serve different functions altogether.

Consider the United States and Canada. They have similar ethnic compositions and share many basic features of culture, including language, religion, and economic and legal systems. Objective assessments show that they have very similar personality profiles: *ICC* between the two observer-rated NEO-PI-R profiles was 0.66. Yet a comparison of the top and bottom panels in Figure 2 shows dramatic differences between perceived national character in these two nations (*ICC* = −.53), especially with regard to Agreeableness. Both Canadians and Americans can point to institutions that seem to justify these beliefs: Canadians are proud of their benevolent universal health care system; Americans

defiantly cherish their right to bear arms. But such differences are small when social policies in the United States and Canada are contrasted with those in, say, China or Nigeria; and whatever differences there may be in social policies are apparently not rooted in personality differences between the two nations.

SOME ETHICAL AND SCIENTIFIC ISSUES

The contrasting national-character stereotypes of Canadians and Americans are expressed chiefly in jokes. In other parts of the world and at other times, such stereotypes have had more serious, even tragic consequences. The findings of Terracciano and colleagues (2005) are a forceful reminder that people everywhere find it easy to develop stereotyped ideas of whole nations and agree well enough with each other to believe their views are consensually validated. But while there is some consensus, there is no accuracy. National-character stereotypes are apparently not even exaggerations of real differences: They are fictions. This is hardly a new insight, but it is a reminder that social scientists must continuously warn the public against this attractive fallacy.

They will be able to do this most effectively if they understand the origins and persistence of stereotypes. How do national-character stereotypes arise? In many respects, Canada is dominated by American culture, and perceived contrasts in national character may serve to assert a distinct national identity. It is less likely that Americans define themselves in reaction to Canadian character; perhaps the origins of American character stereotypes are to be found in the rugged frontier life of American pioneers. Again, some national-character stereotypes appear to be related to economic, geographical, and historical factors. Social psychologists are actively studying the processes by which stereotypes are formed and maintained in the face of disconfirming evidence (Macrae, Stangor, & Hewstone, 1996). Our own ongoing research focuses on determinants of national-character stereotypes and the cross-cultural generalizability and accuracy of age stereotypes.

Many social scientists have been reluctant to admit even the possibility that there are group differences in personality traits. It is therefore somewhat ironic that we were able to debunk national-character stereotypes only by comparing them to the real differences between cultures in aggregate personality traits (McCrae et al., 2005). These differences are relatively small compared to the large variation in traits found within every culture. Yet because they represent personality writ large, the culture-level correlates (e.g., attitudes, mental health, educational achievement) of aggregate personality traits merit continued investigation (McCrae & Terracciano, in press).

Recommended Reading

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