
Kluwer Mediation Blog

Just when you thought it couldn't get any WEIRDer

Charlie Woods (Core Solutions Group / Scottish Universities Insight Institute) · Thursday, April 8th, 2021

In recent years we have learned a lot more about what have become known as cognitive biases and how they may play a part in negotiation and mediation. These are mental shortcuts that save energy and get us out of tight spots that have evolved over thousands of years. Well over a hundred have been **identified** and in the more modern environments in which we now live they can have a significant unconscious influence on how we understand what's going on around us and how we make decisions. One of the vital roles that processes such as mediation can play is to help those involved slow down and examine what impact these shortcuts might be playing.

Biological evolution has therefore had a profound influence on how we think and behave today. A recent **book** from Joseph Henrich Professor of Human Evolutionary Biology at Harvard adds another layer to this. He argues that the psychology of modern humans is also heavily influenced by the way in which different cultures have evolved.

In hunter gatherer societies psychology was shaped by norms, rituals and taboos which boosted collaboration within a group to increase access to food, provide security and insure against hard times, while also increasing competition between groups.

As humans became more settled, with the advent of agriculture, cultures evolved further as the nature of cooperation needed for new farming methods changed. This led to the development of new norms etc. alongside more sophisticated institutions, philosophy and religion.

Building on these developments the book focusses most attention on 'how the West became psychologically peculiar and particularly prosperous'. He describes the people from cultures that evolved in North West Europe (including those who migrated to America, Australasia etc.) as WEIRD (western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic).

The root of the development of this peculiar psychology was the way in which the early western Christian church disrupted more traditional kinship based groups through its 'marriage and families programme', which, for example, made marriage within kin groups much harder and forced people further afield to find partners.

Alongside this came the development of new groups to whom people were loyal (which crossed kin boundaries – for example guilds) and the growth of urban settlements with a very different set of social norms and trading arrangements to govern more impersonal relationships.

“In the urban communities of medieval Europe, the success of merchants, traders, and artisans depended—in part—on their reputation for impartial honesty and fairness, and on their industriousness, patience, precision, and punctuality. These reputational systems favored the cultivation of the relevant social standards, attentional biases, and motivations that apply to impersonal transactions.”

These developments were compounded by the Protestant reformation which emphasised the importance of the individual’s relationship with God, including enabling and requiring individuals to read and understand the bible. The act of reading apparently has physiological implications which further impinge on psychological development.

The impact of this evolution of culture on WEIRD societies is summarised in this [WEIRD chart](#)

Henrich summarises the people who have grown up in this WEIRD culture as:

- individualistic, control-oriented, analytical
- focused on attributes, accomplishments etc. over relationships and social roles
- seeing inconsistencies in others as hypocrisy rather than flexibility
- less willing to conform (not nodes in a social network)
- looking for universal categories and rules with which to organize the world
- mentally projecting straight lines to understand patterns and anticipate trends
- simplifying complex phenomena and often missing relationships – knowing a lot about trees, but often missing the forest!

This contrasts with people who have grown up in cultures which are more kinship based who tend to be more interpersonal and group orientated, less analytical and more holistic in their thinking and who prioritise helping others in their group over obeying more general rules – something WEIRD people might describe as nepotism and corruption.

This is not to say one cultural background is better or worse than another, rather to recognise that they are different and that this difference can have significant implications for understanding what causes people to do things and why. As Henrich puts it:

“In predicting people’s behaviour, many contexts are so constrained by social norms and the watching eyes of others that intuiting people’s personal beliefs or intentions won’t help very much. Instead, it’s better to know their social relationships, allies, debts, and obligations.”

Henrich also notes that many of the psychological experiments carried out in universities have been conducted on WEIRD people (usually students) with general conclusions then being drawn and applied to humanity as a whole.

Within the broad categories of WEIRD and non-WEIRD it is also likely that there are variations within countries resulting from more localized or group based cultural developments. In an [article](#) in the Financial Times Gillian Tett wonders if this might be behind some of the divides that can be seen in the United States at the moment, where people with very different points of view find it difficult to understand where others might be coming from. She concludes:

“Words alone will not heal America. Neither will the law, nor logical analysis of the constitution. What is desperately required is empathy and a new approach that might tap into WEIRD and non-WEIRD modes of thought. “

For mediators this work would strongly suggest that as well as thinking about what biases resulting from biological evolution might be at play, we should also be considering what influence culture might be playing on the way people see the world and make decisions. This could be at a macro level in terms of the societies they have grown up in and at a more micro level in terms of their personal or workplace background.

This further emphasizes the vital role that the mediation process can play in building rapport between participants and providing the opportunity for parties to a negotiation to better understand the perspective from which they are each seeing things.

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