

These subjects were right to wonder about me because I really was weird. I came from a strange and different moral world—the University of Pennsylvania. Penn students were the most unusual of all twelve groups in my study. They were unique in their unwavering devotion to the “harm principle,” which John Stuart Mill had put forth in 1859: “The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.” As one Penn student said: “It’s his chicken, he’s eating it, nobody is getting hurt.”

The Penn students were just as likely as people in the other eleven groups to say that it would bother them to witness the taboo violations, but they were the *only* group that frequently ignored their own feelings of disgust and said that an action that bothered them was nonetheless morally permissible. And they were the only group in which a majority (73 percent) were able to tolerate the chicken story. As one Penn student said, “It’s perverted, but if it’s done in private, it’s his right.”

I and my fellow Penn students were weird in a second way too. In 2010, the cultural psychologists Joe Henrich, Steve Heine, and Ara Norenzayan published a profoundly important article titled “The Weirdest People in the World?”² The authors pointed out that nearly all research in psychology is conducted on a very small subset of the human population: people from cultures that are Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (forming the acronym WEIRD). They then reviewed dozens of studies showing that WEIRD people are statistical outliers; they are the least typical, least representative people you could study if you want to make generalizations about human nature. Even within the West, Americans are more extreme outliers than Europeans, and within the United States, the educated upper middle class (like my Penn sample) is the most unusual of all.

Several of the peculiarities of WEIRD culture can be captured in this simple generalization: *The WEIRDer you are, the more you see a world full of separate objects, rather than relationships*. It has long been reported that Westerners have a more independent and autonomous concept of the self than do East Asians.³ For example, when asked to write twenty statements beginning with the words “I am . . .,” Americans are likely to list their own internal psychological characteristics (happy, outgoing, interested in jazz), whereas East Asians are more likely to list their roles and relationships (a son, a husband, an employee of Fujitsu).

The differences run deep; even visual perception is affected. In what’s known as the framed-line task, you are shown a square with a line drawn inside it. You then turn the page and see an empty square that is larger or smaller than the original square. Your task is to draw a line that is the same as the line you saw on the previous page, either in absolute terms (same number of centimeters; ignore the new frame) or in relative terms (same proportion relative to the frame). Westerners, and particularly Americans, excel at the absolute task, because they saw the line as an independent object in the first place and stored it separately in memory. East Asians, in contrast, outperform Americans at the relative task, because they automatically perceived and remembered the relationship among the parts.⁴

Related to this difference in perception is a difference in thinking style. Most people think holistically (seeing the whole context and the relationships among parts), but WEIRD people think more analytically (detaching the focal object from its context, assigning it to a category, and then assuming that what’s true about the category is true about the object).⁵ Putting this all together, it makes sense that WEIRD philosophers since Kant and Mill have mostly generated