



# Current Controversies in the Study of Personality across Cultures

A. Timothy Church\*  
*Washington State University*

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## Abstract

Research on culture and personality is thriving. In this article, I address several prominent controversies, including: (a) alternative perspectives on the relationship between culture and personality; (b) the cross-cultural universality versus specificity of personality structure; (c) whether comparisons of mean inventory profiles reveal valid cultural differences in trait levels; and (d) the importance and role of the trait concept across cultures. Greater consensus regarding the relationship between culture and personality will likely be achieved if researchers clarify which aspects of personality they are addressing (e.g., basic tendencies vs. characteristic adaptations). Recent lexical and indigenous studies have weakened consensus regarding the universality and comprehensiveness of the Five-Factor Model. The validity of cultural mean profiles remains unresolved. Research on the importance of traits across cultures provides support for both trait and cultural psychology perspectives, although more culture-comparative studies of consistency and predictive validity are needed. Suggestions for research are offered.

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Personality psychology should involve the study of all human beings, not just those in a particular culture. Indeed, the monocultural nature of much psychological research can result in ‘a sense of “culture-blindness” whereby observed findings in one’s own culture are assumed to be universal’ (Heine & Norenzayan, 2006, p. 254). Cross-cultural studies enable tests of the universality of personality theories, concepts, and processes and provide a natural experimental ‘treatment’ for studying the impact of culture on personality. Indeed, one can argue that a truly universal psychology will require the independent emergence and eventual integration of multiple indigenous psychologies around the world (Church & Katigbak, 2002).

In the present article, I focus on several of the most prominent controversies in current research on culture and personality. These include: (a) alternative perspectives on the relationship between culture and personality; (b) the cross-cultural universality versus specificity of personality structure; (c) whether comparisons of mean inventory profiles across cultures reveal valid cultural differences in trait levels; and (d) the importance and role of the trait concept across cultures. I emphasize the study of personality traits

across cultures. For reviews of cross-cultural research in the broader personality domain (e.g., values, emotions, self), see Benet-Martínez and Oishi (forthcoming), Church and Lonner (1998), Heine (2001), and Triandis and Suh (2002).

## Relationship between Culture and Personality

Although culture has been defined in many ways, Fiske (2002, p. 81) provided a definition that would probably be acceptable to most cross-cultural psychologists:

A culture is a socially transmitted or socially constructed constellation consisting of such things as practices, competencies, ideas, schemas, symbols, values, norms, institutions, goals, constitutive rules, artifacts, and modifications of the physical environment.

Thus, culture includes both observable activities and artifacts (i.e., things outside the individual and in the environment) and symbols, values, and meanings (i.e., shared cognitive meanings in the minds of individuals; Berry, 2000). A limitation of most research on culture and personality is the tendency to equate culture with nations, primarily as a convenience, although most researchers understand that nations are mere proxies for cultures and that a variety of subcultures coexist within nations. Despite some consensus on what constitutes culture, psychologists differ in how they incorporate or treat the cultural variable in their research and in how they view the relationship between culture and personality.

Controversy regarding the relationship between culture and personality is not new. An important debate among contributors to the classic culture-and-personality school in anthropology, which thrived from about 1930–1950, involved the degree of correspondence between individual personality and culture (Bock, 2000; LeVine, 2001). Some researchers proposed a close correspondence between cultural configurations and the basic personality type shared by the bulk of the society's members (Benedict, 1934; Kardiner, 1939), whereas others argued that the impact of culture could differ for each individual, resulting in considerable individual variability (e.g., Wallace, 1961). In characterizing the personality or 'national character' of whole populations and ignoring individual variability, classic culture-and-personality studies suffered from the uniformity myth (Bock, 2000). Bock (2000) has warned against the same mistaken assumption of uniformity in current research on personality across cultures, for example, in using mean scores on personality tests to characterize entire nations.

Today, the most basic differences among psychologists who investigate personality across cultures involve their views on (a) the cross-cultural universality versus specificity of personality phenomena, and (b) the primary direction of causality between personality and culture. To some extent, these differences are associated with the alternative theoretical perspectives

of cross-cultural, cultural, and indigenous psychologists, although these distinctions are fuzzy.

Cross-cultural psychologists frequently compare multiple cultures to identify cross-cultural universals or culture-specifics amidst these universals. Culture, or quantitative variables indexing culture and ecology, is treated (at least methodologically) as relatively static and 'outside' the individual. Traditionally, much cross-cultural work has been consistent with an eco-cultural or environmental causation model, which postulates a causal sequence from ecology to culture to socialization to personality to behavior (Triandis & Suh, 2002). For example, when Hofstede and McCrae (2004) found culture-level correlations between the dimensions of the Five-Factor Model or 'Big Five' (i.e., Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness; McCrae & Costa, 1996) and Hofstede's four dimensions of culture (i.e., Individualism, Uncertainty Avoidance, Power Distance, and Masculinity), Hofstede offered interpretations implying cultural causation of personality (e.g., 'masculine' cultures are less conducive to emotional stability than 'feminine' cultures). As an example of ecological causation, Van de Vliert et al. have linked country climate to differences in leadership behavior, motives for volunteer work, and political violence across cultures (Van de Vliert, 2006; Van de Vliert, Huang, & Levine, 2004; Van de Vliert, Schwartz, Huisman, Hofstede, & Daan, 1999).

In contrast to cross-cultural psychologists, who tend to treat culture and personality as relatively distinct, cultural psychologists emphasize the 'mutually constitutive' and deeply intertwined nature of culture and personality (Heine, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In this view, conceptions of self and personality are viewed as 'socially constructed' (i.e., produced through the shared cognition and experience of members of particular cultures) and hence variable across cultures, and the existence of personality traits that are relatively independent of culture is questioned. For example, Kashima (2004) described the relationship between culture and personality as a dynamic process mediated by sociality, or 'the totality of the concrete persons' social interactions in particular contexts cumulated over time' (p. 53).

Finally, indigenous psychologists emphasize the need to formulate theory, concepts, and methods that reflect indigenous cultural contexts (Church & Katigbak, 2002; Kim, Yang, & Hwang, 2006; Sinha, 1997). Indigenous psychologists have primarily focused on elaboration of personality constructs thought to be particularly salient for specific cultural groups. Like cultural psychologists, indigenous psychologists tend to endorse relativistic rather than universalistic perspectives on personality dimensions and processes.

With increasing evidence of the heritability and cross-cultural universality of traits, some cross-cultural and cultural psychologists have proposed models in which biologically based traits are viewed as relatively independent of culture or as underlying causes of culture (Church, 2000; Matsumoto, 2007; McCrae, 2004; Oishi, 2004). For example, McCrae (2004) offered as a 'working hypothesis' the 'claim that culture does not affect personality,

but that personality traits, in the aggregate, may in some circumstances affect culture' (p. 5; i.e., the reverse causation hypothesis). For example, McCrae speculated that a society consisting primarily of people who were introverted (low Extraversion), closed (low Openness), and dutiful (High Conscientiousness) might evolve a social structure characterized by high Power Distance (i.e., acceptance of unequal power in society) because most people would passively accept the dominance of the few natural leaders. Similarly, Oishi (2004) described culture's role as constraining or amplifying the manifestation of basic temperaments, not the temperaments themselves, and contended that basic temperaments limit culture's impact on the individual. The theoretical view that personality traits are independent of culture becomes most controversial in the context of mean profile comparisons across cultures because it seems to imply that cultural differences in mean trait levels have a genetic basis.

Greater clarity and consensus regarding the relationship between culture and personality will likely be achieved if theorists and researchers are explicit about which aspects of personality they are addressing. In this regard, McCrae and Costa (1996) introduced a useful distinction between biologically based *basic tendencies*, including the Big Five traits, and *characteristic adaptations* such as personal strivings, values, beliefs, and aspects of self-concept. The Five-Factor Theory proposes that basic tendencies are independent of culture, whereas characteristic adaptations are influenced by both basic tendencies and environmental influences such as culture. Cross-cultural, cultural, and indigenous psychologists can probably agree that culture impacts characteristic adaptations and that characteristic adaptations and culture are 'mutually constitutive'. There is probably less agreement about whether basic tendencies (e.g., traits) are independent of culture. Nonetheless, both cross-cultural and cultural psychologists are increasingly adopting the view that culture influences the manifestation of traits more than the traits themselves (Matsumoto, 2007; Oishi, 2004). Similarly, McAdams and Pals (2006) differentiated three levels of personality – dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations, and life narratives – and argued that culture influences life narratives the most, characteristic adaptations next most, and dispositional traits the least.

It is also useful in this context to recall the important distinction between folk concepts – which include lay people's socially-constructed or shared personal construals of personality and self – and the personality concepts (e.g., traits) of scientific psychology (Tellegen, 1993). Scientific concepts can evolve from folk concepts. The identification of the Big Five personality dimensions from the natural language in various cultures provides a prominent example (Saucier & Goldberg, 2001). In addition, folk and scientific concepts may tend to mutually correct and converge over time (Saucier, 1992). Nonetheless, the hypothesized cultural differences in construals of personality and self emphasized by cultural psychologists do not preclude the existence of universal, biologically based personality

traits. Personality construals or implicit theories are probably best viewed as folk concepts or characteristic adaptations (although we investigate them scientifically), rather than basic (biologically based) tendencies. Thus, the skepticism of some cultural and indigenous psychologists about the existence of universal traits might reflect tendencies to conflate folk and scientific personality concepts and to discount or downplay the evidence and impact of biologically-based personality traits.

### **Cultural Universality versus Specificity of Personality Trait Structure**

Evidence of heritability is sufficient to indicate that personality traits are not merely cultural constructions. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that personality traits are at least moderately heritable and heritability estimates do not seem to differ substantially across cultures (Jang, McCrae, Angleitner, Riemann, & Livesley, 1998; Loehlin, 1992; Tellegen et al., 1988). Some researchers now apply molecular genetic techniques to identify specific genes underlying personality traits (Plomin & Caspi, 1998) and evolutionary psychologists have proposed evolutionary mechanisms that could explain genetic variance in personality traits (Penke, Denissen, & Miller, 2007). The biological basis of personality – while not necessarily pointing to a specific structural model – suggests that the structure or organization of personality will be similar across cultures.

Until recently, there was growing consensus that the Five-Factor Model provides a universal and comprehensive structure of personality traits (McCrae & Allik, 2002; Triandis & Suh, 2002), and several psychologists have offered evolutionary explanations of the Big Five dimensions (e.g., Buss, 1996; MacDonald, 1998; Nettle, 2006). Several developments have weakened this Big Five consensus, however. First, replication may be weaker in less industrialized, agrarian samples (Piedmont, Bain, McCrae, & Costa, 2002) or in samples characterized by concrete thinking or low cognitive ability (Toomela, 2003; see, however, Allik & McCrae, 2004a). Second, the lower reliability across cultures of scales in the Openness to Experience domain is widespread, perhaps reflecting the more abstract ideas represented by this domain (Piedmont et al., 2002). Difficulty identifying a distinct Openness dimension in indigenous and lexical studies is also relevant in this regard (F. M. Cheung, Cheung, Leung, Ward, & Leong, 2003; De Raad & Peabody, 2005). Third, researchers using different inventories, with somewhat different dimensions, have also replicated their dimensions across cultures, demonstrating that transported inventories facilitate emergence of their embedded structure in new cultural contexts (Church, 2000). Fourth, there is little consensus on the nature and number of more specific traits or facets ‘under’ the Big Five, which may be more variable across cultures than the broader dimensions. Finally, debate continues about whether there are important dimensions that are ‘beyond the Big Five’, such as

Religiosity or Spirituality, Honesty, Positive and Negative Valence, and Sexuality/Sensuality, among others (Paunonen & Jackson, 2000; Saucier & Goldberg, 1998; Schmitt & Buss, 2000).

Given the limitations of the *imposed-etic* approach, in which existing (usually Western) inventories are transported across cultures, other researchers have applied *emic* methods, which rely on native languages, cultural informants, or local psychological literatures to identify indigenous personality concepts. Indeed, the most significant challenges to the universality and comprehensiveness of the Big Five model have emerged from recent lexical studies, which assume that the most salient individual differences in personality will be encoded in natural languages (Saucier & Goldberg, 2001). Lexical researchers examine the structure of comprehensive or representative sets of trait terms in various cultures using self or peer ratings, and have now done so in at least 16 languages, including Chinese, Croatian, Czech, Dutch, English, French, Filipino, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hungarian, Italian, Korean, Polish, Spanish, and Turkish (for reviews, see Ashton & Lee, 2001; Saucier & Goldberg, 2001).

Several vigorous debates have erupted among lexical researchers that have implications for the number and nature of universal personality dimensions. Prominent among these is whether Honesty–Humility should be added to the Big Five as a sixth basic dimension, given its emergence in six-factor solutions in a number of cultures (Ashton et al., 2004). To a significant extent, this debate probably reflects the limited ability of the factor-analytic method to provide definitive conclusions regarding the optimal number and orientation of personality dimensions, particularly given the limited simple structure of the personality domain. For example, Ashton, Lee, Marcus, and de Vries (2007) acknowledge that terms referring to altruism (e.g., *good-hearted*, *helpful*, *considerate*, *altruistic*) tend to blend with either their Honesty–Humility or Agreeableness dimensions, depending on the variable set, rating source, or sample. Ashton and Lee prefer the Honesty–Humility label even when altruism terms are blended on the same factor, while others may prefer a broader label such as Big Five Agreeableness, particularly for cultures in which a purer Honesty–Humility factor has not emerged without the blended altruism terms (Imperio, Church, Katigbak, & Reyes, 2008).

Also debated in the lexical literature is whether to include terms that are purely evaluative in nature (Ashton & Lee, 2002; Benet-Martínez & Waller, 2002; Saucier, 2002); terms for social roles, statuses, and effects; or personality-relevant physical attributes (De Raad & Barelids, 2008; Imperio et al., 2008; Saucier, 1997). Although terms in these categories may not refer to personality traits *per se*, they may provide useful information about personality. Indeed, cultural psychologists have argued that in collectivistic cultures social roles, statuses, and effects may be particularly significant for person description and more central to identity than traits (Kanagawa, Cross, & Markus, 2001).

Another important development in lexical studies is the recent trend to compare the cross-cultural comparability of factors at multiple levels in a hierarchy. Thus far, these studies suggest that cross-cultural comparability is better for the broader factors identified in one-factor (e.g., Virtue or Evaluation), two-factor (e.g., Dynamism and Morality), and three-factor (broader Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness) solutions, than for five- or six-factor solutions (De Raad & Barelds, 2008; De Raad & Peabody, 2005). De Raad and Peabody (2005) discussed errors that they believe have led to over-endorsement of the Big Five dimensions, including labeling ambiguous factors based on an expectation of the Big Five, imposed-etic approaches, and the limitations of marker scale methodology.

To date, Chinese researchers have made the strongest claims for culture-specificity based on lexical studies (Wang, Cui, & Zhou, 2005; Yang, 2006). Yang and Wang (2000, cited in Yang, 2006) identified seven dimensions, labeled Competence versus Impotence, Industriousness versus Unindustriousness, Other-Orientedness versus Self-centeredness, Agreeableness versus Disagreeableness, Extraversion versus Introversion, Large-Mindedness versus Small-Mindedness, and Contentedness versus Vaingloriousness. Based on correlations with measures of the Big Five, the researchers concluded that three of these dimensions – Competence versus Impotence, Other-Orientedness versus Self-centeredness, and Large-Mindedness versus Small-Mindedness – were beyond the coverage of the Big Five, and that none of the Chinese dimensions corresponded to Big Five Openness to Experience.

Complementing lexical studies are studies of indigenous personality inventories. Ortiz et al. (2007) analyzed a large number of Mexican inventories and the Spanish-language NEO Personality Inventory – Revised (NEO-PI-R) and concluded that most of the Mexican dimensions were well subsumed by the Big Five dimensions. Cultural differences did not involve clearly culture-specific dimensions, but more subtle differences in the salience or cultural flavor of particular traits. Katigbak and colleagues (Katigbak, Church, & Akamine, 1996; Katigbak, Church, Guanzon-Lapeña, Carlota, & del Pilar, 2002) drew similar conclusions in studies of Philippine inventories and the Five-Factor Model. Again, the primary claims of unique dimensions beyond the Big Five come from Chinese researchers (F. M. Cheung et al., 2001; Wang et al., 2005). For example, Wang et al. (2005) described the development of an inventory to measure the seven Chinese lexical dimensions and reported weak one-to-one correspondence between the Big Five and Chinese inventory dimensions.

The most prominent Chinese inventory is the Cross-Cultural (Chinese) Personality Assessment Inventory (CPAI-2) developed by Fanny Cheung et al. (F. M. Cheung, Leung, Fan, Song, Zhang, & Zhang, 1996; F. M. Cheung et al., 2003). One significant finding is that no Openness to Experience dimension has emerged with this instrument (e.g., in joint factor analyses with measures of the Big Five), even after additional scales

were developed to measure indigenous conceptions of Openness. F. M. Cheung et al. (2003) concluded 'that openness is not used as an independent personality construct among the Chinese people' (p. 286).

Also of special interest is the CPAI-2 Interpersonal Relatedness factor – one of four higher-order factors found among the scales in the instrument – which is apparently independent of the Big Five dimensions. However, recent research indicates that the Interpersonal Relatedness dimension is not unique to Chinese populations (F. M. Cheung et al., 2003; Lin & Church, 2004), nor do ethnic Chinese necessarily score higher on the associated scales than other Asian ethnic groups (S. F. Cheung, Cheung, Howard, & Lim, 2006). The interpretation of the Interpersonal Relatedness factor – which is thought to assess the interdependence and relational concerns emphasized in Chinese culture (F. M. Cheung et al., 2001) – is also not definitive. For example, Lin and Church (2004) found that the dimension was unrelated to relational self-construals and only modestly related to collective self-construals in Chinese- and European-Americans. Yang (2006) suggested that some scales associated with the Interpersonal Relatedness dimension assess social psychological syndromes rather than traits, which may account for their independence from the Big Five dimensions. Further research on the interpretation and cultural uniqueness of the Interpersonal Relatedness dimension is needed. The same can be said for the many single personality concepts (e.g., Japanese *amae*) described by indigenous psychologists as unique or particularly salient in specific cultures (e.g., see Church & Katigbak, 2002; Kim et al., 2006; Sinha, 1997). The results of such studies have significant implications for conclusions about the universality versus culture-specificity of personality structure.

### Mean Profile Comparisons across Cultures

Recently, renewed efforts have been made to draw conclusions about cultural differences in mean trait levels by comparing aggregate personality profiles across cultures (McCrae, 2002; Schmitt et al., 2007). The controversy generated by these efforts is not new. For example, the extensive cross-national comparisons with the EPQ (e.g., Lynn & Martin, 1995) were criticized by cross-cultural psychologists concerned about the uncertain cross-cultural measurement equivalence of the EPQ scales (e.g., Bijnen, van der Net, & Poortinga, 1986). Although cultural and ethnic comparisons of personality trait levels may not be as sensitive as comparisons of intelligence levels, the same risks and ethical reminders apply, particularly when genetic explanations for these differences are considered. McCrae (2004) offered the following reminders in this regard, noting that it is essential to keep in mind: (a) the small magnitude of the personality differences across cultures; (b) the generally weak relationships between traits and specific behaviors; (c) the considerable within-culture variation in all traits, so that ascribing the mean trait level to all or particular individuals is unjustifiable



stereotyping; (d) the fact that evidence of the heritability of personality traits does not imply that cultural differences necessarily have a genetic basis; and (e) possible alternative interpretations of observed cultural differences. It is these alternative interpretations that are difficult to eliminate and that contribute to the uncertain meaningfulness of cross-cultural profile comparisons.

Perhaps the most persuasive evidence for the meaningfulness of such comparisons is the geographical patterning of mean personality profiles. For example, Allik and McCrae (2004b) found that neighboring countries were generally grouped together in cluster and multidimensional scaling analyses of NEO-PI-R mean profiles. For example, European and American cultures were generally contrasted with Asian and African cultures, with the former higher in Extraversion and Openness to Experience and lower in Agreeableness. There were also a number of anomalies in the grouping of cultures, however. With the Big Five Inventory (BFI; Benet-Martínez & John, 1998), Schmitt et al. (2007) also reported many cases of profile similarity between cultures that made sense in terms of shared geography, culture, and ancestry, but also some less explicable cases of profile similarity (e.g., Estonia with Mexico; Indonesia with the United Kingdom). Interestingly, scale variances also exhibit geographical patterning, being larger in European and American cultures than in Asian and African cultures in both self-report and observer data (McCrae, 2002; McCrae et al., 2005b; Schmitt et al., 2007). Whether this finding supports the validity of profile comparisons depends on the cause of these differences in variability, which remains ambiguous. Substantive interpretations in terms of the greater homogeneity of traits in collectivistic cultures (Lee & Ottati, 1993), or East Asian dialectical thinking (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001), have been offered. However, artifactual interpretations in terms of cultural differences in response styles or data quality are also possible (Johnson, Kulesa, Cho, & Shavitt, 2005; McCrae & Sutin, 2007).

Sensible external correlates of country-level means provide another source of support for the validity of mean profiles. In addition to correlations with Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004), significant country-level correlations have been reported between Big Five scores and values, subjective well-being, organizational commitment, reliance on word-of-mouth for product information, and sociosexuality (Allik & McCrae, 2004b; Gelade, Dobson, & Gilbert, 2006; McCrae et al., 2005a; Mooradian & Swan, 2006; Schmitt et al., 2007). As Ashton (2007) noted, however, the scores on most of these variables were also based on aggregate self-ratings, so they may share any biases present in the personality ratings.

Finally, the meaningfulness of aggregate personality profiles is supported by the finding that country-level means are generalizable (i.e., highly correlated) across sex and age groups in both self-report and observer data (Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001; McCrae, 2001, 2002; McCrae et al., 2005b; Schmitt et al., 2007). Thus, the average cultural differences

that are observed with personality inventories – whatever their meaning – are reliably found across gender and age.

On the other hand, the limited convergence of country-level means obtained with different Big Five measures calls into question the substantive meaningfulness of the profiles. In the largest study, Schmitt et al. (2007) found that EPQ and BFI Neuroticism, but not Extraversion, converged to a moderate extent across cultures. Convergent correlations between the BFI and NEO-PI-R country means were only moderate in size (0.22–0.45), and there was evidence of poor discriminant validity, especially the 0.73 correlation between NEO-PI-R Extraversion and BFI Openness. Schmitt et al. (2007) discussed biases and measurement errors that might have reduced the convergent correlations, including slight differences in conceptualizations of the Big Five.

Cross-cultural psychologists have long noted various method and item biases that can reduce scalar equivalence, the level of equivalence needed for cross-cultural comparisons of mean scores. These include sampling biases, cultural differences in response styles or negative item bias (Allik, 2005; Grimm & Church, 1999; Johnson et al., 2005; Smith, 2004), differential familiarity with test materials, and items that are not equally relevant indicators of the respective personality constructs. For example, Huang, Church, and Katigbak (1997) found that many NEO-PI items exhibit differential item functioning (item bias) in comparisons of Americans and Filipinos. McCrae et al. (2005a) have suggested that item-level differences may cancel out at the facet or scale level, but more research is needed to test this assumption. Heine, Lehman, Peng, and Greenholtz (2002) have argued that reference group effects – the tendency for respondents to rate their own traits in comparison to cultural norms or other reference groups – will also confound cross-cultural comparisons. The extent to which reference group effects are a problem has itself generated controversy (Ashton, 2007; McCrae, Terracciano, Realo, & Allik, 2007a,b; Perugini & Richetin, 2007). A strong version of the effect (i.e., respondents rate themselves largely in reference to cultural norms) seems difficult to reconcile with the substantial mean differences found between cultures because it would presumably result in similar mean levels of scores in all cultures (McCrae et al., 2007b). However, a weaker version (i.e., respondents' ratings are influenced by comparisons with those with whom they typically interact) seems plausible and could impact the size of country-level differences (Ashton, 2007).

Finally, Terracciano et al. (2005) found that mean personality profiles are uncorrelated with ratings of the typical personality of the cultural group provided by informants in the respective cultures. Whether or not this supports the validity of mean personality profiles depends on the validity of the informants' ratings. Terracciano et al. (2005) have concluded that the informant ratings represent inaccurate national character stereotypes and have begun to investigate the culture-level determinants of such

stereotypes (McCrae et al., 2007a). Others have pointed out limitations of this research (e.g., college student samples, reference group effects) or argued that stereotypes are valid to some degree (e.g., Krueger & Wright, 2006; McGrath & Goldberg, 2006; Ottati & Lee, 1995). The basis for informants' ratings of typical traits in the Terracciano et al. study is not entirely clear and, presumably, most of the informants had no direct (e.g., cross-cultural) experience or basis for judging the traits of people in their own cultures relative to people in other cultures. In contrast, Church and Katigbak (2002) asked Filipinos and Americans who had lived in both the United States and the Philippines for at least 3 years (and generally much longer) to judge for each of the 30 NEO-PI-R facet traits, whether Filipinos or Americans would average higher or if they would average the same. The Filipino and American judges exhibited good agreement, but their judgments showed no overall agreement with the NEO-PI-R profile differences between American and Filipino samples. These results, plus my suspicion that at least some of the behaviors assessed by Western inventories are differentially relevant across cultures, reduce my confidence in the meaningfulness of mean profile comparisons across cultures, particularly when the mean differences are small.

In my view, the meaningfulness of mean profile comparisons across cultures remains unresolved. Bilingual test-retest studies (e.g., to test translation equivalence) and studies of differential item functioning would be informative, but are rare. To some extent, studies of immigrants might be able to address the question of whether mean profile differences have a cultural or genetic basis. For example, if the immigrant profiles begin to resemble those of the host culture over time, it would imply acculturation effects on personality (e.g., see McCrae, Yik, Trapnell, Bond, & Paulhus, 1998). In contrast, if mean profiles remain stable over generations and resemble those in cultures of origin, it would tend to support genetic interpretations. Some researchers have begun to explain the higher average Extraversion and Openness to Experience scores of immigrant groups, or Europeans and Americans, compared with Africans and Asians, in terms of selective emigration and resulting gene flow (Camperio Ciani, Capiluppi, Veronese, & Sartori, 2007; Olson, 2007). Direct assessment of trait-relevant behaviors, for example, in experience sampling or daily process studies, might also be useful in validating mean personality profiles, although behaviors, like inventory items, are also subject to cross-cultural equivalence issues (Church, Katigbak, Miramontes, del Prado, & Cabrera, 2007).

### **Importance and Role of the Trait Concept across Cultures**

Even more basic to personality psychology is controversy about the importance and role of the trait concept across cultures. Whereas Western psychologists have described traits as 'the core of personality' (McCrae & Costa, 1996) and as 'virtually required for a systematic understanding of

personality' (Johnson, 1997), some cultural psychologists question whether individuals in all cultures think of personality as an 'internal package of attributes' and expect traits to be less predictive of behavior than social roles, norms, or situational factors in collectivistic cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1998; Triandis, 1995). For example, Markus and Kitayama (1998) argued that different assumptions underlie conceptions of personality in cultures that are characterized by independent versus interdependent views of the self. The independent view of personality, which is thought to be most prevalent in Western countries, conceives of the person as 'an autonomous entity defined by a somewhat distinctive set of attributes, qualities, or processes' that cause behavior. In contrast, in the interdependent view of personality, which is most prevalent in Asian, African, and Latin American countries, the person is viewed as 'an interdependent entity who is part of an encompassing social relationship' and 'behavior is a consequence of being responsive to the others with whom one is interdependent' (Markus & Kitayama, 1998, p. 69).

Cultural psychologists expect traits and other personal attributes to be more salient aspects of self-concept in individualistic cultures, and social and collective attributes to be more salient in collectivistic cultures. del Prado et al. (2007) compiled the relevant studies and concluded that support for cultural psychology perspectives was qualified, with the most supportive studies involving comparisons of Americans with Japanese, Koreans, and Indians. Even then, although Americans tend to report more pure traits than Asians, Asians tend to report other personal attributes such as preferences, goals, interests, and activities more than Americans do (e.g., Dhawan, Roseman, Naidu, Thapa, & Rettek, 1995; Rhee, Uleman, Lee, & Roman, 1995). These results suggest that these cultural differences are due to differential tendencies to describe oneself in abstract terms (e.g., traits) versus more specific or concrete terms (e.g., preferences, goals, etc.), rather than cultural differences in self-construals (Kanagawa et al., 2001; Rhee et al., 1995). Importantly, results for collectivistic cultures outside Asia have generally failed to support cultural psychology hypotheses regarding the content of self-concepts (del Prado et al., 2007, Table 1). This suggests that cultural psychology predictions may apply more narrowly to Asian cultures than to collectivistic cultures in general.

Consistent with trait perspectives, Funder's (1995) Realistic Accuracy Model assumes that personality traits are real characteristics of individuals and posits that traits can be accurately inferred, presumably in all cultures, 'if the judge can manage to detect and correctly use behaviors that are relevant to the trait and available to his or her observation' (p. 658). Cultural psychologists have suggested, however, that trait inference will be more prevalent, and situational inference less so, in individualistic cultures, compared with collectivistic cultures (Choi, Dalal, Kim-Prieto, & Park, 2003; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Miller, 1984). Available evidence supports both trait and cultural psychology perspectives. Studies have shown that

people in collectivistic cultures, not just individualistic cultures, are susceptible to the correspondence bias, the tendency to infer that dispositions correspond to behavior (Choi & Nisbett, 1998); make spontaneous trait inferences (Knowles, Morris, Chiu, & Hong, 2001); and judge dispositional information to be relevant in causal judgments (Choi et al., 2003). At the same time, there is considerable evidence that people in individualistic cultures, compared with people in collectivistic cultures, make more frequent or stronger dispositional inferences and weaker contextual inferences, and are less sensitive to contextual information during causal attribution (Choi & Nisbett, 1998; Choi et al., 2003; Lee, Hallahan, & Herzog, 1996; Miller, 1984; Morris & Peng, 1994; Norenzayan, Choi, & Nisbett, 2002).

Although cross-cultural research on dispositional versus situational attributions seems fairly definitive, several limitations of this research can be noted. These include (a) the near-exclusive focus on comparisons of American and East Asian samples; (b) the failure to differentiate traits from other personal dispositions (e.g., preferences, interests) – which we saw was an important distinction in self-concept studies; (c) the significant gap between cultural psychology theory regarding the variables expected to mediate cultural differences – for example, implicit theories, self-construals, and dialectical thinking – and direct empirical tests of mediation (see, however, Choi et al., 2003); and (d) the fact that researchers have rarely investigated explanations of behaviors that participants actually encountered in their everyday experience. Lee et al. (1996) raised similar concerns about ‘how well attributions observed in artificial, reactive settings reflect what people spontaneously do when explaining meaningful, everyday events’ (p. 733).

Particularly important in evaluating the importance or role of traits across cultures is whether they exhibit cross-situational consistency and predictive validity. Cultural psychologists expect behavior to be less consistent across situations, and traits less predictive of behavior, in collectivistic cultures, where a conjoint (interdependent) model of agency is predominant and contextual factors are strong (Markus & Kitayama, 1998, 2003; Suh, 2002; Triandis, 1995). As Oishi, Diener, Scollon, and Biswas-Diener (2004) have noted, it is important to distinguish between relative and absolute consistency. For example, it would be possible for individuals to exhibit relative consistency (i.e., trait-like individual differences in behavior across situations; as quantified, for example, by correlation coefficients computed across individuals) while also exhibiting situational differences in the absolute amount or level of trait-relevant behavior.

Only a few studies have directly compared levels of consistency and predictive validity across cultures. In an experience sampling study, Oishi et al. (2004) found evidence of relative cross-situational consistency of affect in four cultural groups – supporting trait perspectives – but also cultural differences in absolute consistency, with Japanese, Hispanic Americans in California, and Asian Indian samples exhibiting greater within-individual

variability across situations than Americans in Illinois. Suh (2002) found substantial cross-role consistency in trait ratings in both Americans and Koreans, but Americans exhibited greater consistency than Koreans. English and Chen (2007) found that Asian Americans exhibited less consistency in trait ratings than European Americans across relationship situations, but not across situational contexts defined by location. In contrast, Church et al. (forthcoming) did not find a reliable pattern of greater cross-role consistency in trait ratings in individualistic cultures (United States and Australia) compared with collectivistic cultures (Mexico, Philippines, Malaysia, and Japan), although the sole East Asian culture (Japan) did tend to average lower consistency than the other cultural groups. In a cross-cultural comparison of predictive validity, Church et al. (2007) found that NEO-PI-R domain scores predicted the self-reported frequency of Big Five-related behaviors about equally well in the United States and Philippines.

If we assume that different raters encounter target individuals in different situations, then cross-cultural studies of interobserver agreement are relevant. Malloy, Albright, Díaz-Loving, Dong, and Lee (2004) found that Chinese, but not Mexicans, exhibited lower interobserver agreement in trait ratings than Americans. However, most studies have found comparable levels of interobserver agreement across cultures, a finding that is probably more consistent with trait perspectives than cultural psychology perspectives (Church et al., 2006; Heine & Renshaw, 2002; McCrae et al., 2004). In the view of trait psychologists (e.g., McCrae & Costa, 1996), the presence of substantial interobserver agreement provides particularly strong evidence for the value of the trait concept across cultures because it suggests that traits are real and observable in all cultural contexts. However, some cultural psychologists have attributed such agreement to the shared cognitive constructions and implicit theories of different observers within cultures (e.g., Shweder, 1975).

In summary, research on the importance of traits across cultures has provided support for both trait and cultural psychology perspectives. However, additional research is needed to determine whether cultural psychology predictions apply primarily to comparisons of Americans and East Asians, or to comparisons of individualistic and collectivistic cultures more generally. In addition, whereas self-concepts and causal attributions have been examined frequently across cultures, cross-cultural comparisons of cross-situational consistency and predictive validity have been rare, preventing definitive conclusions about cultural differences.

## **Suggestions for Future Research**

As evident from this review, the field of 'culture and personality' is thriving, as are its controversies. In this final section, I list some priority areas for research, some of which could not be addressed elsewhere in the article due to space considerations.

1. Research on how traits and other aspects of personality impact culture (e.g., see Lehman, Chiu, & Schaller, 2004).
2. Studies of how particular traits (e.g., Openness to Experience) constrain or channel the influence of culture on different individuals.
3. Cross-cultural studies of the behavioral manifestations of traits (e.g., Church et al., 2007).
4. Cross-cultural studies of life narratives, which may exhibit the strongest cultural effects (McAdams & Pals, 2006).
5. Studies of personality structure in less literate or educated samples, or in rural settings in less developed countries, where alternative assessment methods will be needed.
6. Cross-cultural studies with subsamples that vary in socio-economic status (e.g., see Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007).
7. Studies that measure and relate indigenous personality concepts (e.g., Japanese *amae*) to hypothesized universal dimensions (e.g., the Five-Factor Model).
8. The range of studies needed to determine the validity of cultural mean profiles, including immigrant and acculturation studies, studies of culture-level correlates, and investigations of response biases, self-presentation styles, and differential item and test functioning. A better understanding of personality scores across cultures might also be obtained by querying respondents about the basis for their individual item responses (e.g., What context, if any, did they envision when they answered a particular item? Who was the reference standard or group for their responses?)
9. Cross-cultural studies of self-enhancement bias that compare self-ratings of personality versus observer ratings as a criterion (e.g., see Church et al., 2006). Most cross-cultural studies have used methods (e.g., the better-than-average effect) that do not directly address the accuracy of typical personality assessments (Heine & Hamamura, 2007).
10. Cross-cultural investigations of more contextualized measures of personality, which may better capture the differential impact of situations on trait-relevant behaviors across cultures (e.g., see Heller, Watson, Komar, Min, & Perunovic, 2007).
11. Cross-cultural studies of cross-situational consistency and trait-behavior relations using experience sampling of daily behaviors.
12. Studies that examine 'if-then' patterns or behavioral signatures (Mischel, Shoda, & Mendoza-Denton, 2002) in the study of consistency across cultures (e.g., see English & Chen, 2007).
13. Cross-cultural studies of implicit theories, or lay beliefs, about the 'traitedness' versus contextuality of behavior (e.g., see Church et al., 2003, 2005).
14. Theory and research that better integrates evolutionary perspectives into the study of culture and personality (e.g., see Norenzayan, Schaller, & Heine, 2006). Recent work by Schmitt et al. in the International Sexuality Description Project (e.g., Schmitt et al., 2004), which incorporates

both the Five-Factor Model and constructs of interest to evolutionary psychologists, is promising in this regard.

15. Additional conceptual and empirical work on how best to measure dimensions of culture. The validity of available Likert-type measures is controversial. Cultural means frequently fail to correspond to theoretical expectations (Matsumoto, 1999; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002) and the measures may be even more subject to reference group effects and response styles than personality inventories because of their abstract nature (Heine et al., 2002; Oishi et al., 2005). Indeed, self-report measures may be too explicit (i.e., involving self-awareness and reflection) to measure cultural processes that are largely implicit or unconscious (Heine & Norenzayan, 2006; Matsumoto & Yoo, 2006).

Future research on these topics will contribute significantly to the resolution of current controversies in the study of personality across cultures. Furthermore, the variety of research needs and possibilities suggests that research on culture and personality is likely to flourish well into the future.

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## Short Biography

A. Timothy Church is a Professor of Counseling Psychology at Washington State University. His research interests include personality and its measurement across cultures, cross-cultural and indigenous psychology, and the integration of trait and cultural psychology perspectives in the study of personality across cultures. His recent publications on these topics have appeared in the *Journal of Research in Personality*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *European Journal of Personality*, and *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*. He received a BS degree in Mathematics from Lafayette College, an MS in Computer Science from the University of Wisconsin, and a PhD in Psychology from the University of Minnesota.

## Endnote

\* Correspondence address: Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling Psychology, Cleveland Hall, Washington State University, Pullman, WA 99164-2136, USA. Email: church@mail.wsu.edu

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