

Research explodes the myth of a 'West vs. Rest' cultural divide

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A major international research project led by a University of Sussex academic provides new evidence that the common belief in a cultural divide between the West and the rest of the world is little more than a myth.

Cultural psychologists have long argued that people living in Western cultures show a rather distinctive pattern of self-beliefs, compared to those who live in other parts of the world. Westerners, it is claimed, are unusual in that they tend to see themselves as independent from others. A sharp contrast between Western "independence" and non-Western "interdependence" has been at the heart of psychologists' thinking about cultural diversity for the last 25 years.

The new research, involving 73 researchers working in 35 nations and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (UK), explored how people of different cultures see themselves and their relationships with others. The research involved 10,000 participants from over 50 cultural groups spanning all inhabited continents.

The findings, just published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, reveal that the self-beliefs of members of Western cultural groups have much more in common with the rest of the world than was previously suggested, contradicting the generally accepted view of a "West versus the rest" divide in concepts of selfhood.

Simultaneously, the research reveals much more diversity among cultural

groups from different "non-Western" parts of the world than was previously acknowledged.

Dr Vivian Vignoles, Reader in Social Psychology at the University of Sussex, Principal Investigator of the Culture and Identity Research Network, and lead author on the project, explains:

"Self-perceptions influence our social relationships, health and lifestyle choices, community engagement, political actions, and ultimately our own and others' well-being.

"Our new research provides a much richer and more accurate picture of cultural diversity in self-perceptions than was previously available. It shows that when we label a cultural group as 'individualist' or 'collectivist', this can lead us to make a lot of false assumptions about how people in that group will see themselves, and so we may wrongly predict how they might respond to our communications or interventions.

"Our findings suggest that members of Western cultures tend to view themselves as more self-directed, unique and self-expressive than those from some, but not all other parts of the non-western world, and they do not typically view themselves as more self-interested or self-reliant. Western cultural groups are not an 'exception' but form part of the kaleidoscope of [cultural diversity](#).

"Cultural groups in other parts of the world have distinct models of selfhood that are poorly reflected by previous models of culture and self-perceptions. In fact, the prevailing cultural models of selfhood in Middle Eastern, East Asian, Sub-Saharan African or Latin American world regions are at least as different from each other as they each are from the Western model."

The new findings will help researchers to understand better how

psychological processes vary in different parts of the world. In future they could help practitioners to engage more effectively with members of diverse cultural communities; whether in business and trade, health promotion, international conflict resolution or development.

More information: Beyond the 'East-West' dichotomy: Global variation in cultural models of selfhood. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*,. 145(8), 966-1000. www.apa.org/pubs/journals/feat...s/xge-xge0000175.pdf

Provided by University of Sussex

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