

NATIONAL CHARACTER

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NORMAN BUCKLEY normanb@redfieldconsulting.com

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The concept of National Character has been of huge interest for generations. From literature to pop psychology and through to learned research people have struggled to determine whether there is such a thing and if there is then what does it mean? Is it helpful or does it do little more than strengthen prejudice and justify actions which can extend as far as genocide (Rwanda) or war. It is beyond this paper to determine the origins of National Character or Aggregate Personality (a term used for example in McRae and Terracciano's significant 2005 paper¹) or even Modal Personality as described by Inkeles². Nor is it our intention to explore the possibility of different personality structures in different cultures. Fanny Cheung³ in Hong Kong has explained this very well as have others in the Netherlands and Hungary. Our intention was to determine whether, using a common measure available in multiple languages, we could identify meaningful differences in factor saturation and to see whether they can help explain the way we live.

MEASURES

Our personality instrument was Facet5. Facet5 is a 5 factor model with 13 sub-factors first published in January 1990. Facet5 is web based and available in 29 languages. It has proven popular with global organisations because of its practical design and application. The Facet5 factors are:

WILL

Characteristics include Dominance, Assertiveness and Independence. It is similar to the 16PF 2nd order Factor of Independence. Such a Character can also be Stubborn, Argumentative and Authoritarian.

The scales are bipolar so the opposite character is Flexible, Accommodating and Democratic.

ENERGY

This is similar to the general interpretation of Extraversion as being Enthusiastic, Sociable, Adaptable. Introverts are therefore Quiet, Private and Discreet.

AFFECTION

This aligns with the non-g elements of Openness and the concepts of Altruism, Support and Trust. The opposite pole is Task Oriented, Critical, Sceptical. It can also be linked to a People vs Task orientation.

CONTROL

Largely a conscientiousness factors loading on Discipline and Prudence. Creativity and Disinhibition link to the low end of this scale.

EMOTIONALITY

Similar to classic Neuroticism but more broadly defined in line with concepts of self-worth, self-esteem and Judge's construct of Core Self Evaluation. The high end is reactive and intense while the low end is stable and self-assured.

Although Facet5 also contains 13 sub-factors (facets) all calculations were carried out at the main factor level.

SAMPLE

We extracted approximately 50000 cases from our database de-identifying them but retaining other demographic data including the completion language and the location. After cleaning and selecting for sample size we had data from 22 countries. Structural equivalence for these different language versions was established previously. This analysis used raw scores to avoid loss of variance due to standardization.

ANALYSIS

A 1-way ANOVA of the data showed significant differences across every factor although a test of effect size (η^2) showed that the differences for Affection, Control and Emotionality were the strongest.

MEAN DIFFERENCES

The mean differences across these factors were:

WILL

Germany, Holland and the US are at the Dominant, Assertive and Independent end. Hong Kong, Japan and Korea come out as more Accommodating and Democratic.

ENERGY

Here Norway and Ireland lead the pack of exuberant fun lovers just ahead of Netherlands, UK, Brazil and Australia. The Asian trio of HK, Singapore and Korea are much more reserved and private. Note that China moves to the centre of the group.

AFFECTION

China now moves to the top with Ireland, Australia and Canada close behind. They all come out as altruistic, helpful and trusting. The tough, pragmatic group include the Hungarians, Dutch and Germans. These differences are significant and are thought to be of moderate importance (η^2).

CONTROL

Control has the largest range with India, Greece and Malaysia as the most conservative and prudent and with Australia following up and taking its Asian responsibilities seriously.

Scandinavians are all more free spirited along with Germany and Japan and prepared to object on principle if told to do something. They will always question and challenge the rules. The Dutch on the other hand do not know there are any rules. Now the inclusion of Japan at the low end may raise some eyebrows. It did for me. Surely the stereotype of Japan is of a regimented, conservative and rule bound place. But not so say those who work in and with Japanese companies. Apparently they are known to stick rigidly to the rules they like, and to ignore those that are a bit inconvenient!

Control has the largest effect size so if there are behavioural differences you would expect to find them here. So which country was it that felt inclined, in the spirit of tolerance and freedom to allow a hippy commune to establish itself in the middle of its capital and to continue to exist relatively unmolested. Delhi? Athens? Kuala Lumpur, Canberra? I don't think so. Copenhagen? No problem.

And which country had the idea to reduce traffic accidents not by more rules but by removing all the rules completely? Australia? You're joking. We have rules about rules. Netherlands come on down. Welcome to Makkinga in Western Frisia. Now other small towns are trying it but which country was it that thought this was such a brilliant idea that they implemented it in Bohmte with its 13,500 inhabitants? Well done Germany. It fits neatly with the philosophy of unrestricted autobahns.

EMOTIONALITY

The most self-assured and confident nations appear to be the Dutch, Norwegians and Germans with the Australians and Irish not far behind. They all have a noticeable assuredness. But could this spill over into smug self-satisfaction? Well it could if you are Korean, Japanese or from Hong Kong. Or even Hungarian, Brazilian and Lithuanian. All these are less self satisfied. So when Australia tells Japan that it must stop whaling (eating whale meat is thought to date to the Jomon Period – 8000-3000 BC so it's hardly a new idea.) we see their reluctance as unreasonable and their response as overreaction. Could it be us who have failed to see the importance of the issue to a more Emotional country?

SIMILAR COUNTRIES

To check for countries that are behaviourally/culturally similar we performed a simple hierarchical cluster analysis across the five factors. You can see that quick as a flash it found the UK and NZ to be neatly twinned. They are very similar in style which given the ancestry of much of NZ may not be surprising. Australia and Ireland show alike profiles again reflecting early migration patterns. Australia received a large proportion of Britain's unwanted Irish political prisoners (and criminals).

Brazil and Greece show similarities as do Hong Kong and Korea. And so the steady agglomeration of countries goes on. India and Malaysia are more like each other than they are like anybody else. Last ones through the gate are the Japanese. So when a Japanese says "we're different" he may be right. They share our common personality constructs but they put them together in a unique way.

SNAPSHOTS

In Facet5 we have a convenient way of displaying group data that we call a Snapshot. A Snapshot reduces an overall profile to a single data point and helps to show trends and patterns in groups.

From this Snapshot the similarity between Germany and Netherlands is obvious. Same for Australia and Ireland and New Zealand and the UK. But how come Japan isn't grouped in with those two? They look similar. It's because a Snapshot uses only four of the five factors. Emotionality is left out. It's this dimension that moves Japan away from the other two.

CONVERGENT VALIDITY

Convergent validity refers to the degree to which our data is similar to other research findings. To test this part we collected freely available national data for 7 measures:

ROSENBERG'S SELF ESTEEM INDEX

Rosenberg⁴ created a 12 item measure to evaluate feelings of self worth which has been used extensively in global research. As a result data was available for most of our countries. We would expect it to relate to Emotionality since this embodies a sense of self worth. And it does. The correlation of -0.68 suggests that lower levels of Emotionality links to a greater Self Esteem. However we also had contributions from Will and Energy indicating that Determined, Outgoing and confident countries have a pretty good impression of themselves. Germany, the US and the Netherlands meet this picture. Conversely Hong Kong, Korea and Japan are more self doubting.

ENGAGEMENT

The concept of corporate engagement is rapidly gaining currency as its link to hard measures such as staff turnover and profit is demonstrated. Hewitt Associates⁵ define Engagement as "The state in which individuals are emotionally and intellectually committed to the organisation or group". We found modest links to Facet5, most strongly for Control but also for Affection. A larger sample is needed to confirm this but the implication is clear. Countries with a stronger sense of social justice (Affection and Control together) are more likely to feel more engaged. They are more likely to Say good things about their employer, Stay longer and Strive to do better.

HOFSTEDE'S CULTURE MEASURES

Gert Hofstede⁶ is frequently quoted in the realm of National Character. Building on original work in IBM he identified five cultural dimensions which are used to describe the way a country goes about its business.

POWER – DISTANCE

This related to not only the equality of distribution of power in a country but also to its implicit acceptance by the populace. It leads to an Elitist society as opposed to a more Egalitarian one. Malaysians and Chinese show this strongly whereas the Dutch and Norwegians are more Egalitarian. The combination of Control with low Energy (Introversion) and high Emotionality contributes to an Elitist view.

INDIVIDUAL VS COLLECTIVE

Hofstede shows the US, Australia and the UK to be the most Individualistic of countries. In such countries it's every person for themselves. Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaysia are more Collective. High Will, high Energy and low Emotionality contribute to this Individualistic outlook.

MASCULINE VS FEMININE

In Japan and Hungary they tend to believe that society roles are gender specific i.e. there are jobs that blokes do and jobs that shielas do! In Norway and Denmark it is much more evenly spread. We don't have strong Facet5 links for this dimension. The only significant link was for Emotionality. One known characteristic of high Emotionality is a tendency to stick to what they know and to avoid the risk associated with change. However if there is a global shift from gender specific to non-gender specific roles then the level of Emotionality would be likely to influence the rate of this change rather than the change itself. Perhaps the Hofstede numbers for our high Emotionality countries should be re-examined in the years to come.

UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE

This is the degree to which people accept complexity and ambiguity in their lives. Countries which are intolerant of uncertainty (Greece, Japan and Korea) like to have simple, self-evident truths.

Tolerant countries (Singapore, Denmark, Hong Kong) accept that the world is a complicated place and you can't expect too much clarity.

It appears to be linked to a combination of low Affection and high Emotionality. We know that low Affection likes things to be clear cut (as opposed to a tendency of high Affection to be somewhat muddle headed). When we add in the resistance to change associated with high Emotionality this intolerance becomes a search for accuracy and precision. Could this be why Japan and Korea frequently win awards for quality in technology.

Not sure where this leaves the Greeks. Is there a latent high technology industry here? Perhaps other factors will kick in to prevent it.

LONG TERM ORIENTATION

Most Asian countries (China, Japan, Hong Kong) are thought to take a long term view of things whereas countries like Norway, the UK, Germany and Australia tend to see things more urgently. This is linked to low Will, low Energy and high Emotionality. Such countries prefer to take time over decisions rather than jump in and are slower to adopt radical change. The Emotionality also adds a level of caution and hesitancy to their business process.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC MEASURES

So far we see that the results of the Facet5 data are in keeping with other measures of psychological constructs. It provides a form of Construct Validity but does little to explain the relevance to the real world. To do this we went to relatively hard socio-economic measures. We chose five:

GINI

The GINI ratio (Corrado Gini – 1884 – 1965) is a measure of the equality of distribution of wealth in a country. The GINI index⁷ is the GINI ratio expressed as a percentage with low scores indicating a more even distribution, high scores an unequal distribution.

The spread of wealth in a country appears to be related to Will, Energy, Control and Emotionality. All contribute. Countries that are more process oriented, modest and less self assured are more likely to have greater inequality. So in Brazil, Hong Kong, China, Malaysia and the US the rich are very rich and the poor very poor. In Denmark, Netherlands, Germany and Norway, countries which are more assertive, independent, confident and free spirited, wealth is more evenly spread. You might argue that these places are more egalitarian and libertarian and for a long time have had strong socialist governments. It will be interesting to see where Sweden falls on our list.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX (HDI)

The HDI⁸ is an index that combines measures of life expectancy, literacy, educational attainment, and GDP per capita. It should be noted that two of these measures (GDP per capita and Life Expectancy) are calculated separately which means that there will be an element of redundancy in this measure.

Our data suggests that the main driver for this is low Control. Countries that are less restrictive and more supportive of individual freedom put more effort into human development. So India, China and Brazil go to the bottom of the list while Norway, Canada and Ireland go to the top.

PRESS FREEDOM

Reporters Without Borders⁹ is an active professional body dedicated to the defense and monitoring of free speech around the world. They produce an index for each country by asking correspondents, journalists, researchers, jurists and human rights activists, to complete a 52 item questionnaire about the state of press freedom in their country. There are 167 countries in the survey and the results produce values ranging from 0.5 (places like Denmark, Netherland, Ireland and Norway) to 107 for North Korea. The USA ranks 22nd, the UK 28th and Australia 41st. The lower the value, the freer the press.

Control is the strongest contributor to this index but Energy comes close. China, Singapore, India and Malaysia are all restrictive and manage their press closely. Denmark, Norway and Netherlands are very free. This could explain why a Danish paper (Jyllands-Posten) asked a group of Danish cartoonists to draw the Prophet Mohammed as they saw him. They then had no hesitation about publishing the witty contributions.

It might also explain why, when the paper (and the cartoonists) were attacked for their efforts it was the Dutch who were among the first to leap to the Danes' defense. And it was they who republished the cartoons to prove that they couldn't be pushed around and would not bow to pressure.

GDP PER CAPITA¹⁰

This measure is very widely used and understood even if not everyone agrees about what it means or whether it stands as a measure of happiness. It is a measure of a country's wealth. So who are the rich guys? And why?

Our results showed a single clear link to low Control. Countries such as Norway, the US and Ireland are all very wealthy compared to India, China, Bulgaria and Brazil. They are also, mostly, more free thinking and creative. Emotionality comes close suggesting that self-assuredness may also be a contributor to economic performance.

As the chart shows there are some big residuals as well. The US is the wealthiest country but it is actually somewhat higher on Control. Netherlands is very low Control but it is not as wealthy as Denmark, Norway or Hong Kong.

LIFE EXPECTANCY¹¹

So who lives the longest? Japan's longevity is legendary but Hong Kong's is similar. Less well known is Australia at No.3 with Canada close behind.

Again low Control seems to contribute generally but Australia messes it up a bit by being quite high Control. It's the multiple r that gives the game away. The regression equation, while weighting low Control heavily, also factors in a bit of low Will, a bit of low Emotionality and a bit of high Affection. Put it together and you get a fairly easy going, self-effacing and relaxed group. And this converts to longer life. The Indians, Bulgarians, Brazilians try

too hard and beat themselves up about it. Of course in India's case there might easily be some significant economic, nutritional and health issues to consider.

SUMMARY

This study was prompted by a steady stream of enquiries from clients. They wanted to know what differences we found working with different nationalities. There were two reasons for the question. The first was from organisations that wanted to know how they should approach a particular market. Were the differences sufficient to warrant a different strategy? The second (much more common one) was from people working with multi-cultural teams. So a Malaysian shipping company would have Americans, British, Dutch, Singapore Chinese and Malays working together. And the Singaporeans all seemed to have low Will. So what do we do?

To answer the first one, there do seem to be some different National Characters and the ANOVA suggests these differences are real. The biggest differences were on Control and Emotionality. Of the 12 measures we chose Control was related to 7. Emotionality was related to 7 and Energy to 5. Will was related to 4 and Affection to 2.

So if you are trying to build a business in a foreign clime these country differences are significant and some are important. You cannot open a paper without seeing reference to the emerging economies of China and India. Pundits tell us they are the source of future world development and possibly the saviours of the western economies. So we need strategies to approach them and they need to be strategies that are appropriate. The typical Western European way is to charge in with a deal that can't be refused. The US puts a deal on the table but wraps it up in a bit more process and regulation. Meanwhile our "saviours" need more consultation, more consideration and a less "in your face" style. In China's case we also need to show respect for the people involved and take time to get to know them. Both have more Control than a lot of European countries so will want more assurance, references and history. They value tradition and this should not be ignored.

On this basis the UK is probably better equipped to work with India and China (although there could be an element of short termism from low Control) than assertive and dominant Germany. The US is pretty well set but needs to learn patience and humility. Australia is actually quite comfortable sharing a conservative approach with an emphasis on fairness. It must avoid projecting too much of a smug self-satisfied manner. Oh – and it really would help to learn Mandarin.

The second question is different. What do you do with a multi-cultural team? Let's remember our ANOVA. We've looked at the Within Group SS and the Between Group SS and with the help of SPSS declared that there's enough here to say "hey – they're different". We've even roped in the Cohens to help us say "and some of these differences are important!" But let's not lose sight of the fact that the Within Group SS is still way bigger than the Between Group SS. The difference between individuals is much

bigger than the difference between Countries. So a shy Chinese person is still shy even though he's Chinese. And switching the norms doesn't make him less so. A belligerent Dutchman is still belligerent and switching the norms isn't going to change that. So for multi-cultural groups it is how they compare to each other than matters, not how they compare to the people in their village, town or country.

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