

Find a Therapist (City or Zip)

Verified by Psychology Today



**Robert N. McCauley Ph.D.**  
[Why Religion Is Natural and Science Is Not](#)

## The Weirdest Minds in the World

People in open, wealthy, technologically advanced societies have atypical minds.

Posted Sep 27, 2020



Source: wikimedia commons

In the second half of the twentieth century, members of foreign missions to the United Nations headquarters in New York, by virtue of their diplomatic immunity, did not have to pay parking fines. Two economists, Raymond Fisman and Edward Miguel, studied the distribution of more than 150,000 parking citations, which had been issued to diplomats of various member-countries' missions, that went unpaid between 1997 and 2002.

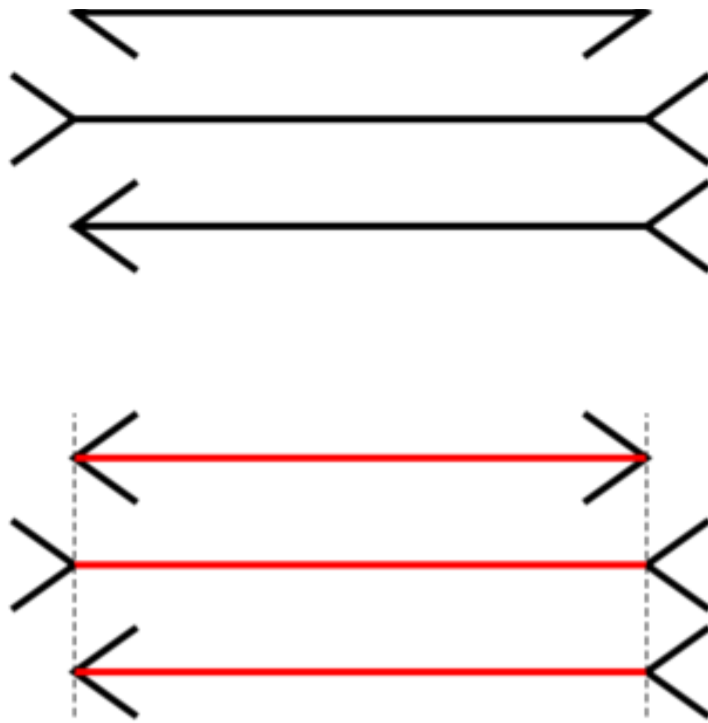
They discovered a fascinating pattern. Some countries' delegations (e.g., Bulgaria) had accumulated more than a hundred tickets *per diplomatically immune employee*, while others' delegations (e.g., Australia) had *no* tickets, let alone any unpaid ones. What they found was that independent measures of corruption in the various countries correlated with the numbers of their diplomats' unpaid parking tickets, even when they controlled for a variety of potentially relevant factors, such as countries' relative wealth.

Finally, in 2002 the city started enforcing parking citations issued to the diplomats. If they had more than three violations, the city's officers seized their diplomatic license plates. As expected, violations dropped dramatically, but representatives from countries plagued by rampant corruption *still* accumulated the most tickets.

In his wonderfully engaging and ambitious new book, [The WEIRDest People in the World](#), Joe Henrich argues that parking lawfully and paying the fines associated with any parking tickets that you do receive is a WEIRD thing to do. It is the kind of thing that people who live in *Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic* societies, do. Henrich's new book aims to explain the origins of WEIRD cognition and behavior, which he, Steven Heine, and Ara Norenzayan described at length in their [landmark paper](#) on this topic a decade ago.

### WEIRD People are... Well... Weird

Their central thesis is not just that WEIRD people are different from other people in this way or that, but that most of the available empirical research indicates that WEIRD people not only differ from other humans on *multiple* psychological fronts but that they are *often extreme outliers*. Henrich and his colleagues survey research across a wide array of psychological functions and capacities. These include such things as spatial reasoning, categorization, inductive inference, moral reasoning, sense of fairness, styles of reasoning, self-concepts and associated motivations, and willingness to cooperate, especially with strangers.



Source: wikicommons

differently from other people. Full disclosure—among the evidence they cite for this conclusion is a [paper on which Henrich and I collaborated](#) examining studies showing that people in WEIRD societies are more susceptible to the [Müller-Lyer illusion](#) than are non-WEIRD people. This was based on research across seventeen cultures, which showed that American participants were substantially more susceptible to the Müller-Lyer illusion than participants from any of the other sixteen cultures and as much as twenty-times more susceptible to the illusion than were, for example, the San of southern Africa.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT

### Skewed Psychological Findings?

These and dozens of other findings about the psychological distinctiveness of WEIRD populations raise a point of concern about contemporary experimental psychology. Henrich notes that, although their paper sounded the alarm bell a decade ago, more than 90 percent of participants in experimental studies in the social and behavioral sciences continue to hail from WEIRD societies. (Not only that, they come overwhelmingly from the *undergraduate populations* of the major research universities of North America and northern Europe.)

Researchers' assumptions that these studies offer evidence about *human* psychology, as opposed to evidence only about WEIRD (late adolescent) psychology, appear questionable. The whole point of Henrich and his colleagues' work is that WEIRD populations are decidedly *not representative* of the psychological makeup of our species in general.

If Henrich and his colleagues are right about the atypicality of the psychology of WEIRD people, then that would seem to call for a substantial increase in *cross-cultural* psychological experimentation. That observation occasions two final points. First, carrying out psychological experiments effectively across cultures will require *teams* of researchers, including cultural anthropologists, and retraining all-around, as psychologists learn about ethnography and anthropologists learn about the tools and methods of experimental psychologists. Second, from its origins in the 1990s, no field has pursued such projects any more assiduously than have researchers in the cognitive science of religion.

### References

- Fisman, R. and Miguel, E. (2007). Corruption, norms, and legal enforcement: Evidence from diplomatic parking tickets. *Journal of Political Economy* 115 (6), 1020-1048.
- Henrich, Joseph. (2020). *The WEIRDEST People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux.
- Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., and Norenzayan, A. (2010). "The Weirdest People in the World?" *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33 (2-3), 61-83, commentaries and replies 83-135.