

What could Europeans learn from the culture of Sub-Saharan Africa? Ubuntu compared to W.E.I.R.D.

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<https://www.uni-koblenz.de/de/universitaet/struktur/leitung/claudia-quaiser-pohl>

Introduction

Would you please so kind as to imagine the following sceneries:

1. In Sub Saharan Africa: An African medium aged man meets incidentally at a small bus stop another medium aged unknown European.

What normally or very likely will happen?

Introduction

2. The same situation with a Sub Saharan African and a European, but in Europe, let's say Germany.

What normally or very likely will happen?

Introduction

3. A European and a Sub Saharan woman, both of almost low economic status got each a lot of money by chance.

European woman: What normally or very likely will happen?

Sub -Saharan woman: What normally or very likely will happen?

Are there differences?

My sources of assumptions, knowledge and evidence

1. In the year 2013 we initiated a workshop in Nairobi with scientists of two Kenyan universities and members of institutions (like the top manager of an international car company) in order to get more information about the differences between W.E.I.R.D. behaviour and Ubuntu behaviour. We developed papers, got a funding from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) and had meetings in Nairobi and in Koblenz (Germany). Unfortunately, the analyses of the research studies has not been concluded to date, but some interim results are remarkable (s. Arasa et al., Kariuki et al., Mwiti et al., presentations on the occasion of the PAPU Congress in Durban 2017).

W.E.I.R.D.

The Western ethics, could be named by the term W.E.I.R.D. (Henrich et al, 2010), shortly describes some basic aspects: **W stands for Western, E for educated, I for industrialized, R for rich and D for democratic.**

The term W.E.I.R.D. has a connotation, because the word “weird” means strange, odd or curious. The authors Henrich et al. show that the usual descriptions of human behaviour is not universal, most of the studies ignore the diversity around the globe. Henrich et al. showed after analyzing very many studies from up to 16 regions around the world about behaviour, performances and human actions **that there are e.g. big variances in the field of visual perception, in decision-making, in reasoning, spatial cognition, punishment and cooperation, self-concepts.**

I think, that are a lot of differences and of contrasts as well.

That means that Western behaviour can't be regarded as universal, although one important model of personality facets claims for it. This model is well known under the denomination Five Factor Model (FFM) and is also called the Big Five personality model. This model (Costa & McCrae, 1992, 2014) assumes personality properties like **conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness, extraversion and neuroticism.**

Each property is categorized on a scale from positive to negative values. The researchers of this model developed the Five Factor Model of personality by gathering all denominations of human behaviour which they could find in dictionaries. The lexical based procedure of a factor analysis led to these five factors.

Separation of power, but robust

Western culture stands for individuality and competition, which lead to seeking for efficiency, power and influence, but also for concord with others forced and guided by democratic and by robust institutional and judicial procedures in our Western countries.

Germans/Europeans and Sub-Saharan Africans

It is likely and as known so far the behaviour of Germans/Europeans and that of Sub Saharan African individuals could differ: That doesn't mean a difference in value, because every specific behaviour produces some advantages and some disadvantages concerning a specific situation.

In Sub Saharan countries a shift **from collectivism to individualism** in terms of coping styles has been observed, mainly in urban areas. Dependence on each other is still the norm in most (rural) Africa. It also reappears when one is in trouble or needs social/ emotional/financial assistance even in an urban environment.

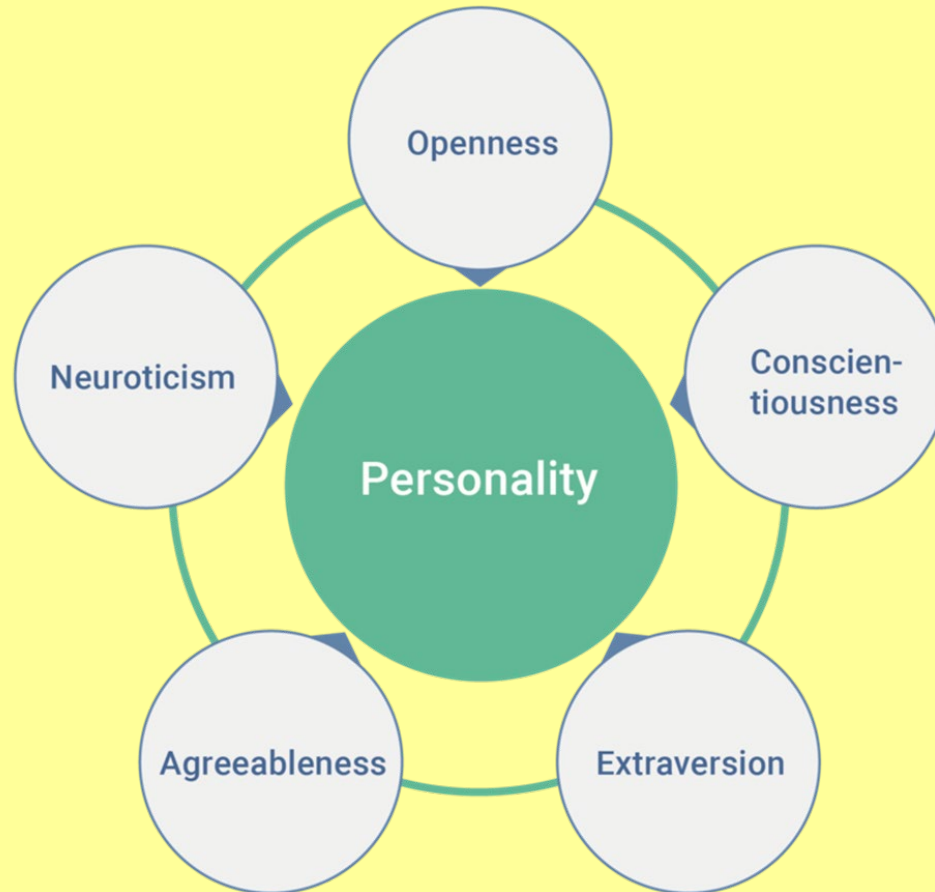
Structure of personality

Science has to describe and to explain phenomena. Aggregation of data shows the underlying structure of phenomena and the connections between components of the structure.

An important research group (Costa & McCrae, 1992, 2104) about the structure of personality delivered five factors.

Recent studies show that this structure represents predominately Western people.

Personality structure: Five Factor Model (Costa & McCrae)



Factor: Openness to experience inventive/curious vs. consistent/cautious

Appreciation for art, emotion, adventure, unusual ideas, curiosity, and variety of experience.

Individuals with **high openness** are said to pursue self-actualization specifically by seeking out intense, euphoric experiences.

Conversely, those with **low openness** seek to gain fulfillment through perseverance and are characterized as pragmatic and data-driven, sometimes even perceived to be dogmatic and closed-minded.

Factor: Conscientiousness efficient/organized vs. easy-going/careless

High conscientiousness is often perceived as stubbornness and obsession.

Low conscientiousness is associated with flexibility and spontaneity, but can also appear as sloppiness and lack of reliability.[6]

Factor: Extraversion outgoing/energetic vs. solitary/reserved

High extraversion is often perceived as attention-seeking, and domineering in social situations.

Low extraversion causes a reserved, reflective personality, which can be perceived as aloof or self-absorbed, shy and reserved.

Factor: Agreeableness friendly/compassionate vs. challenging/detached

High agreeableness shows compassionate cooperative and well tempered behaviour, but is often seen as naive or submissive.

Low agreeableness personalities are often competitive or challenging people, which can be seen as argumentativeness or untrustworthiness.

Factor: Neuroticism

sensitive/nervous vs. secure/confident

The tendency to experience unpleasant emotions easily, such as anger, anxiety, depression, and vulnerability.

High neuroticism results in **emotional instability** and **low impulse control** and **insecure behaviour**.

There is a high need for seeking stability.

Neurotic people can appear as dynamic/hectic.

Low neuroticism is referred to **emotional stability**.

What Ubuntu is about?

Ubuntu is a Nguni Bantu term meaning "humanity". It is often also translated as "**humanity towards others**" and "the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity".

The term Ubuntu appears in South African sources from as early as the mid-19th century. Translations covered the semantic field of "**human nature, humanness, humanity; virtue, goodness, kindness**".

From the 1970s, the Ubuntu began to be described as a specific kind of "**African humanism**".

The sense of Ubuntu is widely spread

- Ubuntu is widely spread in East and South Africa and seems to be important for commercial and business behaviour (Karsten & Illa 2006). There are similar ethics like teranga in Senegal or hunhu or ubukhosi in Zimbabwe (Karsten, 2006, p. 70). In Malawi, the same philosophy is called "uMunthu".
- You can discover Ubuntu behaviour in West Africa, as well.
- From Zimbabwe, the concept was taken over in South Africa in the 1990s as a guiding ideal for the transition from apartheid to majority rule. The term appears in the Epilogue of the Interim Constitution of South Africa (1993), "there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for Ubuntu but not for victimisation".

Personality factors in the Ubuntu region

Unfortunately, there are no in-depth-studies on the Ubuntu related personality factors, but there remarkable results from a study in South Africa (SAPI), which included the majority, i.e non-white people.

According to the recent research from South Africa SAPI group (Fetvadjiev, V. H., Meiring, D., et al., 2015) six instead of five facets or personality factors were found.

South African personality structure according to the SAPI study 2015

These six factors (the authors called them facets) are:

- **1. positive social-related factor,**
- **2. negative social-related factor,**
- **3. neuroticism,**
- **4. extraversion,**
- **5. conscientiousness,**
- **6. openness.**

(In the order of importance)

Social relations: very important

The social related functions are very important, because they found two new, almost independent factors:

1. positive social-related factor (**congruent** with Ubuntu) and
2. negative social-related factor (**opposing** Ubuntu).

Supposed differences McCrae- and the Meiring-model (SAPI)

Personality factors according to FFM	shown in W.E.I.R.D. behaviour	shown in Ubuntu behaviour
Openness to experience	more	
Conscientiousness	equally	equally
Extraversion		more
Agreeableness		more
Neuroticism	more	
Personality factor according to Meiring facets		
positive social-related factor		more
negative social-related factor	more	

Supposed differences between W.E.I.R.D. regions and Ubuntu regions according to the workshop results and the findings of our pilot studies

a) More group orientation and less individualism (more collectivistic) in Ubuntu regions compared to W.E.I.R.D. regions,

Supposed differences

b) Higher claims on their reference groups (e.g. tribes) in Ubuntu regions compared to W.E.I.R.D. regions,

Supposed differences

c) Stronger trust on higher powers (e.g. divinities, faith) in Ubuntu regions compared to W.E.I.R.D. regions,

Supposed differences

d) The relevance of self-efficacy (Bandura, 19977) is supposed to be different in Ubuntu regions compared to W.E.I.R.D. regions. Individuals who have a high self-efficacy expectation of themselves will be better in acting and perform more endurance to reach a certain aim.

Less belief in their action in person (e.g. less belief in their self-efficacy and a different self-evaluation in terms of reliance on others) in Ubuntu regions compared to W.E.I.R.D. regions

Supposed differences

e) More soulfulness, in Ubuntu regions compared to W.E.I.R.D. regions

Supposed differences

f) More patience (resilience) with difficult situations in Ubuntu regions compared to W.E.I.R.D. regions,

Supposed differences

g) More expressiveness in Ubuntu regions compared to W.E.I.R.D. regions.

Supposed differences

h) Less mindfulness towards their own emotions in Ubuntu regions compared to W.E.I.R.D. regions,

Supposed differences

i) A different perspective on work-life resp.
work-family balance,

We should take these aspects into account to find more evidence and a better understanding of cross-cultural differences.

My opinion:

What W.E.I.R.D. people should and could learn from the Ubuntu people

My recommendations would like to improve Western behaviour.

My recommendations will lead to more comfortable, more successful and less dangerous personal and societal actions.

What Westerners should and could learn and what they should keep

a) More group orientation and less individualism (more collectivism) in Ubuntu regions compared to W.E.I.R.D. regions.

Westerners should limit their individualism to a certain extent, i.e. individualism should not be used to turn and to keep other people down. Individualism is needed for good performances and inventions, but should not lead to aggressiveness.

What Westerners should and could learn and what they should keep

b) Higher claims on their reference groups (e.g. tribes) in Ubuntu regions compared to W.E.I.R.D. regions.

In Western regions the biological reference groups are replaced by formal groups, e.g. the institutions of the state, which are made responsible by law and have to act formally. But reference groups in Ubuntu regions are able to provide more compassion and empathy. They can act flexible according to the actual conditions of the individual.

Westerners should have more reference groups which are able to act flexible with compassion and empathy.

What Westerners should and could learn and what they should keep

c) Stronger trust on higher powers (e.g. divinities, faith) in Ubuntu regions compared to W.E.I.R.D. regions.

Westerners could benefit from trusting on higher powers, i.e. to experience those powers and to belief in divinities, e.g. God. Such trust might discharge a person who may belief to be responsible for all incidents and developments.

What Westerners should and could learn and what they should keep

The relevance of self-efficacy is supposed to be different in Ubuntu regions compared to W.E.I.R.D. regions. Individuals who have a high self-efficacy expectation of themselves will be better in acting and perform more endurance to reach a certain aim.

I think Ubuntu-people should get more motivation to feel their personal self-efficacy. They should get a strong belief in their own self-efficacy and in their success.

Westerners sometimes have a strong belief in their own self-efficacy. A strong belief in the own self-efficacy sometimes leads to very strenuous and troublesome situations, because you try to force procedures and can't stop your efforts. Sometimes it yields in desperate consequences. Some Westerners overexert themselves and get exhausted when seeking for the feeling of self-efficacy running into a so-called burnout.

Westerners should learn to limit such efforts or should learn to change a better method of working and of acting.

What Westerners should and could learn and what they should keep

d) A more reality orientated belief in the effectivity of their actions (e.g. less belief in their self-efficacy and a different self-evaluation in terms of reliance on others) in Ubuntu regions compared to W.E.I.R.D. regions.

The higher belief of Westerners in their self-efficacy is a very necessary precondition for success and economic and technical development. They should keep this belief.

What Westerners should and could learn and what they should keep

e) More soulfulness in Ubuntu regions compared to W.E.I.R.D. regions.

Westerners should enhance their soulfulness, because too much people tend to feel unhappy, lonesome and undervalued. If they would gain more soulfulness there wouldn't be less need to be jealous or to fight against others.

What Westerners should and could learn and what they should keep

f) More patience (resilience) with difficult situations in Ubuntu regions compared to W.E.I.R.D. regions.

Many or most Westerners live on a comfortable level and grew up without having experience with serious problems, maybe they were raised overprotected with the consequence of having no techniques for problem solving. They merely long for good solutions. If they would be embedded in an emotionally positive reference group and had experienced problem solving from different people and they had been integrated in problem solving procedures they could gain more patience and resilience, i.e. more stability and hope.

What Westerners should and could learn and what they should keep

g) More expressiveness in Ubuntu regions compared to W.E.I.R.D. regions.

Westerners are not so familiar with showing and expressing emotions, either individually or in groups. To be expressive helps to feel well and to feel a noticeable relief. Westerners should give way for expressing emotions more often .

What Westerners should and could learn and what they should keep

h) Less mindfulness towards their own emotions in Ubuntu regions compared to W.E.I.R.D. regions.

Although Ubuntu individuals are more expressive they sometimes have problems or they feel no need to be mindful or attentive towards their internal world. In some Western regions it is usual to be attentive towards the own emotions, e.g. in female-male relationships. Mindfulness in some Western regions are trained, e.g. in courses.

This attentiveness should be continued and expanded in Western regions.

What Westerners should and could learn and what they should keep

i) A different perspective on work-life respectively work-family balance.

The work-life or the work-family balance in Western regions are mostly measured in terms of hours available for leisure activities or available for family activities. But it is not only the time to find a suitable balance, it is the kind of activity which counts. If you have a big reference group (a wide extended ego) you get more chances of balancing your work-life or your work-family relations. Those relations are predominately bound on emotions. The Westerners should develop conditions for good emotions, i.e. to feel well with oneself and to feel well with the related groups.

The Kenyan German Personality Model

On the basis of the preliminary studies and expert discussions, a modified personality model emerged in which the different aspects of both cultural areas were considered. The extent to which this model can be empirically substantiated is the central task of the running project.

The Kenyan-German Personality Model

The model has 8 factors

**The Model (developed by Priscilla W. Kariuki and Wilfried Echterhoff)
is an integrated view of Ubuntu and W.E.I.R.D
and has been reviewed by the German-Kenyan research group)**

Factor 1 to 4	Pole A	Pole B
Openness	Openness to experience, to change	No tendency to change or to learn, keeping status is preferred, appropriate coping is missing
Conscientiousness	Selecting targets, orienting at targets, looking for appropriate competences and using best competences	Preferring orientation at short term targets
Group relatedness	Tending to extraversion, need for communication, positive social-relatedness and embedded in collectivism, support of others	Prone to introversion
Agreeableness	Tending for concord to others and to oneself	Running into hostility, on the track to damage of others

Factor 5 to 8	Pole A	Pole B
Neuroticism	Stuck with internal restlessness, running into a mess	Keeping emotional stability and order
Trust in higher power	Looking for god, ancestors, magic elements and supernatural spirit	No transcendental source conceivable
Capacity of own emotions	Existence of strong self-reliance and self-guiding	Dependence from external situation and the encouragement by others
Potential of self-efficacy	Evaluating the own self and the own action chains, self-relatedness	Having less self-confidence, strong belief in strong external powers

Ways of changing behaviour

- by adoption of another behaviour and eradicate or avoid your previous one
- by selecting some interesting parts of another behaviour
- after you have learned both behaviours: by switching from one to another behaviour in compliance with the situation or the aims

Integrate a subsystem

It's not good to abolish a behaviour totally which is part of a cohesive system of a personality and of a culture. This method will fail in the long run and wouldn't be sustainable. Behaviour of a person can be regarded as a system, which is self-referential and thus stable. To **change** a system you may penetrate it by a new smaller system, a **subsystem**, which just fits step by step into the entire system (e.g. to understand a foreign language or to accept a new challenging task).

My concluding comment and the answer to the question in the headline of this presentation

The people of the W.E.I.R.D. culture tend – historically seen – to imperial procedures. Western people conquered the world and they still do this by economic means. No other culture of the world except the Western culture tends to such aggressive behaviour, no Asian, no indigenous people of America, no Russians and of course no people of the Ubuntu region.

The W.E.I.R.D. culture should integrate a less aggressive pattern of behaviour and can learn this from the Ubuntu culture. I recommend the W.E.I.R.D. culture to become less weird.

My answer to my question “What could Europeans learn from the culture of Sub-Saharan Africa?” is:

Europeans can and should learn very many positive behaviour patterns from the culture of Sub-Saharan Africa without losing their own positive properties.