

# Cultural determinants of reality

**Across the globe, culture and language heavily influence the way we deal with health issues. This is particularly true in the case of mental health. When making a diagnosis, health professionals must consider the patient's cultural and linguistic background to reach an unbiased assessment.**

**By Solmaz Golsabahi-Broclawski**

Our native language guides our actions and thoughts in many subtle ways. Indeed, language determines the ground rules of communication itself. For example, a child whose native language is German learns to put him- or herself at the centre when expressing a thought. An Iranian child, in contrast, learns to say “we” instead of “I”, downplaying the individual’s role. Similarly, many languages use the words “yes” and “no” differently from German. Many Asian languages have a weaker form of “yes” – and have no word to convey a firm “no”. The rea-

son is that an emphatic negation could feel offensive.

Differences in the way words are used can give rise to misunderstandings. Two people from different cultures may believe they have expressed themselves clearly – and yet they may not have understood each other at all.

Such cultural misunderstandings can carry over into medical and especially psychological evaluations. For example, cultures that prioritise saving face and protecting one’s group give little scope to admitting that an individual suffers mental distress. As entire families are involved in issues of health and illness, it might be considered a disgrace to admit to that a family member is not well. That leaves people who are mentally distressed with only the option of pointing to a physical problem. People in such cultures might say things like “my heart is liquefied”, “my liver is burning”, or “my

skin is on fire” to describe what is in fact mental distress.

This phenomenon explains why physical illnesses with no identifiable organic cause appear more frequently in some cultures than others. If admitting to a mental issue is unavoidable, some cultures might deal with the problem by “externalising” the cause, viewing the affected person as possessed by a ghost, a demon, a devil or some other evildoer.

## CULTURAL STANDARDS

Personality is influenced by many factors, including a person’s biology, learning style and life circumstances. The social and cultural context matters too. The terms and concepts used in the study of personality are themselves strongly influenced by the cultures the researchers belong to. Cultural differences between researcher/clinician and patient – including differences in basic social values – should be taken into account to avoid misunderstandings and incorrect diagnoses (see box next page).

Moreover, individual variations within cultures should be considered. When discussing a nation’s cultural characteristics, experts often portray the values, thinking



Dealing with psychological problems is strongly dependent on culture.

processes and perceptions of the majority as applying to everyone in a given culture. For example, in country X punctuality may be described for everyone as a sign of compulsiveness and lateness as a sign of self-confidence. The possibility of exceptions to these rules is often left out of the picture. Such stereotyping can be harmful.

The ongoing global blending of cultures should also be taken into account. Nowadays it is not uncommon, for example, for a young woman to be self-confident in

public affairs, religiously devout, politically progressive and still have a traditional view of sexuality. The lines of national cultural identities have been blurring at least since the 1970s, and the internet has recently been accelerating the trend dramatically.

Interpersonal interactions within cultures have thus become more complex and multi-layered. This causes stress, psychological instability and mental overload – factors that should be considered when making individual psychological evaluations. Above all,

a discerning attitude towards oneself as an observer and close questioning of one's own cultural precepts, can help to improve understanding and communication worldwide.



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## A family's blessing

A young woman from Syria was interviewed for her suitability for airplan-pilot training in Germany. In response to the question "What do you wish for the future?" she replied in German: "Provided my parents agree, I wish to be trained as a pilot. And if I have their blessing and consent, I would also like to get married after the training."

The psychologist in attendance concluded from this and other responses that the candidate had a pronounced dependent-personality disorder and urgently needed a confidence-boosting workshop. When asked how she reached this conclusion, even though the young woman concerned had a very successful history and was applying for pilot training, the German psychologist said that the candidate had put the family's will before her own, and did not express a single sentiment or wish in first-person form.

The psychologist was then told about the emphasis that the Syrian culture and the Arabic language place on the collective and was asked to reconsider her conclusion. In the course of a subsequent supervi-

sion, the psychologist reported with admiration and astonishment that the young Syrian had managed to convince her grandmother and an uncle to support her plans. Thanks to these senior relatives, she had won her parents' backing as

well. She had not only focused on her dream, but had made sure it came true in the context of her family. She did not want to start her training without the blessing of the family, since she believes that maintaining "peace in the soul" is far better than fulfilling a dream at the cost of a "broken soul".

This example shows how the mental template of an ob-

server can influence a psychological evaluation. Conversely, the German psychologist, with her focus on individual self-determination, could have been evaluated in Syria as an egotistic person with no consideration for others. Neither interpretation is unbiased; both are rooted in the observers' own cultural standards. (sgb)



Learning to understand other cultures: Syrian migrants teach the Arab dance Dabke to Germans.