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What makes people British? Or French, German or Japanese?



I remember decades ago reading a travelogue written by the American writer Paul Theroux, cataloguing his travels around the UK. He recorded walking past an open window on a London street and heard an English-sounding woman say, "They are funny, the Yanks".

He immediately said to himself, "We're funny? You put woolly hats on your boiled eggs! You apologise when someone treads on your toes! You're obsessed with the British upper lip! You all think a cup of tea solves everything! You're the mad ones!"

It seems 47% of us feel proud to be British post-Brexit, plus another 4 in 10 "a little bit", according to The Independent. 13% are not proud at all.

What about the French mindset obviously influenced by a rich historical, literary and military tradition? Who are their mortal enemies? Why, their neighbours, of course - the British.

I could drone on about every European or any other country's stereotype or dig around for academic commentary on population fluxes but I don't see how that would even remotely explain why Germans are notoriously punctual or why Japanese people are notoriously hard-working and rigorously polite. And how it's any different.

National stereotypes are easy to come across

Whether it's the caricature of the introverted English, the brashness of Americans or the industrious Japanese, national stereotypes are easy to come across. But do countries really have their own distinct personalities?

Psychologists say no. They have given the same personality test to hundreds of thousands of people from different nations, but apparently, they have indeed found that average scores tend to come out differently across many cultures.

According to BBC research, the average personality in one country often really is different from the average personality in another.

Crucially, these average differences in personality between nations are not the same as the stereotypes we hold. Although we tend to agree with each other about the typical personality type in a given country - including our own - the research suggests that our assumptions are often wide of the mark.

Several large international studies have now documented cross-cultural differences in average personality. One of the most extensive was **published in 2005** by Robert McCrae and 79 collaborators around the world, who profiled more than 12,000 college students from 51 cultures.

Based on averaging these personality profiles, the researchers were able to present an "aggregate" trait score for each of the cultures.

So, traits, personalities, aggregate scores, moods, and a variety of cross-cultural investigations are far more complicated than it seems.