

CULTURES OBSERVATIONS DATABASE

Helping to track down the Weirdos (and their sub-cultures like the French and the English)



How do we know what European cultures looked like several hundred years ago? Or even what they look like today? It's not easy, because aborigenes never sent anthropologists to check up on us. Europeans hardly get a mention in HRAF or D-PLACE.



We can only look up our history books and read our (very recent) surveys and self-report data.

And yet the evidence is there... For centuries travellers have been documenting what they see in other cultures. Cultures Observations Database is a pilot project demonstrating one way to tap into and analyze this body of information, currently almost unused as data.

EXAMPLE 1: If travellers from five cultures all agree about a behavioral phenomenon in another culture it can be supposed that the phenomenon in question exists. That is already a basic and overdue step forward in research on modern cultures. But what if travellers from one of the five cultures do not notice the phenomenon, or only notice it much later than the others? The obvious place to look for a clue would be in their own cultural back yard. This database makes that possible.

EXAMPLE 2: Groups most seen in England and France. Glaring differences already emerge from our tiny sample containing just 1070 « observations » from 116 « observers » or in other words travellers. The observers come mainly from three nations - England (37 travellers), France (32), and USA (26). This is far too small a sample to give reliable results, but the two tables at right give an idea of possible applications of the data.

Group names in upper-case can be disregarded. They are catch-all categories.

| ENGLAND | |
|----------------------|---------|
| Group | England |
| Reserve | 121 |
| Considerate | 76 |
| 6-UNCLASSIFIED | 63 |
| Inhibitions | 62 |
| Liberty-independence | 53 |
| Assertive | 51 |
| Deference | 45 |
| LIKES | 45 |
| Small-minded | 44 |
| *SOCIAL CUSTOMS | 39 |
| DISLIKES | 39 |
| Sense of perspective | 38 |
| 9-LIKE | 34 |
| 4+independence | 33 |
| 2+Morality | 33 |
| ? | 30 |
| 2+Courtesy | 29 |
| Scornful | 28 |
| Assiduous | 26 |
| 2-Prejudice | 25 |
| 2+Earthiness | 24 |
| 4+Placidity | 20 |
| 1+Humor | 20 |
| Practical | 19 |
| HUMOUR | 19 |
| DO NOT | 18 |
| PHYSICAL | 18 |
| 7-DISLIKE | 18 |
| Self-centered | 17 |
| 2-Rudeness | 17 |
| 1-Inhibition | 17 |

| FRANCE | |
|----------------------|--------|
| Group | France |
| Considerate | 56 |
| Sense of perspective | 44 |
| Self-centered | 42 |
| Small-minded | 40 |
| 6-UNCLASSIFIED | 37 |
| Assiduous | 37 |
| Expressive | 36 |
| Deference | 34 |
| 2+Courtesy | 32 |
| Liberty-independence | 28 |
| Reserve | 27 |
| Joie de vivre | 27 |
| Assertive | 23 |
| Taste for splendour | 22 |
| 4+independence | 20 |
| Moral liberty | 20 |
| DO NOT | 19 |
| 8-DO NOT | 19 |
| Inhibitions | 18 |
| Inventive | 18 |
| Malicious | 17 |
| ? | 16 |
| Courageous | 16 |
| 14+Unrestraint | 16 |
| Uninhibited | 16 |
| 3-Negligence | 16 |
| 2-Rudeness | 15 |
| Active | 15 |
| LIKES | 14 |
| 2+Cooperation | 14 |
| 5+Creativity | 13 |

How does it work?

1. The Observation

Book

Letters from England 1846-1849

Elizabeth Davis Bancroft

Year 1904

View Publication Details

Observer's culture USA

Observed culture England

Page No

Contributed By Bruce Lepper

Snippet in English

The wealthy English are less fashion-obsessed and less ostentatious than wealthy Americans

Original Text

Pub Details

Admin

LETTER: TO W.D.B. AND A.B. LIVERPOOL, October 26, 1846 My dear sons: Thank God with me that we are once more on TERRA FIRMA. We are at the Adelphi. I like these people in Liverpool. They seem to me to think less of fashion and more of substantial excellence than our wealthy people. I am not sure but the existence of a higher class above them has a favorable effect, by limiting them in some ways. There is much less show of furniture in the houses than with us, though their servants and equipages are in much better keeping....

The « Observation » is the base reference unit and is the only static part of the database. This is one or more paragraphs of text extracted from the traveller's account. For an observation to be valid we need to know the date it was made, the culture of the observer, and if possible biographical details. Comments by non-travellers and examples of hearsay are excluded.

2. The Traits

Cultures Observations Database

Edit (Locked)

1846-1849

Elizabeth Davis Bancroft

Year 1904

View Publication Details

Snippet in English

The wealthy English are less fashion-obsessed and less ostentatious than wealthy Americans

Observation Types

Type: Social classes & structure

Traits from this Observation

Trait: Limited by social class

Not obsessed by fashion

Unostentatious

Add new text from Current Publication

Trait Finder

Add new text from different Publication

Main Menu

The first task for the user is to extract the information from the prose. In this example the user has extracted three attributes (which we commonly refer to as traits): **Limited by social class, Not obsessed by fashion, and Unostentatious.** If these traits or very similar ones are not already in the database they are added as new traits.

3. The Groups

Traits Finder

Set Bruce V1 Import

Domain/Factors **SHOW ALL GROUPS**

Trait Groups

Group Moral liberty 11

MUST NOT 6

NEEDS 2

NO TASTE FOR 9

NOT GOOD AT 18

PHYSICAL 12

Practical PROUD OF 1

Reserve 51

Robust 3

Rule 9

Sad 6

Scornful 38

Self-centered 43

Sense of perspective SHOULD NOT 5

Slow 45

Social 7

Taste for splendour 15

Uninhibited 12

Unreliable 14

Wary 10

WOMEN 20

Traits In Group Reserve

Modest Nonvolatile Nostalgic Phlegm Private Procrastinate Prudent Put dignity before trivia Quiet Reflective Reserve Respect for rules Respectable Reticent Self-control Standoffish Stick to their ways and customs Subtle Taciturn Thrifty Understatement Unexcitable Unostentatious Wary

Filter Show All Traits

Add Selected To Observation Quick Create And Add To Observation

All Groups With Trait 'Unostentatious' Reserve

With our small sample we already have over 1000 traits. How can they be manageable? The answer is to create groups or families of traits. If a trait does not fit into an existing group, then a new group can be created. We currently have 39 groups.

| Groups in Goldberg's 100 I | Domain | Goldberg's 1990 Description |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| 1+Spont | Surgency (Extraversion) | Enthusiastic, spirited, vivacious, zealous |
| 1+Gregariousness | Surgency (Extraversion) | Extroverted, gregarious, sociable |
| 1+Playfulness | Surgency (Extraversion) | Adventurous, mischievous, playful, rambunctious |
| 1+Expressiveness | Surgency (Extraversion) | Communicative, expressive, verbal |
| 1+Spontaneity | Surgency (Extraversion) | Carefree, happy-go-lucky, spontaneous |
| 1+Unrestraint | Surgency (Extraversion) | Impetuous, uninhibited, unrestrained |
| 1+Energy Level | Surgency (Extraversion) | Active, energetic, vigorous |
| 1+Talkativeness | Surgency (Extraversion) | Talkative, verbose, wordy |
| 1+Assertion | Surgency (Extraversion) | Assertive, dominant, forceful |
| 1+Animation | Surgency (Extraversion) | Demonstrative, exhibitionistic, flamboyant |
| 1+Courage | Surgency (Extraversion) | Brave, courageous, daring |
| 1+Self-esteem | Surgency (Extraversion) | Assured, confident, proud |
| 1+Candour | Surgency (Extraversion) | Direct, frank, straightforward |
| 1+Humor | Surgency (Extraversion) | Humorous, witty |
| 1+Ambition | Surgency (Extraversion) | Ambitious, enterprising, opportunistic |
| 1+Optimism | Surgency (Extraversion) | Cheerful, jovial, merry, optimistic |
| 1+Alloofness | Surgency (Extraversion) | Seclusive, unsociable, withdrawn |
| 1-Silence | Surgency (Extraversion) | Quiet, silent, untalkative |
| 1-Reserve | Surgency (Extraversion) | Detached, reserved, secretive |
| 1-Shyness | Surgency (Extraversion) | Bashful, shy, timid |
| 1-Inhibition | Surgency (Extraversion) | Inhibited, restrained |
| 1-Unaggressiveness | Surgency (Extraversion) | Unadventurous, unaggressive, uncompetitive |
| 1-Passivity | Surgency (Extraversion) | Docile, passive, submissive |
| 1-Lethargy | Surgency (Extraversion) | Lethargic, sluggish |
| 1-Pessimism | Surgency (Extraversion) | Bitter, joyless, melancholic, moody, morose, pessimistic, somber |
| 2+Cooperation | Agreeableness | Accommodating, agreeable, cooperative, helpful, patient, peaceful, reasonable |
| 2+Amiability | Agreeableness | Amiable, cordial, friendly, genial, pleasant |
| 2+Empathy | Agreeableness | Considerate, kind, sympathetic, trustful, understanding |
| 2+Leniency | Agreeableness | Uncritical, undemanding |

Third-party Sets of lexical groups can be used in the database. This is part of a Set of 115 groups taken from Louis Goldberg's 1990 *An alternative "description of personality": The big-five factor structure*. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 59, 1216-1289. Goldberg has been highly supportive of our project.

The future of COD

Cultures Observations Database (COD) is looking for a home. Ideally, a development of this database, or something like it, should be online, open, and run by an academic group in each European country. It could, and should, become a major archive. Collecting observations is relatively easy, although control is obviously needed, and ideally the observations should be translated into English. The time-consuming part is the choosing - choosing when an already-listed trait is close enough to a new one to be used in its place, choosing which groups to create, and of course choosing into which group or groups a trait should be inserted.

But as Paul Langford, Professor of Modern History at Oxford, said about COD: "separating the stereotypical out from other evidence is very much a matter of judgement and difficult to be completely convincing on. But in my view the more evidence the better and judgement is after all what anthropologists, like historians, need to exercise."

Who are we? We are independant students. I'm the one who does the guessing when it comes to deciding which attributes to put in which pigeon-holes, and Josh Lepper does the programming in Microsoft Access. I was born closer to Calais than to London, but the day I first set foot in France I couldn't believe that such a noisy, food-obsessed tribe could exist just a few miles from my staid English village home. A different cultural world!

Bruce Lepper bruce@cultures.org www.cultures.org

Toulouse, France