Personal Identity on Fáánakkar

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When members of different cultures talk about personality, what terms do they use? This is a long-standing and central issue for the cross-cultural study of personality. Just as investigators such as Costa and McCrae (Part II) have searched for the key terms for describing personality in English, anthropologists and cross-cultural psychologists for years have visited other cultures and reported back about the terms for describing personality in those languages.

This enterprise involves much more than looking up trait words in a dictionary and doing a translation. For one thing, some cultures have no dictionaries. More importantly, although the words used in one language may be translatable into another language, this fact does not necessarily imply that the two words serve the same function or have the same importance in their respective cultural contexts. Deeper research is required to find out what the most important concepts are for describing personality within a particular culture.

Two styles of such research can be identified. The first, anthropological style is for a researcher to visit a culture, immerse himself or herself in its life, and report back how its denizens talk about people. This kind of study yields a detailed—anthropologists use the term “thick”—description of life in another culture, but all the conclusions seem to rest ultimately in the perceptions of the individual researcher. A second, more psychological style is to construct personality questionnaires, using the accepted techniques of psychometrics, in different cultures and languages. Then an attempt is made to compare the results in the two cultures.

The following selection, by the anthropologist John Caughey, is an example of the first kind of research. (The next selection will illustrate the other kind.) Caughey visited an isolated island culture in the South Pacific, and reports back on the basic traits they use to describe personality. He reports that the three most important traits—perhaps, though he does not mention it, comparable to the “Big Five” in English—can be roughly translated as respectfulness, bravery, and “strong thought.” He presents a chart that represents the interrelations of these and other terms important in the culture, and provides some vivid examples of particular individuals described in these terms.
One is left to ponder a couple of questions. First, if another researcher visited this culture, would he or she report back the same terms as the most important ones? Caughey does not describe in this article exactly how he drew his conclusions; they came from a personal immersion in the culture that would not be easy to duplicate. Second, assuming Caughey’s description is accurate, to what degree is the manner of describing personality that he describes different from the ways of our own culture?


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Identity approaches to social organization depend upon the discovery and description of the systems of classification with which the people of a particular society sort themselves out into kinds of persons, and upon the ways in which these classifications are connected to the conduct of social interactions. Identity theorists have suggested that in many, and possibly all, cultures two distinct systems of classification are employed; one set of categories for social roles or social identities and a second set of categories for personality types of personal identities (Goodenough, 1965; Robbins, 1973). Labels for social identities, such as “lawyer,” “professor,” or “uncle” refer to social positions (e.g., occupational, age/sex, and kinship categories) which carry rights and duties vis-à-vis the occupants of matching social positions (Goodenough, 1965, pp. 3–4). Social identities are based on rules of conduct which specify what someone in one social capacity (e.g., “bartender”) owes to and can demand from someone in another social capacity (e.g., “waitress,” “customer,” “owner”) (Goodenough, 1965, p. 8; cf. Spradley Mann, 1975). On the other hand, labels for personal identity, such as “jealous,” “shy,” or “aggressive,” are understood to refer not to social roles but to what someone is like “as a person.” Taken as “personal and independent of one’s social or occupational station in life” (Goodenough, 1963, p. 178; cf. Goodenough 1965, p. 4), they are considered to refer to an individual’s “personality,” “temperament,” or “character.”

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My study of personal identity and social organization was carried out on the Trukese island of Fāānakkar in the Eastern Caroline Islands of Micronesia.1 Fāānakkar lies across the lagoon from Romónum, the island where most of the previous fieldwork on Truk had been carried out, and it is considerably larger than Romónum. My fieldwork was done mainly in two districts of Fāānakkar, an area similar to Romónum in both size (approximately .4 square miles) and population (346 people). While there are differences in detail, the social systems of the two islands are also similar. On Fāānakkar as on Romónum, the population is divided up into named “districts” (sōōpw), each of which is composed of eight to ten “matrilineages” (eterokes). The members of such groups control valuables such as land and magical knowledge in common, and stand together against outsiders. Marriages are arranged between members of the same or adjacent districts, and couples reside in extended family groupings at clusters of dwelling houses at one of the lineage centers where they have kin ties. Within a given lineage, brothers have authority over sisters and elder persons have authority over younger members. The eldest male is usually the “lineage leader” (mmwendo), and the

1The name “Fāānakkar” is a pseudonym for the island in eastern Truk which I studied during eleven months of fieldwork in 1968. For a discussion of that research see Caughey, (1977, pp. 1-7).—Author.
leader of the chiefly lineage is also the “district chief” (samwoonam sôôpw) (Caughey, 1977; cf. Goodenough, 1951, 1974).

Given these arrangements, people regularly interact with one another in terms of social identities based on lineage and district membership, kinship categories, age/sex categories, magical specializations, and leadership roles. However, people are also much concerned with assessing one another’s personal identity or “character” (napanap, literally “shape”). In the Fàänakkàr theory of the self, “character” is understood to refer to the style or “shape” of an individual’s thoughts and emotions. Taxonomically, “character” is a cover term for a series of expressions which may be appropriately employed in describing an individual’s personal style. The most significant character descriptors are contained within a system of classification based on the interrelationships of three pairs of terms. Each pair consists of one expression designating a positive character quality and a second designating the negative opposite attribute. These terms are listed below with preliminary English glosses:

1. mosonson: “respectfulness,” “humility,” “kindness” nananam tekiya: “arrogance,” “haughtiness”
2. pwara: “bravery,” “mastery,” “power” nissimwà: “cowardice,” “weakness,” “subservience”
3. ekiyek pëchékkùm: “strong thought,” “competitive thought” ekiyek pwoteete: “weak thought,” “lazy thought”

An understanding of the meaning of these terms depends on relating them to certain assumptions about character inherent in the Fàänakkàr theory of the self. First of all, it is taken for granted that character is an object for critical evaluation. The combination of the three admirable traits, “respectfulness,” “bravery,” and “strong thought” defines the ideal type. This combination constitutes an emotionally charged and highly significant image within this culture and a person who approximates it is viewed with the greatest admiration. The combination of nananam tekiya and pwara (“arrogant bravery” or mwaàneson, “man lowering”) is viewed with ambivalence. “Arrogance” usually carries a strong negative evaluation but it intensifies an aspect of bravery in a way which is sometimes admirable. Other possible character types are considered progressively less desirable (see Figure 41.1). The worst character type combines the three negative traits, “arrogance,” “cowardice,” and “weak thought” and each of these terms evokes strong feelings of hatred and contempt (Caughey, 1977, pp. 25–40).

A second important assumption is that character is unstable. The readiness with which they characterize their fellows shows that people have a more or less distinct impression of the current personal identity of all those with whom they regularly interact, but all such impressions are considered tentative.

Although he has been a leading figure on Fàänakkàr, D. O. got drunk and cursed many people including some in his own district. He also got into a fight with one of his kinsmen. The next day another man commented as follows: "A long time ago D.O. stopped drinking. He wanted to be a man, he wanted to be a good person, he wanted to be respectful. And he was extremely respectful. But yesterday he was wounded by his drinking. People liked him until yesterday but now some will think, 'What is this? Is he turning into an evil person?' They will be undecided about him."

As this text suggests, the maintenance or transformation of character is thought to be due in major part, to the individual’s inner desire to achieve good character. It also relates to an individual’s “understanding.” As individuals get older, their understanding and hence their character sometimes improves. A lineage leader described his sister’s son as follows:

I despise the arrogance of B.Q. He is brave, but he lacks strong thought. His thinking is womanly. He has not reached the age of manhood, however, and his character may change.
Character is also considered subject to alteration by a variety of other factors including magical forces. Spells and magical medicines may be used to improve a child's character. Sometimes adults are also affected, as is evident in a neighbor's characterization of A. W.

A. W. used to be arrogant. He was strong and he thought he could beat up all the men of his district. . . . Now A. W. is very respectful. His wife put the medicine of love magic called "gluing" on him.

It is also assumed that certain individuals may feign (mwaaken) positive character they do not truly possess.

These assumptions are important for the conduct of social interactions; they are also important for the appraisal of personal identity. They mean that the character of others cannot be taken for granted; rather, character is something which has to be carefully monitored. One must be ready to radically reassess the character of another person, either because the apparent character was fraudulent or because the individual has, in fact, changed. As Gladwin and Sarason indicate (1953, p. 149), the people of Truk are quite ready to revise their opinions of others, even those with whom they are closely related.

When directly asked about the meaning of their character terms, the people of Fáànakkar readily offer brief definitions. "A person of re-
spectfulness,” it may be said, “has sympathy for other people” or “truly understands etiquette.” “True bravery,” they say, “does not mean looking for fights, it does not mean being arrogant and starting fights, it means being respectful until someone wants a fight.” A person of “strong thought” is one who “thinks in terms of the three stones, to envy, to equal, and to surpass,” and so forth. While such definitions are crucial in getting a feel for the orientation of this framework of personality evaluation, they are rough, rule of thumb generalizations about the thought and behavior of people with given character attributes. As such they do not fully encompass the meaning of these personality terms because they do not provide the information necessary to determine when a particular person will be judged by the people of Fäänakkar to have the qualities to which the character terms refer. This is a problem for the understanding of any system of personal identity including that of American culture.

The meanings of personality terms are much less obvious than is often assumed—as suggested by the fact that neither our folk nor dictionary definitions specify criteria which would allow an outsider to make culturally appropriate character assessments in American society. As Williams (1968) points out, “unless we know what behavior qualifies as honest in various circumstances we have no real guide to particular conduct; we know only that something called ‘honesty’ is regarded as a desirable thing” (pp. 284–285).

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While the general meaning of character terms is partially revealed in the definitions offered by the people of Fäänakkar, and while their character terms can be roughly glossed with English personality terms, neither of these strategies effectively specifies the meaning of Fäänakkar character terms. This is because neither provides the information necessary to determine when a particular person will be judged by the people of Fäänakkar to have a given character quality.

In the Fäänakkar theory of the self, as in most anthropological approaches, personality is assumed to be intrapsychic, but this assumption obscures the actual process of personality appraisal. In practice personality judgments depend on interpretations of observable behavior based on a systematic connection between personal identity and the rules of social identity relationships. The only way one can tell whether an individual “has” (i.e., has displayed) a given character quality—say, namang tekiya—is by knowing the rights and duties governing the particular social identities the person is operating in. This means, first of all, that superficially similar English glosses cannot be treated as equivalent to the Trukese terms. It is not only that the two sets of terms are embedded in fundamentally different theories of the self, it is also that an act which is namang tekiya in terms of Trukese culture may not be “arrogant” in terms of American culture. Even more important, an act which might be namang tekiya in terms of the rules of one Fäänakkar social identity relationship may be mosonoson in another relationship, because the rules governing both substantive and ceremonial aspects of conduct vary significantly from one social relationship to another. Maps specifying the expectations and obligations of particular social identity relationships are not just guides to appropriate conduct; they also provide the frame of reference through which personality is defined and assessed.

* * * Because it is taken for granted that personal worth is measured by character, and because of various aspects of their enculturation, including social control, people on Fäänakkar are deeply concerned about character appraisal. From the point of view of the individual actor, the positive terms represent ideal self-images and the negative terms represent feared self-images. In order to maintain their own self-esteem, in order to influence others to judge their character favorably, and in order to avoid the consequences that are expected to befall a person of negative character, people seek to play the rules of their social roles in ways which will allow them to achieve and maintain positive character. Concern with character often functions as a means of social control, but it does not always have this effect. Because “strong thought” and “bravery” are
more important than “respectfulness,” people sometimes violate the rules of their social identity relationships—as by stealing openly—in order to enhance their reputations. * * * It is necessary to understand how concern with character leads people sometimes to follow these rules and sometimes to break them. Here as elsewhere an understanding of social behavior 

Anthropologists have frequently expressed dissatisfaction with culture and personality studies which employ Western psychological categories to appraise the modal personality and “explain” the social behavior of people in other societies. Such studies have been strongly criticized from a variety of different perspectives (cf. Shweder, 1979, p. 257). As Kiefer (1977, p. 106) observes, some writers have questioned the utility of “personality” as an explanatory concept, while others have predicted the demise of research in culture and personality. Ethnopsychological approaches offer a promising and relatively little explored alternative. By focusing on the conceptions of personal identity employed in the culture studied, by considering how the meanings of personality terms are connected to the rules of social identity relationships, and by examining how such terms come to represent positive and negative goals for the self, we can begin to formulate detailed ethnographic answers to questions about the relationships between the individual and culture which were fundamental to the development of culture and personality studies and which are basic to psychological anthropology generally (cf. Langness and Kennedy, 1979, p. 101; Bourguignon, 1973, p. 1109). That is, we can get at the motivations of individual actors and the ways in which these motivations influence the conduct of social relationships.

References


