The Truth and Myths about the National Character of Estonians

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Sometimes called bullet time, time freeze, dead time, flow motion or time slice, the effect was made popular in the 1999 film *The Matrix*.

But what’s the secret of the ‘bullet time’ effect? It turns out that on each of those bullets is a tiny caption „*Made in Estonia““ 😊
After having dug to a depth of 100 meters last year, Scottish scientists found traces of copper wire dating back 1000 years and came to the conclusion that their ancestors already had a telephone network more than 1000 years ago.

Not to be outdone by the Scots, in the weeks that followed, English scientists dug to a depth of 200 meters, and shortly after, headlines in the newspapers read, “English archaeologists have found traces of 2000 year old fibre-optic cable and have concluded that their ancestors already had an advanced high-tech digital communications network a thousand years earlier than the Scots.”

One week later, Estonian newspapers reported the following: “After digging as deep as 5000 meters in Narva, Estonian scientists have found absolutely nothing. They, therefore, have concluded that 5,000 years ago, Estonia's inhabitants were already using wireless technology.”

From „Estonian Jokes“ by Aarne Vesilind
National Character

Beliefs about distinctive personality characteristics common to members of a culture are referred to as national character.
THE PERFECT EUROPEAN SHOULD BE...

LIKE A BRIT
AVAILABLE...

LIKE THE FRENCH
TECHNICAL...

AS A BELGIAN
TALKATIVE... AS A FINN

AS A PORTUGUESE
CONTROLLED...

FLEXIBLE... AS A SWED
FAMOUS...

AS A LUXEMBOURGER
HUMOROUS... AS A GERMAN

AS AN ITALIAN
DISCREET...

SOBER
HUMBLE...

AS THE IRISH
AS A SPANIARD

AS A DUTCHMAN
GENEROUS...

AS A GREEK
ORGANISED...

AS A DANE
Question:
How can you tell the difference between a Finnish introvert and a Finnish extravert?

Answer:
When he's talking to you a Finnish introvert looks at his shoes. A Finnish extravert looks at your shoes.
Is There a Kernel of Truth in National Character Stereotypes?

Science, October 7, 2005, vol 310, 96-100.

National Character Does Not Reflect Mean Personality Trait Levels in 49 Cultures

Most people hold beliefs about personality characteristics typical of members of their own and others’ cultures. These perceptions of national character may be generalizations from personal experience, stereotypes with a “kernel of truth,” or inaccurate stereotypes. We obtained national character ratings of 3989 people from 49 cultures and compared them with the average personality scores of culture members assessed by observer ratings and self-reports. National character ratings were reliable but did not converge with assessed traits. Perceptions of national character thus appear to be unfounded stereotypes that may serve the function of maintaining a national identity.
Who is a Typical Extravert?

- Extraversion is a tendency to experience positive emotions.
- Extraverts prefer social activities and gatherings, they are active, talkative, and self-confident. Introverts, on the other hand, prefer solitude, small groups, and would rather stay at home than attend a party or large social gathering.
Who is a Conscientious Person?

- **Conscientiousness** is a tendency to manage self-control, to be effective, purposeful, and hard-working.
Analyses within and across 49 cultures, comparing aggregate personality traits from student and adult samples with ratings of the “typical” ingroup member, clearly indicated that national character stereotypes have little basis in reality.

Terracciano et al (2005)
McCrae, Terracciano et al, JPSP, 2005
McCrae, Terracciano et al, JPSP, 2005
Estonians: National Character vs Personality Traits

Realo et al., 2009, EJP
How do National Character Stereotypes Arise?

- **Warmth**: warm climates are associated with stereotypes of metaphorically warm interpersonal traits.

Among many Montesquieu’s ideas, outlined in *De l'esprit des lois* ("The Spirit of the Laws"), is the metereological climate theory, which holds that climate may substantially influence the nature of man and his society.

Montesquieu went so far as to assert that certain climates are superior to others, the temperate climate of France being ideal.

His view is that people living in very warm countries are "too hot-tempered," while those in northern countries are "icy" or "stiff." The climate of middle Europe is therefore optimal!

*The Spirit of Laws* (French: *De l'esprit des lois*) (1748).
A feature mentioned in nearly all of the stories is **closedness, coldness, restraint, aloof manner of Estonians** – “as a layer of ice”.

Stories suggest a unanimous image of people with dismayed faces taking seriously the world and themselves.

Those who succeed in breaking the layer of ice, sometimes in retrospect interpret it in a positive way: as **frankness, sincerity and modesty**.
In a comparative questionnaire study on silence, the Estonian respondents reported themselves to be more silence bound and more comfortable with silence and conversational pauses than Canadians (Kivik, 1998).

As the author observes, many features characteristic of the “silent Finn,” such as
- speaking only if one has something to say,
- passive information gathering in new situations, and
- respecting the other party’s privacy,
were also reflected in the responses of the Estonian sample.
“... Even in situations with strangers which usually are most uncomfortable for silences, Estonians reported not being disturbed by silence if it is a mutually clear that there is nothing to talk about ...”

“... In the interviews the North American students singled out that the “really proficient small-talkers” they had met in Estonia were all people who had lived abroad (Western Europe, the U.S) for some time. ...”

Some Determinants of National Character Stereotypes

- **Wealth**: citizens of wealthier nations are perceived as being high in Assertiveness but low in Warmth. Overall, the portrait is a businesslike one, task-oriented, serious and interpersonally cold.

- **Values**: in countries where people emphasize secular-rational values, people see themselves as introverted and more conscientious (but not in Russia).

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The origins of stereotypes probably differ from country to country. Canadians see themselves as the mirror image of Americans and *Estonians and Finns see themselves as the mirror image of Russians.*

Estonians and Finns are quiet and modest *because* Russians are active and talkative. Differently from Russians, however, Estonians and Finns are conscientious and hard-working!
Conclusion (1)

• National stereotypes can sometimes provide some information about a culture, but very often, they do not describe people.

• The media and interpersonal communication have a powerful role in shaping and maintaining these stereotypical beliefs. Views of national character are enshrined in literature and history, disseminated through jokes, and perpetuated by travelers’ tales.
Conclusions (2)

- The relative silence of Estonians, often seen as verbal clumsiness, lack of manners, or hostility, is a part of the Fenno-Ugric communicative style and does not reflect the real personality traits of Estonians. "Speaking is silver, silence is gold."

- Estonians’ view of their high Conscientiousness is based on values stemming from protestant work ethics and rational-secular world-view.

- Estonians see themselves as the mirror image of Russians perhaps in an effort to differentiate themselves and establish an independent national identity.
THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!

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