

# Psychological consequences of relational mobility

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Relational mobility is a socio-ecological variable that represents how much freedom and opportunity a society affords individuals to select and replace interpersonal relationships based on their personal preferences. As a socio-ecological dimension of variation in human societies, relational mobility can vary between countries, regions, and different points in history. In this article, we review evidence on how societal differences in relational mobility may lead to differences in behavioral and psychological tendencies of people who reside there. We particularly focus on two sets of consequences of relational mobility found by new studies: interpersonal strategies, such as passionate love and commitment behavior, as well as cultural thinking styles, such as attribution and attention.

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Social environments vary across human societies, and the nature of these environments impacts the ways individuals think, feel, and behave. Studies conducted from the perspective of ‘socio-ecological psychology’ [1] have linked a modern-day variation in human behavior and psychological tendencies to aspects of social environments, both historical and current, which people find themselves embedded in [2–9]. These studies help us to understand both the social ecological bases of psychological differences between societies, but also shed light on how humans may adapt their behavior to their surrounding environment [1].

Relational mobility is one such dimension of diversity in human societies, referring to the degree of flexibility versus fixed-nature of interpersonal relationships and group memberships [10]. In societies high in relational mobility, individuals have many opportunities to meet new people and to

choose whom they interact with (or which groups they belong to), and they can replace relationships when they are unsatisfied. In societies low in relational mobility, interpersonal relationships and group memberships tend to be fixed, and individuals have less freedom to select or change these relationships even if they wished to.

Studies have found that relational mobility varies across human societies at many levels. For instance, a world-wide study found that relational mobility tends to be high in countries in North America, Western Europe, Latin America, and Australasia, whereas it tends to be low in countries in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East [11<sup>•</sup>,12<sup>•</sup>]. Relational mobility also varies within countries: some environments afford individuals with more opportunities than others (for instance, large college campuses: e.g. [13], upon entering a new school: [14]; large cities [15]). Recent research [12<sup>•</sup>] has shown that differences in the levels of relational mobility across cultures is linked to more distal ecological factors such as historical variations in subsistence styles (e.g. the prevalence of herding versus rice cultivation) and in historical and ecological threats (e.g. geoclimate harshness and prevalence of pathogens).

Relational mobility may lead to a host of differences in psychological and behavioral tendencies, such as in general trust [12<sup>•</sup>,16], factors to determine happiness and psychological health [17,18], self-esteem [12<sup>•</sup>,19], the pursuit of uniqueness [20], the quality of interpersonal relationships [21,22], and the degree of privacy concern in the social network sites [23]. In the next section, we review literature specifically focusing on two categories: interpersonal behavior and cognitive styles, both of which can be thought of as “strategies” tailored to societies that are high or low in relational mobility.

### Interpersonal behavior and psychology

An interesting set of findings on cultural variation in interpersonal processes shows that North Americans tend to behave proactively toward various categories of relationships. For instance, when compared to East Asians, North Americans show greater interpersonal intimacy [24,25], help friends [26], seek support from friends [27], open up or disclose their failures and weaknesses [28], feel more passionate love toward their romantic partner [29,30], and trust strangers [31] (See Ref. [32<sup>•</sup>], for a more detailed review). These findings are seemingly counterintuitive because North Americans have traditionally been identified as ‘individualistic’ or ‘independent’, whereas East Asians are generally considered to be ‘collectivistic’ and ‘interdependent’ [33,34]. Why would individualistic Westerners, who supposedly see themselves as distinct agents

and prioritize their own interest over that of others, show more engaging interpersonal behaviors and enhanced intimacy than those from collectivistic societies, who are supposed to define themselves in terms of their relationships with others and prioritize the welfare of others and groups?

One explanation for these seemingly anomalous findings resides in the differences in 'adaptive tasks' that individuals under high versus low relational mobility must fulfill. In high relational mobility societies where there are many relational options, such as North America, one crucial task for individuals is to seek out relationships that one finds valuable (such as who is trustworthy: [35]). However, another critical task is to keep one's partners, by continuously working to retain them. If an individual does not invest effort into retaining their partners, chances are their partners would choose to move to other more beneficial relationships. In the context of group memberships, in high relational mobility contexts someone else may take your position, and you might be excluded from the group. In contrast, because of the relative stability of relationships in low relational mobility societies, there is less risk of one's partners leaving or being stolen by competitors. Instead, one must be careful not to damage one's current relationships, or gain negative reputation within the group. Otherwise, people may end up being 'stuck' in low quality or unpleasant relationships. These differences in incentive structure between high and low relational mobility societies seem to lead to differences in adaptive strategies of individuals. Indeed, one set of studies found that higher relational mobility was associated with greater risk-propensity—prioritization of benefit seeking over cost avoidance—in the relational domain, but not in other risk domains (such as health and financial risk) [36•]. These findings suggest that people adapt their behaviors in relationships based on incentives generated by the level of relational mobility in their society.

There are multiple strategies that individuals in high relational mobility societies may adopt in order to solicit valuable others, and be selected over competitors. First, one can display one's value as a partner. This includes displaying one's strength, resourcefulness, and generosity [37]. Heightened feelings of intimacy may also increase helping behavior directed to one's partner [38]. Second, one can signal commitment to the relationship by actively limiting one's own ability to betray their partner. For instance, people might divulge their sensitive personal information to their partner as a signal of their trust, which also makes it difficult for one to betray the recipient of the information, lest their partner disclose the information to others [39].

A recent study has suggested that passionate love has more utility in societies high in relational mobility [40••]. This hypothesis is based on Robert Frank's theory that some emotions or sentiments can increase commitment to relationships [41]. Accordingly, passionate love directs one's attention and leads to helping behavior exclusively to their

current partner, which can help the partner feel secure that you are committed to the relationship. Passionate love should be more useful in high relational mobility environments where relationships are more easily lost and individuals are faced with constant risk of mate poaching. The results were consistent with the theory: a study of Japanese and American participants, all of whom were in a romantic relationship, showed that Americans reported more passionate feelings toward their partners than did Japanese, and this difference was statistically explained by the difference in the perceived relational mobility. Moreover, the intensity of passion was associated with such commitment-making behaviors as getting closer and giving priority to one's partner and cutting off access to other potential mates. Consistent with these findings, another study of couples in the US and Japan [42•] found that married couples in the United States, a country with higher divorce rates — a proxy of higher societal-level relational mobility — than Japan, were more likely to give gifts to each other. They also showed that among Japanese participants, those who had more relational opportunities (i.e. tended to interact with varied social groups) were more likely to engage in gift giving, supporting the idea that higher levels of relational mobility encourage behaviors that may help in retaining one's partner.

Furthermore, recent findings from a large-scale cross-cultural study support the notion that higher mobility leads to increased intimacy and commitment strategies. Thomson *et al.* [12••] recruited 16 939 participants from 39 countries and regions across the globe using Facebook advertisements for an interactive online survey. The survey included such questions as the level of intimacy they felt and the degree of self-disclosure for friends and romantic partners. Participants also indicated their perception of relational mobility in their immediate social environment. The results from country-level analysis showed that people in countries higher in relational mobility tended to have higher interpersonal intimacy, self-disclosure, and social support provision, just as predicted. In addition to the tests of psychological consequences, this study, which utilized ecological-level analysis using country or region as a unit of analysis, 1) tested and confirmed convergent and discriminant validity of the relational mobility scale [16], and 2) identified historical and ecological antecedents of high relational mobility.

### Thinking style

The literature we have reviewed so far demonstrates the power of the socio-ecological concept of relational mobility to explain and predict cross-cultural differences in interpersonal behavior. However, relational mobility can also influence deeper phenomena: the default ways that people think about and perceive the world. Cultural thinking styles, better known as the contrast between analytic versus holistic modes of thought [43], is a topic that has been studied extensively within cultural psychology. Analytic thinking style, which is prevalent in Western societies, is the tendency for people to focus their

attention on focal person and objects while putting less focus on context. In contrast, holistic thinking style, more widespread in East Asian societies, is the tendency to attend to both focal person/object and the context [44,45].

New research suggests that the culture-specific thinking might actually be cognitive strategies tailored to social contexts varying in the levels of relational mobility [11\*\*]. Individuals in low relational mobility contexts should have broader visual attention to wider social networks surrounding them. Because they are embedded in tighter social networks and constraints, there are strong incentives for them to monitor social cues and social norms in order to behave appropriately and flourish in their communities. However, individuals living in social ecologies with higher levels of relational mobility have less need to pay attention to context, and thus have more ability to focus on an individual and a target object without considering how they may be impacted by environment. Indeed, they will tend to have more personal control over the environment, as they have more opportunities to choose their relationships and will experience fewer constraints from their relationships.

The researchers tested these hypotheses using six studies. They found that people in high relational mobility environments and contexts tend to make dispositional causal attributions and show analytic (as contrasted with holistic) attention style than people in low relational mobility environments. Furthermore, these differences were mediated by cross-cultural differences in internal versus external locus of control, consistent with the notion that people in low mobility settings have less control over their environment. Interestingly, participants' tendency to use for analytic versus holistic cognition by default changed when the researchers experimentally manipulated situational relational mobility: American participants who imagined themselves in a situation low in relational mobility showed patterns of holistic cognition similar to participants from low mobility countries, compared to participants who imagined themselves in a high mobility situation, who showed more analytic cognition. Furthermore, the analytic responses of participants in the high mobility condition were similar to the control condition. This suggests that the tendency for analytic cognition among Americans observed in the control condition may be a 'default strategy' [46] adapted to high mobility environments, which is most common in their daily life. However, when presented with a low mobility setting, they seem to be able to switch strategies.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, levels of relational mobility in society seem to have broad impacts on how people think and behave. This impact is seen both in the context of interpersonal relationships, as well as in cognition. These studies can help to understand how socio-ecological factors like relational mobility can explain and predict a wide-range variation in human behavior and psychological processes.

## Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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