



Turns Out Where You Live Really Does Shape Who You Are

EMILY BADGER 9:00 AM ET 10 COMMENTS



Mark Twain penned a famous line more than a century ago neatly distilling the distinct cultures of the three largest cities in the American Northeast. "In Boston," he wrote, "they ask, 'How much does he know?' In New York, 'How much is he worth?' In Philadelphia, 'Who were his parents?'"

Boston has been, since its earliest days, a city of higher education, New York a city of financial might, and Philadelphia a city of historical lineage. To this day – Twain wrote this in 1899 – much about his assessment still holds. We often joke about what these cultural legacies mean for ourselves (Chicagoans are so sensible, Angelenos so flaky, people in Salt Lake City so self-reliant). But it turns out there is in fact plenty of truth to the notion that the places where we live influence how we view the world and our role in it.

Take, for example, Boston and San Francisco. Victoria Plaut, a social and cultural psychologist at the UC Berkeley School of Law, went to school and taught in both of these cities. And she recalls that their cultural norms manifested in very different ways in how students behaved (or, rather, how they perceived that they should behave). In Boston, she recalls, it seemed important for students to make a great show of how hard they were working.

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"Those social status markers mattered: where you were going to school, how hard you were working," she says. "Whereas in the Bay Area, I felt what mattered to students was – they were working hard – but it mattered to show you had time to go out and play ultimate Frisbee on the oval. It was like a duck smoothly gliding on the surface but paddling furiously below."

At a very basic level, the cultures of these two places shaped for these students their understanding of how to be (their sense of "self") and how to be well (or their "well-being," in Plaut's language). This is not an uncommon idea within the national or even regional context. America is typically described as having its own character and values, prizing freedom, liberty and individualism. And distinctions emerge at the regional level too,

context shapes us in dramatic ways."

between, say, anti-government Appalachia and Calvinist-inflected New England. But following this idea down to the more local level, Plaut and several of her colleagues wanted to look more closely at what our cities mean for our selves.

"We knew that cities have local dialects and local vocabularies and local economies and industries and economic realities, local newspapers and radio stations," she says. "We thought all of those

things should mean that cities are cultures, too."

Plaut and her co-authors, Hazel Rose Markus, Jodi Treadway, and Alyssa Fu, published their findings in the paper "[The Cultural Construction of Self and Well-Being: A Tale of Two Cities](#)" (the hat tip for the Mark Twain quote goes to them). They focused in their research on San Francisco and Boston, two cities steeped in quite different popular narratives about the stodgy and history-oriented East and new and shiny West.

"These differences are often thought of as stereotypes," Plaut says. "And what we are finding is that these stereotypes actually reflect something much deeper, and that local context shapes us in dramatic ways."

Plaut and her colleagues tested this idea with a series of studies comparing the cultural products, social norms and psychology of both cities. Boston and San Francisco are in many ways alike: They're both liberal-leaning, highly educated waterfront towns with an emphasis on eds, meds, and venture capital. But they have dramatically different histories. Boston was born as a Puritan colony, San Francisco as a get-rich Gold Rush town. And ample research has documented that the [earliest historical influences](#) in a place continue to [shape and define it for generations to come](#).

Today, these classic identities in San Francisco and Boston still emerge in banal places. Among all the cultural products they sampled, the researchers looked at promotional material from Harvard and Stanford. Harvard sells its "tradition of excellence," its founding in 1636, its history as the nation's oldest college. Stanford's material reads almost like a rebellion against institutions like history-steeped Harvard (which may well be the point): "Free from the boundaries of tradition," the university writes, it "attracts forward-looking, forward-thinking people—people whose entrepreneurial attitudes refuse limits and resist assumptions," while giving students "the freedom to be themselves: innovative, creative, unconstrained by any predetermined look or affect."

These similar themes – one city bound by tradition, the other free from it; one emphasizing community and institutions, the other individualism – were reflected in newspaper headlines, and on the websites of hospitals and venture capital firms.

Not surprisingly, they were also reflected in the psychological tendencies of residents in both cities. In surveys conducted as part of this study, people in Boston were more likely to say they felt there were clear expectations for how people should behave in their city. Conversely, people in San Francisco said they felt where they lived that people had the freedom to go their own way. In Boston, peoples' self-satisfaction seemed to be tied to education, finances and community (all things that also matter to other people). In San Francisco this was less the case, with people less bound by concerns over status and social norms.

All of these responses supported the researchers' hypothesis around an "old and established" culture in Boston and a "new and free" one in San Francisco – and what that might mean for the people who live there, for their sense of self and well-being.

"Place does shape people at a fundamental level," Plaut says. Although she adds a couple of caveats. She and her fellow authors make no value judgment of either of these cultures. And, of course, they acknowledge that this model doesn't apply equally to everyone. "Not everyone in San Francisco is concerned with innovation. And not everyone in Boston is concerned with tradition."

But this may also explain something else you've experienced, in either of these cities or elsewhere: "We do suspect that if you're primarily used to one of them, and you uproot yourself, or get placed in another context, you're going to feel some disorientation."

That's not just jet lag, or missing your friends. You've landed in a new culture.

Plaut and her colleagues focused on just these two cities to do an in-depth study of both. But their results raise questions for someone else to pursue: What do these influences look like in Las Vegas, or Savannah, or St. Paul? Could such cultures be identified at the neighborhood level? And what would it mean to live in a place without a strong sense of identity and norms? (San Francisco's norm, after all, is a distinct lack of norms.) What if the place that shaped you was... Orlando?

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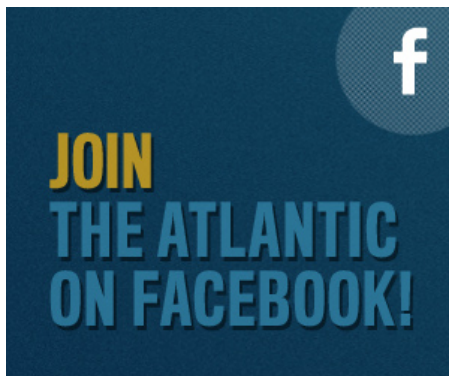
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