

# Eastern independence, Western conformity?

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While the act of selecting an everyday writing utensil seems to be a simple enough task, scientists have found that it actually could shed light on complex cultural differences.

Psychologists Toshio Yamagishi, Hirofumi Hashimoto and Joanna Schug from Hokkaido University in Sapporo, Japan used the seemingly simple task of pen choice to determine if Japanese and American cultural differences are a function of social constraints. According to the scientists, previous psychological research on the topic has been flawed since it tends to attribute an individual's culture-specific behavior to their inherent preferences.

"In this perspective, preferences are the dominant determinants of behavior only in a social vacuum where individuals do not need to consider the reactions of others," wrote the authors in the June 2008 issue of *Psychological Science*, a publication of the Association for Psychological Science. "And we believe cultural psychologists would agree that culture-specific behavior does not occur in a social vacuum."

The psychologists hypothesized instead that individuals may be maintaining culture-specific behaviors by repeatedly relying on proven social strategies. For example, what appears to be a person's preference for conformity in Japanese culture alternatively might be an individual's avoidance of a social stigma.

To support this theory, the scientists arranged a series of studies designed to disprove, or at least argue against, the widely accepted

stereotype that Americans prefer qualities of uniqueness while the Japanese intuitively value conformity. American and Japanese participants were presented with various scenarios that asked them to select, actually and hypothetically, a pen from a cup filled with four pens of one color and one pen of another, alternating between green and orange. The results show that both American and Japanese participants were more likely to select a majority pen over the uniquely-colored pen if they had been previously monitored by other participants or asked to choose with an experimenter present.

The results also revealed that the American and Japanese participants reacted similarly in situations that had a clearly defined impact on others—as was the case with purchasing a pen, which obviously did not affect anyone else. And only the scenarios in which the social relevance was ambiguous, such as hypothetically selecting a pen to take a survey, did Japanese participants choose the majority, and Americans the unique, pens.

The findings not only suggest that innate cultural differences were not the deciding factor, but that the default reaction for pen choice may be strongly correlated with differences in social constraints.

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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