

Action-inaction balance in cultural values more common in East Asian countries

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This image shows Dolores Albarracín. Credit: University of Pennsylvania, Annenberg School for Communication

People in East Asian countries seem to strike the best balance between

liking action and inaction, whereas someone from the Mediterranean area of the world are far less likely to have achieved the same balance.

This balance between action and inaction is best displayed in Asia, where Labor Day is not observed until May.

A two-year-long study involving over 4,000 volunteer participants (age 19 to 30) from 19 countries and looked at the degree to which a culture holds attitudes toward rest and activity. It was led by Dolores Albarracín, Ph.D., the Martin Fishbein Chair at the Annenberg School for Communication and Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and included volunteers from Hong Kong, Japan, China, Singapore, England, Norway, Philippines, Switzerland, Argentina, Spain, Bolivia, Israel, Mexico, USA, Colombia, and Portugal. Key collaborators included co-Investigator Hong Li from Battelle Organization and Ethan Zell, Assistant Professor of Psychology from University of North Carolina at Greensboro, as well as researchers from 18 other countries.

The results are reported in the September issue of the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*. Understanding the dynamics of attitudes toward action and inaction can be of benefit when developing public service announcement campaigns, health awareness messages, or other advertising campaigns, as well as understanding patterns of rest and risky behavior and how these attitudes are communicated within a culture.

People from East-Asian societies can see opposites as coexisting—as in the balance that exists between "Yin" and "Yang"—and actually value action and inaction to a more similar, moderate degree than Europeans, North Americans, and Latin Americans, who, according to the study, overvalue action.

Animals regulate their amount of activity through [biological mechanisms](#)

that ensure sleep and wakefulness cycles. Humans have these mechanisms as well, Dr. Albarracín said, but they are also socially conditioned to be active or rest through their attitudes and beliefs. Dr. Albarracín and her team have been studying these attitudes and finding that all cultures in their research value action more than inaction.

"Ideally, people should value both action and inaction," she said, "because valuing only action could make you engage in indiscriminate, manic, even risky activity (think addictions, overeating, aggression), and valuing only inaction could make you too passive and perhaps even depressed."

For display purposes, the following list ranked from highest to lowest and developed from Dr. Albarracín's study, ranks action-inaction balance in cultural values.

- China
- Hong Kong
- Japan
- Norway
- Switzerland
- United States
- England
- Singapore
- Spain
- Israel
- Mexico and Philippines
- Portugal
- Guatemala
- Columbia
- Bolivia
- Argentina and Italy
- Turkey

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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