

White Men Can't Contextualize: Psychologist Richard Nisbett Believes That Asians and Westerners Think and Even See Differently—And He Has the Data to Prove It

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STANDARDIZED TESTS MAKE ME NERVOUS, and what I'm doing feels an awful lot like taking a standardized test. I'm sitting in a windowless, underventilated room in the basement of a social-science building on the University of Michigan campus, staring at the screen of an old Mac PowerBook. Pulse: up slightly. Palms: more than a tad on the humid side.

My assignment is simple, explains the mellow, ponytailed grad student hovering over me. I'm to watch the screen, identify the images that appear there, and rate my confidence in my judgments. It's just a psychology experiment, with nothing riding on it. Still, it's never a happy experience having the limits of one's mental ability probed.

For a brief moment before the test starts, I imagine wowing the lab with my unprecedented perspicacity ("This guy's amazing!"). But the dream founders quickly. The first image to pop up is easy: a small, nubby orange square, just below the center of the screen. Clearly a basketball in extreme close-up. My confidence is high. The second image is more challenging, but manageable: several small, crisp shapes that appear to be elements of a bigger picture. I see fur, hind legs, big ears. I guess "rabbit." Medium confidence. (Not bad: I'm later told it was a kangaroo.) The third image is—

The third image is a total wash. My eyes dart around, scanning for something to latch on to. They don't find it. The screen is a blurry, fuzzy mess. It fades to white. No idea, no guess.

As the experiment continues, that's the pattern. There are sharp, fragmentary images that I can identify: bits of a turtle's shell, a pineapple, a tiger. And there are blurrier, more complete scenes that stump me. I get used to it. What is harder to grasp—what, honestly, is almost impossible to wrap my mind around—is the supposed explanation for this discrepancy. According to the reigning theory in this lab, I can't interpret the fuzzy images because I was raised in a European-American culture.

In an extraordinary series of experiments on this campus, most under the direction of Richard Nisbett, one of the nation's most prominent academic psychologists, researchers have been charting the cognitive differences between Americans and East Asians. Nisbett and his students have found striking variation in how people brought up in the East and the West view the world—and when they say "view the world," they mean it literally.

Nisbett's group has discovered that East Asians perform differently from Americans on some of the classic social-psychology experiments. East Asians seem to be aware, in a way that Americans are not, of the strong role that social pressure and social context—as opposed to indelible character traits—play in human decisionmaking. That's interesting enough.

What has really made waves, however, is the discovery that the sensitivity to context carries over into basic information processing. Asian culture seems to train people to take fuller note of the visual environment as well as the social environment. Nisbett and his colleagues have found that when presented with images on computers, Asians recall background and peripheral details far better than Americans.

Nisbett's new work has been called revolutionary. "It challenges the foundations of cognitive science as it has developed for the last twenty-five or thirty years," says Stephen Stich, a philosopher at Rutgers University. "It has never been surprising that people have different cultural beliefs. But the presumption has always been that when you get a bunch of normal subjects, they act the same way at the level of basic perceptual processes. What Dick has been showing is that that is radically wrong. It astonishes people."

Yet some scholars are taken aback not by the work's freshness but by its seemingly old-fashioned, not to say retrograde, implications. They are concerned about what they see as the naïveté with which Nisbett traffics in characterizations of ethnic groups—of whole continents, even. This late in the postcolonial era, is it possible for scholars to speculate about "the Asian mind"?

"The more I do this work, the more I realize the truth in the saying 'It's the West and the rest,'" Nisbett says. To his critics, that stark dichotomy is precisely the problem. Yet Nisbett is gambling his reputation on the conviction that he's onto something huge.

LEAN AND BLUE-EYED, the sixty-year-old Nisbett displays a native ruggedness that decades in academia have not entirely smoothed away. It's not hard to imagine him in El Paso, Texas, where he grew up before heading east to Tufts University and then Columbia. Even in high school, he knew he wanted to be a

psychologist. He'd stumbled across a primer on Freud in a local library. "It was like a genetic lock and key," he recalls. "I knew that I was going to do that for the rest of my life."

Like most psychologists, Nisbett began his career studying aspects of human behavior that were presumed to be universal. In his book *Human Inference* (1980), he argued that all people were quite dismal at basic inferential tasks, such as figuring out whether two lines are the same length. And he identified other odd glitches in their thinking: If psychologists laid out four different items of clothing in various sequences and asked subjects to choose the "best" one, subjects would almost always choose the fourth and final item, and they would argue strenuously in favor of their choice: When asked if they thought the order of presentation affected their decision, they would scoff.

Human Inference didn't even allude to cultural variation. But Nisbett confesses that he's long had a latent curiosity about ethnic and gender differences. "Those were not legal interests to have until late in my career," he says. It wasn't until 1982, when he spent a six-week vacation in China, that Nisbett started thinking actively about cultural difference. Perhaps it was in the air: Feminist psychologists were opening the related question of whether women's ways of knowing differed from men's. In later years, greater numbers of Asian students started arriving in U.S. psychology departments, bringing with them their own ideas about social psychology. Nisbett credits the "brilliance" of his Asian students with shaping his research at every step. "They have called all of this—right—in advance," he says. In particular, a student from Beijing named Kaiping Peng—now an assistant professor at Berkeley—engaged Nisbett in discussions of universalism and its troubles.

By taking a cultural turn, Nisbett was breaking with long-standing convention of his discipline. In their normal practice, academic psychologists strip away what they consider the superfluous culture-specific "content" of thought—baseball, hot dogs, sumo, sushi—to get at basic mental "processes" like categorization, inference, and memory (or fundamental personality traits like introversion). To keep culture out of the lab, experimenters have gone so far as to use nonsense syllables in place of words. To be sure, a motley assortment of scholars—a few linguists, anthropologists, and psychologists—have long hungered for an interdisciplinary field that might be called cultural psychology. In the 1920s and 1930s, for example, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf proposed that even the perception of color could be shaped by language and grammar.

But the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis attracted harsh scrutiny, and by the 1970s cultural psychology had begun to decline. The scholars who continued the project—people like Michael Cole of the University of California at San Diego and Richard Shweder of the Committee on Human Development at the University of Chicago—tended to work on the fringes of existing disciplines. Shweder's edited volume, *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion* (1984), along with the more recent work emerging from Nisbett's lab, has helped to revive the field.

One of Nisbett's former colleagues at Michigan, Hazel Markus, who is now at Stanford, actually turned to the study of East Asia before he did, publishing a paper in *Psychological Review* in 1991 that has become one of the most widely cited in the history of social psychology. Co-written by Shinobu Kitayama, a psychologist then at the University of Oregon, "Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation" contrasts the American idea of an "independent self" with the Asian concept of an "interdependent self." The difference played out in many ways. Asked to describe themselves, Japanese students referred to their social roles or were merely descriptive: "I am a student" or "I play tennis." Americans referred to intrinsic qualities: "I am friendly" or "I am ambitious." Americans reported feeling joy and anger more deeply and for longer periods than Asians, who considered emotional displays self-indulgent.

For his own debut in cultural psychology, Nisbett tackled an ethnic group he already knew a good deal about: Southern males. In work leading up to *Culture of Honor* (Westview, 1996), co-written by Dov Cohen, a former graduate student, he explored whether Southern men were, as he suspected, especially touchy about the protection of hearth and home. Analyzing gun laws, murder rates, and attitudes toward personal property in states north and south of the Mason-Dixon Line, Nisbett found that Southern states indeed had more than their share of "honor" murders. He backed up the finding with some clever experimentation, recruiting Northern and Southern men to come to the lab for an undisclosed test. As they walked from one room to another, one at a time, he had an assistant bump them and crudely insult them. The Southerners got angrier more quickly, they got flat-out angrier, and they wouldn't back down.

Some of Nisbett and Cohen's explanations of the Southerners' behavior raised eyebrows. Using statistics, the authors claimed to have ruled out such possible causes as climate, slavery's legacy, and poverty. Instead, they largely attributed the Southerners' hypersensitivity to the historical settlement of the region by "Scotch-Irish" herders from the fringes of Britain. Herders, the argument went, usually operated a long way from authorities and thus had to enforce property rights on their own. That kind of broad-brush ethnohistorical theory will sound familiar to those who have read Nisbett's new work on Asia.

NISBETT'S BEST evidence for a cognitive chasm between West and East is summed up in the April 2001 issue of *Psychological Review*. He and his sprawling network of collaborators conducted about thirty separate experiments; together, these experiments were intended to provide hard evidence for what might seem a soft generalization: "East Asians," they write, end to be "more holistic" and make "relatively little use of categories and formal logic," whereas Westerners are more "analytic, paying attention primarily to the object and the categories to which it belongs and using rules, including formal logic, to understand its behavior." The article is co-written by several former students of Nisbett's: Kaiping Peng, along with Incheol Choi of Seoul National University and Ara Norenzayan of the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris. The key to Nisbett's recent work is a curious feature of human psychology called, somewhat portentously, the fundamental attribution error. This failing has to do with human resistance to understanding the preeminent role of social context in molding behavior. Social psychologists had been aware of the error for a long time, but it was first named and described in detail in a 1967 article by the Duke psychologists Edward E. Jones and Victor Harris.

It's no secret that human behavior is shaped by social pressure. Nevertheless, people generally believe that when they speak and act, their words and deeds reflect not their immediate circumstances but who she will act in the same way. (In experiments, subjects gauge the likelihood at somewhere between 50 and 100 percent.) Actually, there is very little correlation between one case and another—if a woman hands out change one time, there's perhaps a one-in-ten chance she will do so the next. Here's what matters: Does she have extra change in her pocket? Does she have free time? Has someone just done some-thing nice for her? In a thoroughly delightful experiment, it was shown that even a theology student in training for the ministry—someone, for that matter, on his way to deliver a sermon on the Good Samaritan—will blithely step over a person in distress if he is running a few minutes late.

You've just seen examples of how context shapes behavior. But do you believe them? It is incredibly difficult to get people to absorb the importance of contingency. In one experiment, researchers told college students that in a video they were about to watch, a speaker reading an essay endorsing the death penalty had been explicitly assigned to take that position. The students were told it was, quite literally, a command performance. Yet when psychologists asked the students, after the video rolled, if the speech reflected the speaker's own views, the students said yes. Psychologists then took the experiment a step further, all but rubbing students' noses in the context. They asked the students to write a short speech themselves, taking a preassigned position on the death penalty—irrespective of their own views. Sometimes the psychologists even provided the students with a list of arguments that had to be included. Yet when the students saw someone else, on video, making the same arguments that they themselves had just regurgitated on command, they still felt that the speaker really believed what he or she was saying. If you find that odd, you're not alone. "It's really amazing how opaque we are, how dense," Nisbett says.

These findings have been repeated so often that they are staples of social-psychology textbooks, and they've been duplicated using widely varying topics and groups of students. The fundamental attribution error, it was assumed, was indeed fundamental. Nisbett, therefore, was astounded to find that East Asians are less susceptible to it—or rather, that they don't carry it to such near-autistic, Homer Simpson-esque lengths. Asians are just as prone to make the error the first time around. But once they are guided to notice context, they do better. At first, when watching speakers assess the death penalty, they do not identify the speakers' motivations correctly. But when assigned to write their own essays on the death penalty, most of them quickly catch on, correctly identifying why the speakers are saying what they are saying. When they are given specific arguments to use, they are all the more able to grasp the situation.

In psychology lingo, the finding suggests that Asians exhibit greater "attention to the field" than Americans. Nisbett and his collaborators have observed this heightened awareness in many corners of life. Asian newspapers, for example, tend to explain murders through references to social influences ("He was under a lot of pressure"), whereas American papers focus on stable traits ("He was crazy"). In laboratories, Asians and Westerners show similar divergences. When presented with a short piece of detective fiction, Asians identify far more of the passing details in the story as relevant clues. These aren't just differences of taste; often the Asians are right. "East Asian folk psychology," Nisbett and his colleagues write, "may better correspond to the findings and theory of scientific psychology than does American folk psychology."

Even at the most abstract levels of cognition, such as categorization, the two groups of test subjects display significant differences. Perhaps because of their social attunement, Asians appear to be more interested in networks and affiliations than in rigid definitions and categories. When Americans are asked to group together two of the three words "seagull," "sky," and "dog," they choose "seagull, dog," presumably because both fit into the category "animal." Asians choose "seagull, sky," presumably because seagulls can be found in the sky. (In the trio "pen, notebook, magazine," Asians choose "pen, notebook," Americans "notebook, magazine.")

THE MOST BASIC differences, however, and perhaps the most striking ones, have to do with visual perception. Almost everyone finds it bizarre to think of an Easterner and a Westerner looking at the same picture and finding different things there. The most memorable visual-perception experiments involve the now-famous Michigan fish. These studies were written up in *The New York Times* in August 2000 and will soon be reproduced in textbooks. Takahiko Masuda, their graduate-student inventor, used digital animation to create several aquatic scenes. Viewed on a computer monitor, the scenes show several large iridescent fish moving purposefully across the field of view while small fish and other bland water creatures go about their business in the background. American and Japanese students were asked to watch the scenes for an undisclosed reason. When quizzed later on, they remembered very different things about the scenes. The Japanese made 70 percent more comments about the backgrounds. They made fully twice as many comments about inanimate objects, such as sand, rocks, and shells. The Americans remarked on little except the big "focal fish." "If it ain't moving," Nisbett likes to say when he presents the data, "it doesn't exist for an American."

Nisbett's various tests have been administered to Asian and European-American students in Ann Arbor as well as to students at universities in China, Korea, and Japan. In all of these disparate settings, the findings are consistent—justifying, Nisbett says, talk of "East" and "West." "People have been talking about the differences between Eastern and Western cultures for decades—even using the terms 'analytic' and 'holistic,'" says Susan Andersen, a professor of psychology at New York University and an editor at *Psychological Review*. "It's not as if that notion is brand new by any stretch. What's new is that the evidence is so provocative and clear, and Nisbett is such a superb scientist that he can nail down things that had previously been more on the order of what I would call clinical speculation."

NISBETT'S findings would seem to open a philosophical can of worms, offering ammunition to radical multiculturalists and relativists who argue that there is no standpoint, outside particular cultures, from which truths about the world can be ascertained. Nisbett doesn't think the implications are quite that momentous. "When I first started doing this work, I thought, I'm really dancing with the devil—relativism, anything goes, 'there are no standards.' I don't feel that way anymore. I do feel that there are universals. I just don't know where they are."

Nisbett's attitude is far from belittling toward Eastern cultures. On the contrary, he reflects, "The more familiar I am with Eastern ways of thing, the more respectful of them I am and the easier it is to criticize Western ways of thinking." In his office, a couple of stray pieces of Asian pottery and a four-inch-tall marble dragon hint at his sympathies. On the tests, however, Nisbett performs like an off-the-charts Westerner.

The recent *Psychological Review* paper avoids one of cultural psychology's most obvious danger zones by refusing to chalk the differences up to biology. Instead, the authors argue that the variation is "traceable to markedly different social systems." And yet, in his search for explanations, Nisbett is not shy about making grand cultural-historical arguments that seem to contrast with his careful laboratory work. Eastern and Western attitudes and cognitive attributes, he believes, can be traced all the way back to ancient Greece and ancient China. Social independence and logical thought have long gone together in the West, he argues; the Greeks were great debaters, flaunting their (individual) wits. China, by contrast, was always characterized by "closely knit collectivity" and had no real tradition of public argument. China's was also an agricultural society, whereas independent-minded herders and fishermen populated Greece.

Today, Nisbett adds, social practices and cognitive styles reinforce each other. Asian kids are taught by their parents that the nail that sticks out gets hammered in, whereas American kids learn that the squeaky wheel gets the grease. Asians practice feng shui, which teaches them to pay attention to the environment; attending to the environment then encourages the development of more practices like feng shui.

These differences may have real-world implications. Paradoxically, because Asians are more aware of social pressure, they may be more resistant to it. Knowing that viewing pornography might push them toward sexual callousness, for instance, they might take steps to avoid such films, whereas Americans, certain that they are too stout of character to be affected, might get blindsided. Nisbett also advances another hypothesis that may be less flattering to Asians. Because Asians know that many factors affect behavior, they tend to be less surprised than Westerners when things go otherwise than they expect. This applies to the physical world, too. This general unsurprisability, combined with a slightly softer attitude toward logic, renders Asians less eager to identify cause and effect. The same qualities that make Asians socially acute may reduce their "epistemic curiosity" about the world. That in turn, Nisbett speculates, may explain why science arose in the West, not the East—despite Asia's rich traditions of art, culture, and practical invention.

ONE MIGHT THINK that Nisbett's work on cultural differences would strike a chord with anthropologists, but for the most part they have given him a cold shoulder. "Psychologists who are doing work on culture and cognition rely on anthropologists," Nisbett says. "But it's very much an unrequited love." Hazel Markus concurs: "Most people in literary criticism, anthropology, and cultural studies just kind of reject psychology as somehow the devil. They make the sign of the cross and turn away." Cultural anthropologists have largely abandoned their previous assumption that a culture can be understood as a unified whole; rather, they stress that cultures are composed of disparate parts that are continually made and remade. One well-known anthropologist, who did not want to be named, wrote in an e-mail to me that Nisbett's research was "deja vu all over again," alluding to the bad old days when social scientists argued that all Germans were stuck in the anal phase and that the "natives" couldn't think logically.

Even some fellow cognitive psychologists have reservations. John A. Lucy, a member of Chicago's Committee on Human Development who has studied the effects of language on cognition, cautions that Nisbett's categories are too sweeping and broad. "Where I have trouble," he says, "is that he's talking about 'Asia.' When you compare China and Korea and Thailand and Japan, they are really different from a cultural point of view, and even a biological point of view. A lot of anthropologists who work in the area get a little nervous when people talk about 'the Asian mind'—the way you might get nervous hearing someone talking about 'the Aryan mind.' Especially, he adds, if "Aryan" is supposed to include the Irish, Scandinavians, Poles, and Italians. And the use of ancient concepts like the Tao to map the modern Asian mind also strikes him as "just too big a reach."

Richard Shweder agrees. He suggests that though it's "unjustifiable" for anthropologists to reject the study of cultural difference, "when you start talking about 'East and West' at a very high level of abstraction, you do start bordering on a form of stereotype." Cultural psychologists would be better off reconstructing and analyzing the hopes, fears, and worldviews of real people in concrete circumstances. "To give an account of belief in a society," he says, "you have to give an account of an individual person in the society."

Several anthropologists suggest that Nisbett's results are artifacts of slightly skewed experiments, although these critics haven't examined the protocols closely enough to explain how this might be so. "If there's anything that anthropologists are sensitive to, it is context," says Webb Keane, an associate professor at Michigan. "You don't just generalize from the laboratory situation to all sorts of situations that people find themselves in outside the lab. People enter labs with all sorts of expectations of what to do there." In response to the charge that he leans on ethnic stereotypes, Nisbett says he is stumped as to how he can discuss the lab findings without invoking Asia, or shared culture, in his papers. "One answer I have is that most of what we do doesn't have anything to do with the stereotypes—and some of our findings overturn them," he adds. "You couldn't derive the fish stuff from stereotypes. The second answer is, Let the chips fall where they may. Asians have a lot of cognitive habits that might benefit us. I'd like to see more things than I do. I'd like to not make some of the logical errors I do. I'd like to be less susceptible to the fundamental attribution error." How easily can we train ourselves to think in another cultural style? Nisbett suspects Asians are at an advantage. "I think they will get our tricks before we get theirs," he says. "Our tricks are easy to get. Rules are easy."

AT TIMES, Nisbett thinks some of his critics are more interested in politics than in science—and he's been there before. In the early 1990s, he gave a talk on the Michigan campus in which he rebutted the idea that blacks have lower I.Q.'s than whites; some faculty and student activists blasted him for the talk, arguing that it was offensive to find such ideas even worthy of discussion. He blames such activists—at Michigan and elsewhere—for squelching honest work on the subject and thus leaving scholars unprepared to counter what he calls the "scurrilous" arguments put forth in *The Bell Curve* a few years later. Partly because there was a scholarly vacuum, he says, the press received *The Bell Curve* with far too little skepticism. "I'm angry at my fellow liberals for allowing that to happen," he says. "When anyone accuses me of 'essentializing,' I get some of that anger back."

"Here I'll say one essentializing thing," he adds, breaking into a disarming smile. "Asians need to be warned less about the dangers of essentializing than we do."

According to the new work, after all, it's Americans who put people into categories and attribute significant, unchangeable qualities to them. Asians tend to believe in a more fluid social world. Which raises an interesting question: Is there something prototypically Western about Nisbett's whole project? Is he indulging his American desire to chop the world up into categories and assign fixed essences to the different parts? Are we sure that Asians possess the stable trait of not believing in stable traits? Do Nisbett's findings display Western social science's own fundamental attribution error when dealing with other cultures?

Some anthropologists think so. Nisbett's earlier work, however, is so well regarded that the new findings are getting a respectful look from people in a number of fields. Nisbett has even inspired Stephen

Stich, the Rutgers philosopher, to turn to the lab. Using questionnaires, Stich thinks he has detected subtle differences between Asian and Western epistemology—different standards for determining when we "really know" something, as opposed to merely believing it.

The few people exploring the tricky boundary between anthropology and psychology say that Nisbett deserves credit for his courage. "When you are in a tradition that has clear boundaries and clear stands, it's easy to march forward," says John Lucy. "When you are on new turf, it gets hard. You get potshots from left and right. I vigorously disagree with some of Nisbett's work, but I respect him and I hope he succeeds."

Roy D'Andrade, an anthropologist at UC-San Diego, says the real insights in cultural psychology will emerge from the clashes between ethnographers and lab scientists. The lab scientists will be pressed to produce more nuanced arguments, and the ethnographers will be spurred to generate harder, empirically verifiable data. "I think they will argue," he says, "and the grad students will look at both sides and say, 'A plague on both your houses,' and try to find a way around the paradoxes and conundrums of their teachers. If you want to know what the resolution will look like, you'll have to see what the new generation does."

In the meantime, Stich says, it might make sense for scholars to be a little more circumspect about speaking of the ways "human beings" form hypotheses about the world. Psychology is belatedly coming to terms with its universalist fallacies, he says. But philosophers and cognitive scientists are even further behind, peppering their papers with blithe remarks about what "we" intuitively feel, morally, and what proof "we" accept as conclusive. Will they ever change their ways? Perhaps not: After all, as Nisbett's work suggests, our most cherished habits may be more deeply entrenched than we know.

Christopher Shea is a contributing writer to *LF*. His article "A Blacker Shade of Yale: African-American Studies Takes a New Direction" appeared in the March 2001 issue.