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Cultural differences in analogical reasoning

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Abstract

According to a long-standing dogma, Westerners are more capable of thinking abstractly than East Asians. Here, we challenge this generalization by comparing US and Chinese adults in a paradigm case of abstract thinking: analogy. Chinese and American participants completed the most difficult set of Raven's (2003) Standard Progressive Matrices (SPM), a widely used test of analogical reasoning. For each item, participants attempted to discern the analogical relationships between parts of an incomplete matrix to identify the correct way to complete it. Chinese participants produced significantly more correct answers on the SPM, indicating more successful analogical reasoning. We replicated this result with a second sample of Chinese participants. This cross-cultural difference remained significant when demographic factors were controlled. We predicted this difference, reasoning that East Asian's sensitivity to context gives them an advantage over Westerners in various kinds of abstract thinking.