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Abstract Thought Across Cultures

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Abstract

How does thinking differ across cultures? Previously, we reported that Chinese people tend to think more abstractly than Caucasian Americans, as indexed by their propensity to construe actions either abstractly or concretely (Singh et al., 2019). Here we provide further evidence for the cultural diversity of abstract thought: We report action construal data from Japan and South Korea, and compare them to our previous Chinese and American data. Chinese, Japanese, and South Korean patterns of action construal all differed significantly from one another. Whereas Chinese participants construed actions more abstractly than American participants, South Koreans did not differ from Americans, and Japanese participants construed actions less abstractly than Americans. The diversity of these East Asian data challenges the assumption that people from China, Japan, and South Korea have a unified “Eastern” cognitive style. Furthermore, these results challenge the longstanding generalization that Westerners think more abstractly than non-Westerners.