

East views the world differently to West

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Cultural differences between the West and East are well documented, but a study shows that concrete differences also exist in how British and Chinese people recognise people and the world around them. Easterners really do look at the world differently to Westerners, according to new research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

"British and Chinese people process visual information in very different ways," explains researcher Dr David Kelly from Royal Holloway, University of London. "This is important not simply from a research viewpoint, but because it helps us understand much better some of the cultural differences between East and West which people can sometimes find disconcerting."

For example, while most British people look at a person's eyes when they are talking to them, Chinese people are much less likely to make eye contact. "This can leave the British person feeling uncomfortable and distrustful," Dr Kelly points out. "On the other hand, the Chinese person would consider eye contact to be potentially disrespectful and impolite."

Research now suggests that this particular cultural contrast is underpinned by the different ways [Westerners](#) (British) and Easterners (Chinese) 'process' visual information. While adults from Western cultures process information analytically by focusing on key features, adults from the East process information in a more holistic style, which also takes context and situation into account.

In terms of eye contact for example, this means that when a Westerner

processes a person's face they will typically fixate on the key feature of the face, usually the eyes. An Easterner, in contrast, will largely avoid the eyes (hence the lack of [eye contact](#)) and take in information from a wider area below the eyes and around the nose. Interestingly, the studies also show that when asked to recognise other unfamiliar stimuli, such as sheep faces, Westerners and Easterners continue to employ their different face processing strategies in animals.

The researchers also explored when the learning of socio-cultural processing strategies took place by carrying out a series of visual processing studies with British and Chinese children, aged five to 12.

"If culture is responsible for shaping the way visual information is extracted and processed, then it is reasonable to assume that the strategies observed in Eastern adults emerge during childhood," Dr Kelly points out. "And our research showed this to be the case. Both British and Chinese children showed only minimal or no differences in processing strategies at the youngest age groups of five and six years year olds, but the different ways of processing [visual information](#) had emerged by the age of 12."

While the mechanisms by which these different strategies emerge between age five and 12 is at present unknown, researchers believe these findings make an important contribution to smoothing cross-cultural relations. "While the Chinese are extremely keen to act appropriately and not offend anyone, [cultural differences](#) can make interactions uncomfortable and frustrating," Dr Kelly explains. "Greater awareness of how these differences arise can only help improve communication between East and West."

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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