

When it comes to emotions, Eastern and Western cultures see things very differently

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University of Alberta psychology professor Takahiko Masuda. Credit: University of Alberta

A team of researchers from Canada and Japan have uncovered some remarkable results on how eastern and western cultures assess situations very differently.

Across two studies, participants viewed images, each of which consisted of one centre model and four background models in each image. The researchers manipulated the facial emotion (happy, angry, sad) in the centre or background models and asked the participants to determine the dominant emotion of the centre figure.

The majority of Japanese participants (72%) reported that their

judgments of the centre person's emotions were influenced by the emotions of the background figures, while most North Americans (also 72%) reported they were not influenced by the background figures at all.

“What we found is quite interesting,” says Takahiko Masuda, a Psychology professor from the University of Alberta. “Our results demonstrate that when North Americans are trying to figure out how a person is feeling, they selectively focus on that particular person's facial expression, whereas Japanese consider the emotions of the other people in the situation.”

This may be because Japanese attention is not concentrated on the individual, but includes everyone in the group, says Masuda.

For the second part of the study, researchers monitored the eye movements of the participants and again the results indicated that the Japanese looked at the surrounding people more than the westerners when judging the situation.

While both the Japanese and westerners looked to the central figure during the first second of viewing the photo, the Japanese looked to the background figures at the very next second, while westerners continued to focus on the central figure.

"East Asians seem to have a more holistic pattern of attention, perceiving people in terms of the relationships to others," says Masuda. "People raised in the North American tradition often find it easy to isolate a person from its surroundings, while East Asians are accustomed to read the air "kuuki wo yomu" of the situation through their cultural practices, and as a result, they think that even surrounding people's facial expressions are an informative source to understand the particular person's emotion.”

These findings are published in the upcoming issue of *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Source: University of Alberta

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