

All in the mind

Technology and affordable air travel may be bringing cultures together, but diversity runs deep, says author and academic Richard Nisbett.

If you thought that the global phenomenon that was “Gangnam Style” said something about globalisation and a melding of cultural attitudes, then think again. The interconnected world may be where East meets West, but global businesses ignore the significant remaining differences at their peril, says one of the leading thinkers on the subject.

Richard Nisbett, based at the University of Michigan, is author of the respected volume *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently—and Why*. He says cultural diversity is not just about what we like and how we behave but even affects what we see. He describes an experiment in which Japanese and American people were, individually, shown realistic (but animated) underwater scenes lasting 20 seconds and then were asked, “What did you see?” The Japanese respondents, he recalls, typically started by describing the context of the scene. “Almost always, the Japanese referred to the backdrop element of the water in which these things were happening. So they might say, ‘Well, I saw the stream; the water was green; there were rocks and shells at the bottom; and there were three big fish swimming off to the right.’ But the Americans rarely mentioned the context. They started off with the most salient, largest, brightly

coloured things. They were saying, ‘I saw three big fish swimming off to the right, and they had big stipples on their bellies; there were rocks and shells on the bottom,’ etc. The Japanese identified 60 per cent more context elements like rocks and shells, and they identified twice as many relationships, like ‘the shell was next to the reeds.’”

Another experiment presented subjects with an image of a cartoon person clearly expressing an emotion, such as anger. In some cases, that person was flanked by other people displaying the same emotion; in other cases, that person was surrounded by people displaying other emotions. When asked what emotion the central figure was displaying, the Japanese, Nisbett says, were substantially influenced by the emotions of the people flanking the central character, while the Americans were largely unaffected.

This sense of context is evident in relationships and can be measured. “In East Asia, the concept of the person is bound up with other people: I am my parents’ child, I’m my sister’s brother, I’m my friend’s friend and so forth, and I’ve been told by East Asians who know Westerners very well that if someone moves out of your circle, you lose someone. You literally feel like a different person. Now that’s true for us, too: if I lost

my wife, I would feel like half a person, but my immediate family is pretty much it. I could lose my best friend, and I’d still feel like myself. That’s not true of East Asians.” Brain scans show the medial prefrontal cortices of both Asians and Westerners reacting when subjects think about themselves. “But,” Nisbett notes, “when East Asians think about their mother, that same area lights up. It doesn’t light up for Westerners.”

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BUSINESS?

For businesses looking to appeal to consumers and to affect those who influence consumers, this means very different approaches depending on which part of the world they’re working in. “The point is about perception and cognition,” Nisbett says. “The East Asians see much more of situational context than Westerners do, so they’re more attentive to what other people think, what other people are doing and what their emotional reactions are. One implication of this is that East Asians are much more aware of social influence.”

When it comes to the power of advertising and word of mouth, Asians tend to be far more aware of who is influencing them and the prevailing climate of conformity. Westerners tend to think they make up their own mind about





the world based on their own reasoning and their own values. In fact, social context does influence Asians to a greater extent, but Westerners are often blind to the social pressures that they, too, are under.

Western brands moving east, Nisbett says, should try to emphasise why their product is good for people's relationships with others and how it expresses your communion with people in your group—with your fellow countrymen—even though that would be a mistake for most Western audiences. This approach to diversity is best seen, he says, in two Samsung ads for the same product in different markets. In the West, "the ad shows an individual, and it's emphasising why you should get this product: it's because you're such an independent person—you march to your own drum—so to express your individuality, you would want this product. The Samsung ad directed at Koreans has two families on a picnic together and says, 'Samsung is another family.'"

GREAT WALLS

The East-West divide is not a sharp line, Nisbett notes, but is rather a sliding scale that not only varies between geographies but also within markets and across age groups. "I talk about Americans as distinct from Westerners, because on all the

East Asians, especially Japanese, are much wiser about social conflict when they're young than Americans are, and I think it's because they're being taught.

dimensions, Americans are more extreme, but all of this moves as you go from East to West or West to East. Russians and East Europeans are roughly half way between East Asians and Americans," he says.

Socio-economic status (SES) is also a strong indicator of these kinds of differences in viewpoint, especially the relationship between the individual and their communities, Nisbett says. "I've been speaking as if the big distinction is between East Asians and Westerners. Actually, you can find these differences within cultures.

"Lower socio-economic status people are much more like East Asians than upper

middle-class people. We have seen that East Asia equals lower SES. Westerners equal higher SES." Nisbett suggests a thought experiment: suppose that you had just bought a new car. If you found out shortly afterwards that one of your friends had bought the exact same car, how would you react? "Would you say, 'Oh god, that would be terrible! My friend is sort of stealing my identity'? Lower SES people say, 'Well, that'd be fantastic! We could start a car club or something.'"

Universities in the US, which are trying to encourage more students from low SES backgrounds into higher education, are having to change their approach in a way

not too dissimilar to that of brands moving from West to East. Research has found that the language used in marketing material by prestigious universities was turning low SES students away. "They'd say, 'You're here to develop yourself. You're here to find your own goals and values and what you're going to be like in the world,' and this is very off-putting and alienating to working-class people. So, for them, you want to emphasise that this is all about how you're going to advance your family, you're going to be part of a community where you'll be sharing, and so on."

BLURRING BOUNDARIES

With globalisation, some of those boundaries are blurring. Young Chinese tend to be more 'Western' than, say, the Japanese, he says. "The Japanese have been industrialised for 150 years and capitalist to a large degree, and I think in general industrialisation and capitalisation push people in an individualistic direction. But if that's happened in Japan, it certainly hasn't gone very far, because they remain highly interdependent. On the other hand, the Chinese have always been more individualistic than the Japanese." University professors teaching Asian students have long been frustrated by pupils' reluctance to speak up in class. "It's still that way with Japanese and Korean students that I have, but Chinese students—not so much."

Nisbett recalls that he was speaking recently with a young team in China from Procter & Gamble about a new shampoo being introduced. "My god, they were all over me!" he says. "I couldn't get a word in. It was much more animated than I would expect with a bunch of Westerners. I think they're moving very rapidly towards a more individualistic, independent way."

Are Westerners moving towards Eastern ways of thinking and seeing, too? Nisbett thinks we may be, just a little. "I do think there is some indication that, at least in the US, people are moving towards being more concerned with community—or are at least paying lip service to it." His hunch is that this shift has less to do with the recession and the need for people to help one another out than with a broader change that includes

greater acceptance of holistic health therapies.

"To the Chinese, it's always seemed bizarre that you might be able to cure someone by chopping something out of their body, so they've understood health in terms of relations between what's going on in the body and a holistic approach to the body and its relationship with the environment. Now, of course, that's becoming much more of a concern in Western medicine."

The way individuals regard themselves and the influences on them changes throughout their lives, of course, and Nisbett's recent research into older people shows some of them do, indeed, get wiser. "Westerners get wiser as they get older with respect to some kinds of things," he says. "The two kinds of things you'd expect people to get wiser at—understanding social conflict, how to avoid it and deal with it if it happens, and increasing uncertainty about the world—both of these things are true for Westerners. East Asians, especially Japanese, are much wiser about social conflict when they're young than Americans are, and I think it's because they're being taught. Thereafter, they don't get wiser in that respect. There isn't that much more for them to learn."

For researchers looking to eliminate Asian respondents' urge to agree with a

group and please the interviewer, Nisbett says digital technology and the anonymity it can provide may be the answer. The focus group is unlikely to elicit honest answers in, say, Japan, he says, recounting a story about his Japanese friend who, after living in America, wanted to try an American-style dinner party in Japan. "It was a total flop, because American dinner parties are just an exchange of opinion: 'I saw this.' 'Have you been watching *Breaking Bad*?' 'Do you like it?' 'I hated it.' 'Really? I loved it.' For Japanese, my god, it's a social mess. The social fabric has been torn if there's a disagreement." **RW**



Richard Nisbett

is Theodore M. Newcomb Distinguished University Professor at the University of Michigan. He is also author of *Intelligence and How to Get it: Why Schools and Cultures Count* and co-author with Malcolm Gladwell and Lee Ross of *The Person and the Situation*.

BIGGER, BOLDER, BETTER RESOURCES

the NEW MyESOMAR

Members can login now
to exclusively download
the Congress 2013
paper collection.

 **ACCESS TOP RESOURCES** 

-  **Research World Magazine**
Download the latest edition
-  **Webinars library**
Watch the past webinars on demand
-  **Market intelligence reports**
Global Prices Study and more
-  **Paper collection**
3D Digital Dimensions 2013
-  **Congress 2013 presentations**
...



**GET CONNECTED:
START NETWORKING**

➔ Search & message your peers

BUILD YOUR REPUTATION

 **MANAGE YOUR PROFILE**

EXTEND YOUR NETWORK

 **FIND & CONTACT YOUR PEERS**



How did Coca-Cola use research to change drinking habits in South Latin America?

rwconnect.esomar.org

RW
CONNECT

ESOMAR
| WORLD RESEARCH

BE
CONNECTED

Join Now

www.esomar.org/membership

Stratégir
Consumer & Shopper researchers

Further than
Facts...

Mix research

- Simulated Test Market
- Pack
- Concept
- Price

Sensory research

- Pref Map
- Sniff test
- Blind Test

www.strategir.com

BORDEAUX
MANNHEIM
LONDON
LYON
SHANGHAI
NEW YORK
MADRID
SAO PAULO
RIO
MILAN
MOSCOW
KIEV
WARSAW
MINSK
BELGRADE
BUDAPEST
ZAGREB
NICOSIA
JEDDAH

Consumer Knowledge

Brand tracking Needstates U&A

Shopper research

Drugstores
Specialized & department stores Hypermarkets e-Retail