A LINE ON LIFE

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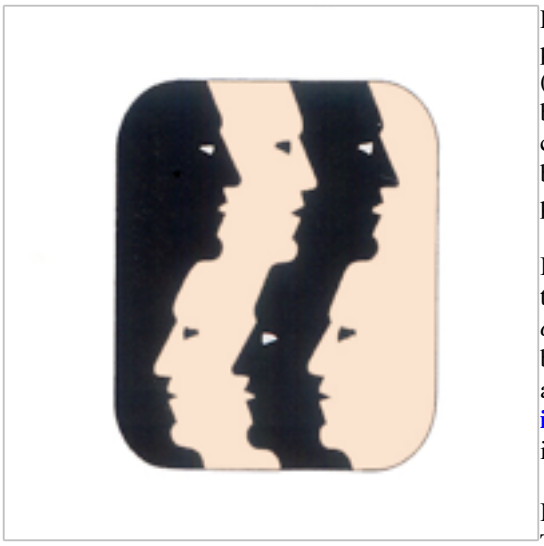
Person Perception — East vs. West *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Social psychologists study many topics. One of these is how we perceive other people. However, social psychology developed largely as a product of our culture. Most of the research on evaluating personal traits was conducted in the United States. Do the conclusions apply to people all over the world? Or are they only relevant to people in the United States? How does our culture influence our self-image and our perception of others?



Fortunately, social psychologists are aware of this problem. In the last decade, **cross-cultural studies** (examining similar aspects in different cultures) have become more common. According to these cross-cultural studies, there seem to be significant differences between Western societies and Eastern societies in the perception of other people.

In **Western societies** like the United States, research typically views the individual as "*independent, self-contained, and autonomous*." Individuals are seen as being guided by **internal qualities** such as traits, abilities, motives, and values. The emphasis is on **individualism**. People want to be recognized individually for what they contribute or achieve.

In contrast, **Eastern cultures** — China, Japan, or Thailand — have another viewpoint. They tend to see individuals as **interdependent** with the surrounding society. In this view, the individual can only be viewed in specific **situations** — with friends, family, work group, or toward the village or society as a whole. In Eastern societies, people are seen collectively. There is a strong desire to belong, to fit in with whatever relationship exists at the time. They stress group goals and actions. They avoid any individual recognition that might separate them from their group.

Of course, these cultural differences lead to a divergence in our perception of ourselves and others. In the West, we focus on an *independent* self. This makes us strive for **internal consistency**. For example, we try to act consistently over time and have our attitudes match our personal behavior. We tend to strive for "*self-expression*" and try to reach our "*full potential*."

The Eastern view of the self is much different, and this leads to different behavior. Easterners want to be in **harmony with their surroundings**. Internal consistency is less important for them. In contrast, their emphasis is on acting according to the expectations in a particular situation. They find no discomfort in behaving one way in one situation and the opposite way in another. In contrast to the Western attempt to maintain harmony within the self, Easterners strive for harmony within the situation.

These different cultural views also influence the **attributions** — the assignment of causes — concerning the behavior of others. In Western cultures, people discount the effect of the situation on behavior. This makes them likely to commit the **fundamental attribution error**. This means that we — as Western observers — incorrectly view the behavior of others as caused by internal personality traits. In comparison, we minimize the potential of situational factors.

In contrast, people from Eastern cultures are *not* likely to see behavior as caused by internal traits. We, as Westerners, are likely to say, "*She is a friendly person*." In contrast, those from Eastern cultures are likely to merely describe the behavior. "*She acts friendly when she meets people she likes*." With this different emphasis, people from Eastern cultures are less likely to make the fundamental attribution error.

In a 1984 cross-cultural study, several descriptions of deviant behavior were read by people from North America and Hindus from India. They were asked to make attributions for the described behavior. For example, one case involved a motorcycle accident. The passenger was badly injured. The driver, who was an attorney, left the injured passenger in the hospital waiting room. The attorney immediately hurried to his trial in the courtroom. He did not wait to talk with a physician about the passenger's condition. The passenger died.

How did the subjects explain the actions of the attorney? Of the responses of North Americans, 36% involved *internal qualities* of the attorney (irresponsible, success-oriented). On the other hand, only 17% of the responses related to *situational factors* (need to deal with an important court case). In contrast, the responses of Indian subjects indicated an opposite trend. They mentioned internal qualities 15% of the time and situational factors 32% of the time. (Some members of each group included neither of the two factors.)

Our culture influences the way we interpret people's actions. However, we need to point out an important point. In both groups, there were some who attributed behavior to internal factors, and others who attributed the same behavior to situational factors. Even in our culture — that emphasizes internal causes for the behavior of others — situational factors are not completely ignored.

When judging behavior of people from other cultures, we need to remember our Western bias.

These cross-cultural experiments give us some insights. Our cultural norms warp our perception of our own actions and the actions of others. We need to remember the differences between cultures. This becomes especially important, when we evaluate behavior of people from other cultures. What seems appropriate in other cultures may seem irrational to us, since we are judging by our Western norms.

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* Adapted from Stephen Worchel and Wayne Shebilske's *Psychology: Principles and Applications,* Prentice Hall Publishers, 1992, page 629.