

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE *Current*

August 8, 2018

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Rugged Individualists

Though a small segment of the population, left-handers have a lot to contend with. Consider, for example, the *left*-handed compliment (that isn't really a compliment at all), the *left*-handed toast (tantamount to putting a curse on the honoree) and the evil spirits that lurk over one's *left* shoulder (hence the throwing of salt in that direction).

And then there's the tell-tale ink or pencil smudge that runs along the outside edge of the left-hander's palm.

Even the French word for "left" — "gauche" — in English refers to something that is unsophisticated or socially awkward.

But August 13 — International Left Handers Day — southpaws everywhere will have their moment.

"It's interesting the way we identify it," said Heejung Kim, a professor of psychology at UC Santa Barbara whose research interests include the role of culture in shaping social behaviors. "Right-handed is 'correct-handed' and left-handed is what's 'left.'"

In a study that looked at when and why differences in devaluation and avoidance of individuals with "non-normative" characteristics emerge between East Asian and Western cultural contexts, for example, Kim and her team used left-handedness as a test function.

“Some cultures — like the Korean culture — are more collectivistic,” Kim said. “They tend to put a high value on tightly adhering to cultural norms.” Individualistic cultures, by contrast, stress independence and personal identity. “They tend to have a more loose, live-and-let-live approach,” she noted.

An indicator of that cultural difference is the number of left-handed people, and in collectivistic cultures, left-handedness is not very common. “It’s not that people in individualistic cultures create more left-handed babies,” Kim explained, “but rather that in collectivistic cultures parents of left-handed children are more likely to force their children to use their right hands.”

In those cultures, she continued “you’re not supposed to be different from what’s considered normative.”

In the devaluation study, Kim and her colleagues wanted to understand whether and why some cultures undervalue unusual traits or behaviors, and how great a role the voluntary or involuntary nature of those traits and behaviors play. “Left-handedness was useful for our research because it is a fairly innocuous type of unusualness,” she said.

It turns out that even if a characteristic is involuntary, people in collectivistic cultures — where group function is paramount — tended to undervalue it, although they did so to a lesser extent when compared with a characteristic considered more voluntary. They anticipate, Kim noted, that the individual displaying that characteristic will require a greater share of the communal resources. “In the study, when we introduced a left-handed person but that person made a point of saying he wouldn’t need any special treatment, people were more willing to accept him,” she said.

About UC Santa Barbara

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