



**FEELINGS** Images from a study that found that Westerners focused on the central figure's expression, while the Japanese took everyone into account.

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## East and West Part Ways in Test of Facial Expressions

By [ERIC NAGOURNEY](#)

How do you know how someone is feeling? For people in Western societies, it is usually easy: look at the person's face.

But for people from Japan and other Eastern societies, a new study finds, it may be more complex — having to do not only with evaluating the other person's face but also with gauging the mood of others who might be around.

The differences may speak to deeply ingrained cultural traits, the authors write, suggesting that Westerners may “see emotions as individual feelings, while Japanese see them as inseparable from the feelings of the group.”

The findings are based on a study of about three dozen students in two groups — one Japanese, one Western — who were shown a series of drawings of five children. The volunteers were told that the drawings were going to be used in an educational television program and that the researchers wanted to see how realistic they were.

Sometimes the expressions of all the children in an image were the same, but more often they varied. The participants were asked to look at the face of the person at the center of the picture and rate it on a 10-point scale for happiness, sadness and anger.

The Western students did not much change their assessment of a character's mood no matter what was happening with the other characters. But for most of the Japanese participants, it made a measurable difference. If the figure in the center had a happy face but those in the background were sad or angry, they tended to give the happy figure a

lower score. If everyone was happy, they gave the figure in the center a higher one. When the images were shown to two other groups of students wearing equipment that tracked their eye movements, the researchers found that the Japanese spent more time looking at the children in the background of the pictures.

The [study](#) appears in the March issue of The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. While the study offers hints into how different the world may look to people from different cultures, it raises as many questions as answers. “We don’t know exactly what’s going on,” said the lead author, Takahiko Masuda, an assistant professor of [psychology](#) at the University of Alberta in Canada.

Still, the study fits squarely in a longstanding body of research into differences between Eastern and Western perceptions of the world around us.

Researchers studying paintings from the 16th through 20th centuries, for example, have found that in Western portraits, the subject took up a larger portion of the picture and was painted in a way to make the subject stand out, the study said. In Eastern portraits, the subjects tended to be smaller and to blend into the background.

Even now, the differences often remain. When Dr. Masuda and other researchers handed students cameras in an earlier study and asked them to take portraits, the subjects filled more space in the frame of the photographs taken by the Americans.

Many researchers have suggested that East Asians take a more holistic view of the world.

In the new study on faces, the findings may also reflect social differences, said Kristi L. Lockhart, a lecturer in psychology at Yale who has studied both cultures. Where Western societies tend to promote individuality, Eastern ones emphasize the needs of the group. So when a Japanese sees a happy person amid sad ones, it may be a bit unsettling. He may adjust his view of how happy that person is “because of his real desire to fit in with the group and to not be different,” Dr. Lockhart said.

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