
Standing Out: Is it Selfish?



By [Zoe Kinias](#) , INSEAD Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour

Your unusual trait may be acceptable, even endearing, in some contexts, but in others it could place you at professional risk.

With the global job market remaining ultra-competitive, a question on many people's minds is what influences the evaluations of job candidates. Everyone wants to be evaluated at least as favourably as their qualifications justify, but can seemingly innocuous unusual traits make those aiming to socially network and land jobs less professionally attractive? For example, does being exceptionally curious, left-handed, or vegetarian catch people's eye in a positive way if they notice at all, or could this reduce the extent to which others want to interact and work with people with this sort of unusual characteristic?

New research shows that people who have even benign unusual characteristics should pay attention to cultural variance in responses to them. Having these unusual characteristics is usually not problematic in the United States. But in South Korea, Japan, and other East Asian countries, where people are more likely to believe that there are proper ways of being and acting to ensure social harmony and facilitate group functioning, they can have personal and professional implications.

Specifically, in East Asian countries people tend to expect individuals who have what we call “non-normative” characteristics to cause a disruption. They are seen as more selfish and are more likely to be avoided. This is even more likely if the characteristic is seen as controllable, such as being a vegetarian (versus having a food allergy, for which people are not blamed), and if the individual has not taken steps to assure others that they will minimise potential disruptions.

How did we study this?

In the research, [Standing Out as a Signal to Selfishness: Culture and Devaluation of Non-Normative Characteristics](#), - co-authored with Heejung Kim, Associate Professor of Psychology from the University of California; Andrew Hafenbrack, INSEAD Ph.D. Candidate in Organisational Behaviour; and Jina Lee from Yonsei University - we first investigated the hypothesis that individuals from East Asian countries were more likely to devalue and distance themselves from individuals with non-normative characteristics than were people from the United States. We also examined hypotheses that these individuals were more likely to be considered disruptive and selfish, and what these individuals can do to fare best in East Asia.

The research included several studies using experimental manipulations and controls to analyse outcomes for people with various “non-normative” characteristics in professional and social contexts.

One study compared American and Korean ratings of a local job candidate who was left-handed. The participants all read about a left-handed candidate who was well qualified for a job and were asked to provide a general rating of him as well as indicate how disruptive they thought he would be as an employee. Relative to Americans, the Koreans both rated this left-handed job candidate less favourably and said they thought he would be more disruptive. Statistical analyses further showed that the more disruptive Koreans thought the job applicant would be, the lower their overall ratings of him. Then, a follow-up study examined how Koreans and Americans rate job applicants who differ on handedness and who either cause a disruption by asking for a seat change or not. Whereas the Americans’ decisions were not affected by the applicant’s request to switch seats, when he requested a seat change, Koreans judged him as more selfish and were less likely to offer him the job.

In two additional studies Korean and American participants evaluated individuals who were vegetarian, had a food allergy, or had no dietary restrictions. In one study, participants read about an individual who was a new colleague in a work dinner context, and in the other study participants expressed interest in socially networking with an actual potential partner. In the socially networking study, research participants in both the U.S. and South Korea were told they would have an opportunity to network with someone they would not otherwise have an opportunity to meet, and would watch a video of this individual. The introduction videos were designed to be as similar as possible across cultures and across experimental conditions (in fact, they were rated equivalently attractive by a group of Europeans and other Asians who could not hear what they were saying), but differed in whether the individual casually mentioned having a dietary restriction that influences lunch meeting plans. Across both studies, Americans who evaluated vegetarians or individuals with food allergies were as interested in working and networking with them as were those who evaluated individuals with no dietary restrictions. Koreans, on the other hand, expressed substantially less interest in working or networking with the individuals with dietary restrictions, particularly when the restriction was by choice (vegetarian) and when the person being evaluated caused a disruption (did not eat the main dish at the dinner party).

Too much of a good thing

In the final study we investigated whether East Asians are more likely than Westerners to devalue people who stood out by having excessively favourable qualities. While an initial survey found being curious, friendly, and extroverted were considered by both American and Korean participants to be good traits to have, when participants were asked to rate the characteristic at a higher “non-normative” level – that is being extremely curious, unusually friendly or a strong extrovert – Korean participants significantly devalued them compared to their American counterparts.

Doomed to failure?

One exciting aspect of the current research is that people with unusual characteristics aren’t necessarily doomed to failure as a result of seeming selfish in countries like South Korea. Our research shows that when people with unusual characteristics haven’t chosen to have them and demonstrate they will not request special accommodations, there are no social or professional consequences. This means that individuals with such traits may

wish to take extra steps, when in an East Asian context, to reassure the people they are working or socialising with that they will not be disruptive. Similarly Asians visiting or working in North America should be aware of the greater tolerance towards (even appreciation of) unusual characteristics and the cultural acceptability of relatively innocuous disruptions.



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