

Two Systems of Thinking Across Cultures

Ara Norenzayan

University of British Columbia

Many theorists have postulated two distinct systems that govern human thinking—one is holistic, experience-based and reliant on similarity relations, the other analytic, language-based, and reflecting the application of rules. Until recently, little was known about these systems of thinking outside of North American and Western European cultures. In recent years, cross cultural researchers have examined these two systems of thinking across diverse cultural groups. I review this evidence, and conclude that 1) these systems of thinking exist in principle in the cognitive repertoire of all cultures, but 2) there are marked and systematic cultural differences in the default tendency to rely on one or the other system in solving cognitive problems. This latter finding contradicts a longstanding assumption in cognitive science that cultural differences affect the content of thought but not the cognitive processes themselves. Finally, I review evidence that speaks to possible social psychological and ecological explanations for these cognitive differences.