Among the many 'irrational' effects unearthed by decision making researchers, one has been the focus of a relative wealth of cross-cultural work: the compromise effect. Strictly speaking, the compromise effect stems for an unwarranted shift towards an option when it becomes a compromise option. Imagine you have a choice between two computers that differ significantly only on two attributes:

Computer A. RAM: 3 GB; Hard Drive: 100 GB

Computer B. RAM: 2 GB; Hard Drive: 200 GB

Now imagine that a third computer is added:

Computer C. RAM: 1 GB; Hard Drive: 300 GB

It has been observed that people tend to choose computer B more often when computer C is added (Simonson, 1989). The explanation is that computer B becomes the compromise option, and that choosing the compromise option can be favored for at least two reasons: it might be easier to justify and it might be less likely to be criticized.
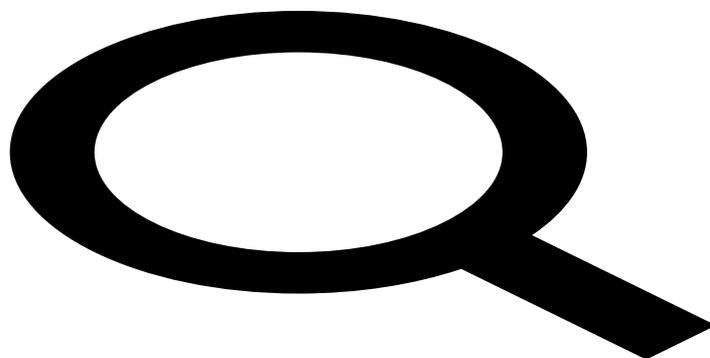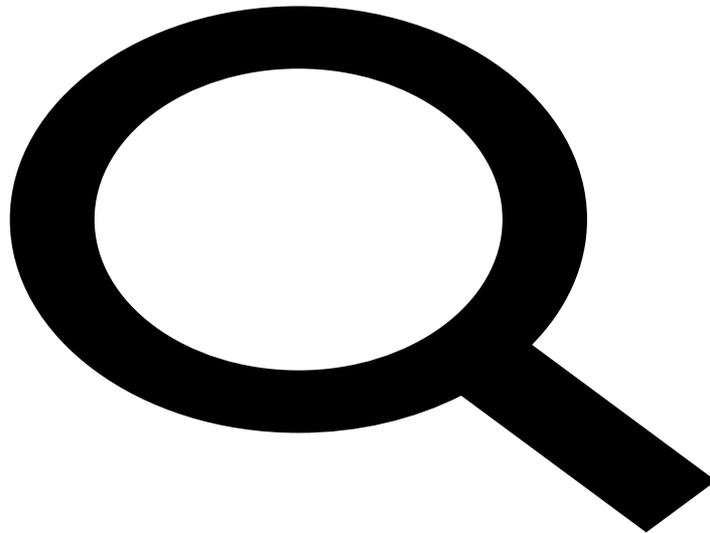
Does McCain look like a better candidate in the bottom picture?

One could then formulate a rather straightforward prediction regarding cross-cultural differences. It

has been surmised that Easterners show a general preference for options that will not offend anyone and that will preserve social harmony, options that form a "middle-way" (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Easterners should then favor compromise options,

by contrast with Western who might prefer the more 'extreme' choices reflecting their lack of care for such concerns. Several experiments, however, failed to yield such a difference when the choices of American and East-Asian populations (Chinese and Japanese) were compared (Briley, Morris, & Simonson, 2000). But one only had to ask for justifications for this very difference to emerge: when participants had to justify their choices, the Americans drifted towards the more extreme options when the East-Asians fell back on the compromise.

It is then possible to spin a more interesting, but still quite straightforward, story. While there would be no difference in the immediate, intuitive preferences of Easterners and Westerners, various justifications would be favored depending on the culture, and individuals could use reasoning to adapt their choices to these conditions.

These results are complicated however by the fact that among the American participants, only those who have a high 'need for uniqueness' seem to show the shift towards extreme when they have to justify their choices (Simonson & Nowlis, 2000). This would mean that the advantage for justifications supporting extreme choices is not a given: inside one population, some people will favor this type of justification, while others will be quite indifferent. It is then the relative proportion of people high in need for uniqueness inside a population that would need explaining.

Another complication is that, as mentioned above, the need for justification is not the only mechanism that can make people shift to, or from, a compromise option. One can also prefer such an option because it is less likely to be criticized, presumably through the operation of another mechanism, closer to impression management than to reasoning maybe. While the search for an easy to justify option yields culturally variable results, this mechanism seems to pull everyone towards compromise options. When American participants were told that they might have to defend their choice in front of a whole classroom, they shifted towards the security of the compromise option (Simonson, 1989). Likewise, participants from both the US and Hong Kong chose the compromise option more often when their belonging to their cultural group was made salient (Briley & Wyer, 2002).

Instead of comparing populations, it is possible to study bi-cultural individuals primed in one of their cultures. Thus, Honk Kong participants partly immersed in Western culture favored the compromise option more often when tested in Chinese than in English (Briley, Morris, & Simonson, 2005). This difference, however, disappeared under cognitive load, proving that some kind of higher level mechanism was pushing them towards the compromise-or towards the extreme. This shows again that the influence of culture, in this case, is not directly upon intuitions but has to be mediated by some higher level mechanism-whether it is reasoning or impression management.

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Unfortunately cross-cultural studies of decision making are quite rare. In this relative paucity of

data, there is a danger that preliminary results can be taken as reflecting straightforward, possibly deep seated, differences between populations. However, as the example of the compromise effect illustrates, the picture will likely be much more complicated. Results will vary not only between cultures, but also within cultures and quite probably within individuals as well. Subtle mechanisms of adaptation to the immediate social context can hide deeper similarities. Several mechanisms might be at play depending on rather subtle experimental manipulation. For instance, it seems that for American participants simply having to justify one's answer on the questionnaire will activate reasoning and drive them towards the easier to justify extremes while the thought of defending one's choice in front of an audience will trigger impression management mechanisms pushing for the harder to criticize compromise option. This may look like a mess, but such is the nature of the psychological reality that researchers will have to deal with in any case to arrive at a satisfying understanding. If cross-cultural psychology forces us to do it earlier rather than later, it can only be a blessing.

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