Cowboy Culture Doesn’t Have a Monopoly on Innovation

March 09, 2022

What does culture have to do with creativity? The answer could be “a lot.” For decades, psychologists trying to understand the roots of creative imaginations have looked at the way two kinds of cultures affect artistic and inventive efforts. Individualistic (sometimes called “cowboy”) cultures encourage people to be unique and to prioritize their own interests, even if doing so costs the group overall. Collectivistic cultures are based on relationships and duties to other people, often sacrificing the individual’s wants for the needs of close others or the community.

Individualism has long been thought to have a creative edge. Individualists resist social convention, the logic goes, and that pushback supports innovation. For instance, around the world, individualistic cultures have more invention patents than collectivistic cultures do. That advantage remains even when we compare only countries with similar wealth—an important control because affluent countries hold more patents on average.

But a new study suggests that these ideas about culture and creativity could be off base. People in collectivistic cultures actually do better with a particular type of creative thinking than people in individualistic cultures. This creativity could be linked to what their ancestors farmed—and the findings overall reveal the shortcomings of thinking about innovation too narrowly.

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