

How You Cross the Street Largely Depends on Where You're From



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During [six weeks in Tokyo](#) last year I noticed that Japanese pedestrians did something that walkers in Manhattan rarely do: they waited to cross the street until the signal permitted. In my (admittedly limited) experience, I found this to be the case even when crossing would have required just a few total steps, and even when there were absolutely no cars in sight. When I asked my interpreter about this habit one day, she told me that most Japanese, as a general rule, obeyed laws to the letter.

Evidently others have been as fascinated by this cultural difference as I was, judging by a [new study of cross-cultural pedestrian behavior](#) conducted by an international research team. The group set up observations posts at various crossings in the French

city of Strasbourg and the Japanese city of Inuyama. The sites, according to the coordinates given in the study, were somewhere around here in Inuyama —



Google Maps coordinates N35°22.928'E136°57.057'

and here in Strasbourg —



Google Maps coordinates N48°35.099'E7°44.876'

The researchers did their best to make sure the two streets were similar in every sense except the people doing the crossings. Both roads carried similar volumes of two-way traffic, both had the same speed limit and width, and both tests were carried out at the same time of day. In each case, only individual pedestrians were tracked, so as to minimize the influence of others on the decision to cross. Two experiments were conducted in both cities: one a legal crosswalk and signal (with the same 30-second green duration), and another at an unmarked crossing.

The results were both clear and striking. At the legal crossing in Strasbourg, France, about 67 percent of pedestrians crossed against the red light. Only 7 percent of walkers in Inuyama did the same. At the unmarked crossing, the researchers measured how much time between cars a pedestrian needed before deciding to walk. In Strasbourg that time clocked in at 9 seconds, on average; in Inuyama, walkers felt free from risk at 16-second gaps.

Since the traffic conditions were otherwise so similar, the researchers concluded that the differences in pedestrian behavior were the result of "social context, and particu-

larly how individuals learn to cross the road from observing" others. They believe their test is one of the first to compare the crossing behavior of walkers, but there's evidence to suggest that American walkers would fit closer to the Strasbourg profile. (One [study from 2006](#) timed acceptable crossing gaps in the United States at anywhere between 5 and 9 seconds.) This raises the prospect of a more general East-West pedestrian distinction.

The findings lend some scientific support to my anecdotal observations from Tokyo, but they also suggest that any Japanese tendency to obey laws is only part of the equation. Being a law-abiding citizen might explain the difference in walking at *legal* crossings, but the difference that occurred at unmarked crossings suggests that some aversion to risk may play a role, too. Indeed, at least two [recent studies](#) have found that Westerners are more willing than various Asian cultures to engage in risky decision-making.

More broadly, the way culture governs pedestrian behavior is becoming a fascinating lens into city life. Previous work has suggested that American and Europeans [give directions differently](#) and that certain city residents tend to [walk faster than others](#). Oddly, Tokyo residents have been clocked as some of the world's swiftest city walkers; maybe some of that speed is an attempt to make up for all the time spent waiting for the light to change before crossing the street.

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