

Why are there so many left-handed people in Sri Lanka?

If asked "what was the first thing that impressed you about Sri Lanka" I would have to say "the extraordinary large number of left-handed people". In western culture left-handedness has been held in contempt, in spite of evidence of superior intellectual capacity. In Britain such people are referred to as 'cack-handers' (from the Teutonic word for excrement). In Ireland we are 'ciotógs'. Right-handed people are dextrous, while left-handers are sinistral and sinister means strange. In France we would be gauche, which word carries over into English as socially awkward. This led me to wonder whether there was a link with autism and indeed, there is a statistically greater number of left-handers amongst autistic people. Personal experience suggests that there is a link with certain subject specialisms. As an undergraduate attending the nuclear physics lectures of Ireland's Nobel laureate, Ernest Walton, I noted that 60% of the class were left-handed. Several years later, as a postgraduate I was invigilating in a hall where there were 180 aspiring teachers doing a Diploma in Education examination. Only one of these was left-handed. Was this significant? Did it mean that teachers are antagonistic to left-handedness? Certainly, in my school days my teachers did try to change me. They eventually gave up.

The Chinese consider that left-handed people are very clever and here there is a problem. You do not see many people writing with their left hand in China. Parents of young children are very worried. What if they were left-handed, but not very intelligent? Would this be a disgrace on the family? So, children are forced to write with their right hand. So, how do I know that there are left-handed people in China? Simple. Their parents were working so hard to change writing habits that they forgot to tell them that they should also hold their chop-sticks with their right hand. When I taught at the NCUK college in Shanghai all the teachers would go out for lunch together. So here we had an interesting case where all the lefties amongst the staff had to sit next to each other. Have you ever tried using chopsticks while sitting next to a left-hander doing the same thing? And so, the ever curious scientist wonders whether left-handers tend to sit next to each other. At meetings I map the laterality of those sitting around me and then try to see if it is statistically significant. However, just as with Schrödinger's cat, the very fact that I have told you about this will ruin any future experiments.

My son is left-handed and I believe that I know why. I simply put his Fisher-Price Activity Centre on the left side of his cot. My wife was not willing for us to have a really large family so that I could exhaustively test this hypothesis. I wonder why? Which brings back to the questions. Why are so many people in Sri Lanka left-handed? Does this have an influence on the career paths that our young will take?