

QESS Project - Reading Club



NEW YORK TIMES

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/22/learning/how-well-do-you-read-other-people.html>

STUDENT OPINION

How Well Do You Read Other People?

Are you good at picking up on social cues? Or are you usually oblivious to the social world around you?

By Jeremy Engle

Nov. 22, 2019

You walk into a crowded room: Can you tell if the mood is tense or light?

You are at a friend's house: Can you sense if they would like you to stay all afternoon or if they are secretly hoping you would leave already?

How observant are you in social situations? Are you good at picking up on social cues — or reading a room? Can you sense what people are really thinking and feeling? Or are you usually oblivious to the social world around you?

In "[The Korean Secret to Happiness and Success](#)," Euny Hong writes:

I was born in the United States and raised in an English-speaking household. My parents spoke Korean with each other — it was great for secret conversations — but not with me and my siblings. Nonetheless, some Korean words were impossible to escape.

One of the first I learned was “nunchi” — literally translated, “eye-measure.” Nunchi is the art of sensing what people are thinking and feeling, and responding appropriately. It’s speed-reading a room with the emphasis on the collective, not on specific individuals. It might be the most important word I ever learned.

As with most Korean children, I learned it in the negative, with my parents chiding, “Why don’t you have any nunchi?” In traditional Korean child rearing, nunchi is on a par with “Look both ways before crossing the street” and “Don’t hit your sister.”

There is a Korean expression, “Half of social life is nunchi.” You need nunchi to get along with people, to get what you want out of people in a purely pragmatic sense and to protect yourself from danger. Nunchi emphasizes speed — if you are a skilled nunchi practitioner, Koreans don’t say you have “good” nunchi, they say you have “quick” nunchi.

Whereas the average person enters a room focusing only on a few people (the ones they like or hate or want to sleep with), a skilled nunchi practitioner takes a mental snapshot of the whole room. Is the atmosphere light or heavy? Why? Is a soccer game on TV in the 89th minute? Did someone’s ex just walk in?

Maybe you have nunchi already: Do you sense when a host secretly wants you to leave? Do you accurately sense when dangers are real before your friends do? Then you probably have quick nunchi. When a work meeting is about to end, do you jump in with, “I just have one more question”? Do people roll their eyes when you speak? Then you need to work on your nunchi.

The great thing about nunchi is you don’t need to be rich, privileged, or even in a good mood to employ it. In fact, Koreans say that nunchi is “the secret weapon of the disadvantaged.” It’s especially useful to women and minorities in the workplace who, like me, are tired of being given contradictory feedback — that they are either leaning out or leaning in too much.

Nunchi exists so that the embattled can focus on changing the circumstances within their control. You don’t need to be the loudest in order to present your ideas or ask for a raise; you just need to have *the best timing*.

Worksheet

Vocabulary

Read the entire article, then comment on one of the following:

1. How well do you read other people — and situations? Do you think you have “quick nunchi”? Tell us about a recent experience when your social skills were put to the test. What did it reveal about your nunchi?

2. Ms. Hong provides many examples of social situations where nunchi might be very useful. Which of the example(s) resonated most with your experiences?

3. How meaningful or relevant is the concept of nunchi to you? Do you agree with Ms. Hong’s argument that nunchi is an important key to happiness and success? What do you think are other keys to success in social situations?

The author writes:

You might well wonder, if nunchi is so great, why isn't the world doing it already? Well, aspects of nunchi are horrifying to the 21st century Western mind, the opposite of what we teach our children. Nunchi requires that you admit the value of collectivism, of introversion, and above all, of never passing up a good opportunity to shut up.

Do you agree? In what ways is nunchi the opposite of what we teach children in the United States? What aspects of nunchi do you think American parents should incorporate in their child-rearing approach?

What is your own experience in "nunchi"? Cite an example to illustrate your point.

- End -