A Queen’s study has found that for North Americans, a feeling of power leads to thinking in a focused and analytical way, which may be beneficial when pursuing personal goals.

“What’s most interesting about this study is the idea that thinking is flexible, not rigid or innately pre-programmed. We are able to attune our style of thinking to the needs of the situation,” explains Li-Jun Ji, the study’s co-author and a social psychologist who studies the relationships between culture and thinking. “However, the specific ways we might attune our thinking seem to depend on our cultural background.”

For most people, being in a position of power or influence means that they want to influence others and achieve their own goals. In North America, these goals tend to be self-defined and independent from the wider social context.

As a result, thinking analytically—focusing on one’s own goal and how to achieve it without being distracted by the surrounding context—can be advantageous.

In order to induce feelings of power, the researchers asked study participants to recollect occasions in their lives when they had influenced others. The participants then completed a number of different tasks designed to assess whether they were thinking more analytically or more holistically.

Analytical thinking is characterized by processing a focal object and its features independently from its surrounding context (for example, using adjectives to describe a ball as ‘red’ or ‘round’). Holistic thinking involves a focus on contextual information and the relationships between objects (for example, using verbs like ‘kick’ or ‘play’ to highlight the connection between the ball and its environment).

Dr. Ji also found that North American individuals with high socioeconomic status (SES) displayed more analytical thinking than low SES individuals. She believes this may be because a higher SES increases people’s feelings of power.