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Dialectical Responses to Questions About Dialectical Thinking

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If the names are not agreed upon, the dialogues won't be smooth.

—Confucius, *Analects*

Debate about our article on culture and dialectical thinking (Peng & Nisbett, September 1999) exemplifies a thousand-year-old Confucian saying: If the participants in an intellectual discourse have different understandings about the topic in question, then the conversation will surely get difficult. Being the perpetrators who opened this Pandora's box, we feel obligated to clarify some of the confusion about our research, which is something we perhaps did not do adequately in our initial article. Interestingly enough, we find ourselves, in dialectical fashion, in agreement with many of the arguments made by the critics (Chan, 2000, this issue; Ho, 2000, this issue; Lee, 2000, this issue)—except those about the validity of our research. Therefore, instead of responding to individual comments, we propose a synthesis that may resolve some of the seeming contradictions between our statements and the statements of the critics.

On Contradiction

The carefully crafted terms *seeming contradiction* and *apparent contradiction* in our article (Peng & Nisbett, 1999) were intended to indicate that the psychological

definitions of contradiction are not necessarily logical ones but semantic or interpretive ones. In other words, the contradictions we talked about in the article are not logical contradictions but psychological contradictions. We followed the tradition in psychology, more specifically Piaget's (Piaget, 1974), in which *contradiction* is defined not in terms of propositional logic structure but in terms of functional disequilibrium. Many of the contradictions we used for the research were what Piaget (1974) called "natural contradictions" (p. iv): for example, the incomplete compensation between the positive effects of action toward some goal and the negative effects produced by the same action or by environmental factors. Therefore, it should also be clear that we are not suggesting Chinese are incapable of logical thinking. On the contrary, well-established cross-cultural findings show Asian excellence in mathematics and science, subjects obviously requiring logical thinking. Our contention is not that Chinese are illogical but rather that they rely on heuristics for assessing everyday life events, which prompt them to seek the middle way between extremes and leave them less concerned by apparent contradictions than are Westerners.

On Dialectical Thinking

We used the term *dialectical thinking* in a rather broad way to refer to a cluster of concepts, not just the sort of dialectical reasoning that cognitive psychologists and development psychologists usually speak of (e.g., Basseches, 1980; Riegel, 1973). We intended to be inclusive, believing that a variety of works from psychology and philosophy can be seen as bearing on the issue, including those of thinkers who rooted their philosophical systems in dialectical processes. A number of different levels of analysis have also been considered—including dialectical dynamics at the societal level (e.g., Marxist dialectics), at the level of interpersonal discourse (e.g., dialectical argumentation), and at the intrapsychic level (e.g., integrative complexity)—because each offers insights on how opposite positions interact and how they are reconciled, if at all (Peng & Ames, in press). The bottom line is that although dialectical thinking has long played a pivotal role in various philosophical discussions, it is only beginning to be understood as a psychological issue. It seems to us much more constructive to not limit ourselves to certain definitions of dialectical think-

ing, because psychologists still have much to learn to fully understand the psychology of dialectical thinking.

On Cultural Differences in Dialectical Thinking

We contend that there are differences between Chinese dialectical thinking and Western dialectical thinking. The Western dialectical thinking styles, that is, the Hegelian and Marxist styles, are fundamentally consistent with the laws of formal logic and are aggressive in the sense that contradictions require synthesis rather than mere acceptance. Chinese dialectical thinking and Western dialectical thinking differ in several fundamental ways. Chinese dialectical thought denies the reality of true contradiction, accepts the unity of opposites, and regards the coexistence of opposites as permanent. Belief in genuine contradiction is regarded as a kind of error. The Western Marxist dialectic treats contradiction as real but defines it differently from the Western Aristotelian tradition, in terms not of the laws of formal logic but rather by the three laws of dialectical logic (Peng, 1997). As Lenin (1961) put it in the *Philosophical Notebooks*, the unity of opposites is temporary, transitory, and conditional. Equilibrium and harmony are temporary; conflict, contradiction, and the struggle of opposing tendencies are permanent (Lenin, 1961). Whether the sorts of Chinese reasoning tendencies that we described should be termed *dialectical* we regard as an open question. There are clear similarities between Eastern and Western dialecticism, but the differences may be great enough that using the same term for both may prove to be more confusing than helpful.

The Empirical Aspects of our Article

Our strongest disagreement with our critics (Chan, 2000; Ho, 2000; Lee, 2000) is on the question of whether our empirical findings are suspect if our philosophical analysis is in error. Whether we have correctly characterized either Chinese or Western dialectical thinking and whether we are correct in our assertion that folk Chinese dialecticism treats contradiction in a different way than does folk Western logic, our empirical findings stand. Our Chinese and Western participants responded very differently to seeming or psychological contradictions. Chinese liked proverbs in-

volving superficial contradictions more than did Americans; Chinese tried to find merit in two apparently opposing propositions, whereas Americans came down on the side of one proposition at the expense of the other; and Chinese were not as impressed as were Americans by arguments that applied the law of noncontradiction. In short, we believe that there are interesting differences between Chinese and Americans in their responses to superficially contradictory propositions and that there are many interesting theoretical and practical implications of our empirical findings (for reviews, see Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, in press; Peng, Ames, & Knowles, in press).

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- Corrigan and Penn (September 1999) have articulately integrated important aspects of both clinical and social psychology in their article titled “Lessons From Social Psychology on Discrediting Psychiatric Stigma.” Their strategies for reducing stigma toward severe mental illness are relevant and, more importantly, useful for those who work with and advocate for people with mental illness. As researchers in the fields of discrimination and prejudice have found, providing the opportunity for contact between stigmatized groups and the general public can lead to a decrease in stereotypes if certain conditions such as equal status among participants and high levels of intimacy are provided.
- In their concluding remarks, the authors (Corrigan & Penn, 1999) suggested that people with severe mental illness can use a number of strategies to cope with stigma, including participating in psychosocial clubhouses and practicing selective disclosure of their illness. We would like to add our observation that participating in a meaningful work experience may also help people with mental illness cope with stereotypes regarding their illness, improve their quality of life (Bryson & Bell, 1999), and increase their self-esteem. In our research on the effects of vocational rehabilitation on people with schizophrenia (Bell, Lysaker, & Milstein, 1996, 1997), we have found that working has powerful implications on stigma reduction for both the participants with mental illness and the work site supervisors and coworkers.
- Although we did not set out to study stigma reduction (we primarily study the clinical benefits of work), we have empirical evidence that participating in work increased the participants’ sense of purposefulness and motivation (Bryson & Bell, 1999). In addition, we have anecdotal evidence that supervisors and coworkers broaden their knowledge and understanding of mental illness when working side-by-side with people with mental illness. Others have reported that working increases self-esteem and self-worth (Mueser et al., 1997). This is probably because, as Corrigan and Penn suggested, our work program and programs like it (Bond, Dietzen, McGrew, & Miller, 1995; Mueser et al., 1997) provide an opportunity for contact between those with severe mental illness and members of the community. Our participants work independently in entry-level positions alongside full-time staff in a large urban Veterans Medical Center. This arrangement creates a collegial environment and gives participants a status similar to that of newly hired staff. Most jobs require cooperation with full-time staff, an arrangement that provides the opportunity to socialize informally and to develop close relationships with coworkers.
- Our participants have all been diagnosed with schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder. However, they vary greatly in symptom level and type as measured by the Positive and Negative Syndrome Scale. Some people fall into the “discredited” category that Corrigan and Penn (1999, p. 772) described because their illness is apparent (e.g., their appearance is disheveled), whereas others have a “discreditable” stigma because their illness is not apparent (e.g., their symptoms are in remission or they have developed excellent strategies for coping with their symptoms). As participants develop relationships with coworkers, even those who appear normal must respond to questions about themselves and their work history that confront them with issues about disclosing their mental illness. When people with severe mental illness leave the comfort and security of the disabled role and lifestyle to engage in mainstream activities such as work, they face the ambiguity of being neither fully well nor completely ill. We offer participants an alternative role: that of someone in recovery. A concept borrowed from substance abuse treatment, the role of recovery provides a social psychological framework in which forward and backward movement is not only expected but also understood to be part of the healing process. This framework is useful for both participants and members of the community, including work supervisors and coworkers.
- In addition to the stigma-reducing conditions that Corrigan and Penn (1999) suggested, such as equal status and cooperative tasks, our colleagues and we have found it essential to provide work-related support for people with severe mental illness to help them integrate their identities as both a worker and a person with a disability (Lysaker & France, 1999). This strategy of providing specific support for a

Work to Reduce Stigma

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