Chapter 11

The Dialectical Self: Contradiction, Change, and Holism in the East Asian Self-Concept

Julie Spencer-Rodgers, University of California, Berkeley
Kaiping Peng, University of California, Berkeley

Cultural psychology is broadening our understanding of the self-concept. Scholars have defined the self-concept as a dynamic, multidimensional, and complex knowledge structure (Baumeister, 1998; Higgins, 1987; Markus & Kunda, 1986) that can be divided into content, structural, and evaluative components (Campbell, Trapnell, Heine, Katz, Lavallee, & Lehman, 1996). A growing corpus of research points to substantial cultural variation in each component of the self-concept. To illustrate, the content of the self-concept, which includes beliefs about one's personal attributes (e.g., personality traits and physical characteristics) and episodic and semantic self-relevant memories (Campbell et al., 1996), is characterized by a greater proportion of social roles in the East and a greater proportion of personality traits in the West (Cousins, 1989; Schweder, 1995). The structure of the self-concept refers to how the content components or specific self-beliefs are organized and structured in memory. Considerable scholarship shows that there are greater discrepancies between the actual and ideal selves (Heine & Lehman, 1999) and the public and private selves (Triandis, 1995) among East Asians than North Americans. The evaluative components of the self-concept refer to the valence (positivity/negativity) of one's personal attributes and global self-esteem, or an overall evaluation of the self as an attitude object (Baumeister, 1998; Campbell et al., 1996). A robust and well-documented finding in the cross-cultural literature is that East Asians use more negative attributes when describing the self than do Westerners (Diener & Diener, 1995; Heine & Lehman, 1997, Spencer-Rodgers, Peng, Wang, & Hou, in press).

There is also mounting evidence that basic cognitive processes, including self-perception, are affected by culturally shared folk epistemologies (Morris,
11. Naïve Dialecticism

collectivist and interdependent (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Koreans), collectivist/
interdependent cultures (e.g., Chileans, Spaniards, Mexicans) are not necessarily
dialectical. Individual difference measures of dialecticism and interdependence,
moreover, are generally not related: The Dialectical Self Scale (Spencer-Rodgers,
Srivastava, & Peng, 2001), which assesses dialectical thinking in the domain of
self-perception, is not significantly correlated with the interdependent subscale of
the Self-Construal Scale (Singelis, 1994) in East Asian and Western samples
(Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2001).

NAÏVE DIALECTICISM: CHANGE,
CONTRADICTION, AND HOLISM

The three central and interrelated tenets of naïve dialecticism consist of the
principles of change, contradiction, and holism (Peng, 1997; Peng & Nisbett,
1999). The principle of change views reality as a dynamic process and holds that
the world is in constant flux. Because reality is fluid and ever-changing, all objects
and events in the universe are thought to eventually change into their opposites
(e.g., what is positive becomes negative, what is negative becomes positive). The
related principle of contradiction asserts that all phenomena are composed of at
least two opposing elements (yin/yang) that exist in active harmony and balance.
If every element turns into its opposite, in a never-ending cycle of reversal and
renewal, then good and bad, active and passive, masculine and feminine, old and
new, and so on, must exist in the same object or event simultaneously. Because
change and contradiction are ever present, all phenomena in the universe are also
interrelated. The principle of holism maintains that nothing is isolated or
independent and that the part cannot be understood except in relation to the whole.
In the following sections, we outline each of the three assumptions of dialectical
folk theories in greater detail and we review pertinent psychological evidence
relating naïve dialecticism to the East Asian self-concept.

NAÏVE DIALECTICISM AND THE SELF-CONCEPT

Naïve dialecticism provides a useful and comprehensive theoretical framework for
summarizing much of the cross-cultural research on the self. For instance, the
dialectical principle of change implies that the East Asian self-concept will be
characterized by greater fluidity, flexibility, and malleability. This proposition has
received strong empirical support in the literature. To illustrate, when describing
the self on the Twenty Statements Test (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954), East Asians
use a greater proportion of self-references that are related to short-term activities,
the immediate situation, and concrete behaviors, whereas Americans employ more
enduring and stable personality traits (Cousins, 1989; Kanagawa, Cross, &
Markus, 2001; Rhue, Uleman, Lee, & Roman, 1995). The principle of holism

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION: DIALECTICISM,
COLLECTIVISM, AND INTERDEPENDENCE

Naïve dialecticism can be distinguished from other cultural dimensions that are
characteristic of many East Asian cultures. Notably, naïve dialecticism is not
assumed to be an aspect of collectivism (Triandis, 1995) or interdependence
(Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Collectivism refers to a cultural system of values and
traditions, which focuses on interpersonal relationships, adherence to social
norms, respect for authority/elders, and the promotion of group harmony
(Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Triandis, 1995). Interdependence refers
to a culture-specific conception of selfhood, prevalent in the East, which is
characterized by an emphasis on the interrelatedness of the self to others. The
interdependent self is more diffused across important ingroup members, rather
than strictly bound within the individual (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Naïve dialecticism, in contrast, is a culture-specific mode of cognition
that emphasizes the dimensions of contradiction, change, and holism. Naïve
dialecticism is grounded in the lay theory tradition in cultural psychology (e.g.,
Morris & Peng, 1994; Peng, Ames, & Knowles, 2000), in which culture is
conceptualized as a set of knowledge structures or implicit beliefs that influence
and guide people's basic perceptions of and inferences about the world. Although
dialectical thinking is typical of numerous East Asian cultures, which are

Nisbett, & Peng, 1995; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001; Peng & Nisbett,
1999, 2000). Naïve dialecticism represents a one folk epistemology or "way of
knowing" about the world that is prevalent in numerous East Asian countries,
including China, Japan, and Korea (Peng, 1997; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Naïve
dialecticism is based in Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, and emphasizes
contradiction, change, and interrelations in the environment. In Eastern dialectical
cultures, all phenomena are seen as consisting of contradictory elements that are
constantly changing and yet are perpetually interconnected. Nisbett et al. (2001)
has similarly described Eastern ontologies and epistemologies in terms of holism,
in which greater attention is paid to the perceptual field, the situational context,
and relationships among objects and events in the environment. Conversely,
Western folk epistemologies or ways of knowing, which are rooted in Aristotelian
formal logic (Lewin, 1935; Peng & Nisbett, 1999), emphasize order and constancy
in the world, immutable laws and truths, and decontextualized facts and ideas.
These culturally distinct epistemological structures guide people's understanding
of reality and human life. They influence the nature and structure of the
self-concept, the manner in which cultural groups deal with contradiction and
change in their thoughts, feelings, and actions, and the way in which they
conceptualize the self in relation to other people, the physical environment, and
the metaphysical realm.
positions that the individual self is an inseparable part of a larger whole, which includes other people, other living organisms, material objects, and the metaphysical realm. Like the interdependent self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), the dialectical self is conceptualized in relation to others, including important ingroup members. In many respects, theoretical and empirical research on interdependent self-construals supports the notion of holism. Indeed, the interdependent self perspective could be regarded as one (more limited) aspect of the broader principle of holism. The dialectical self differs from the interdependent self, however, in that the individual self is also diffused across nonliving and intangible phenomena. Finally, substantial empirical evidence exists for the principle of contradiction in cross-cultural research on identity consistency (Suh, 2002), inconsistent self-beliefs (Choi & Choi, 2002), and attitude-behavior congruence (Kashima, Siegel, Tanaka, & Kashima, 1992). Although scholars have typically attributed these group-level differences to other cultural factors, notably collectivism and interdependence, many of the findings that have been reported in the literature are highly consistent with our theoretical predictions deriving from naive dialecticism. Of course, given the complexity of anthropological systems and human behavior, multiple cultural factors likely give rise to East-West differences in the self-concept. Naïve dialecticism, collectivism, and interdependence may have additive or interactive effects on self-construals and psychological functioning.

**PRINCIPLE OF CONTRADICTION**

Folk epistemologies influence people’s reasoning about psychological contradiction as well as their tolerance for ambiguity. A primary assumption in Western psychology is that human beings are fundamentally uncomfortable with incongruity and that they seek consistency across all domains of existence (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958; Lewin, 1951). Scholars postulate that individuals possess a basic need to synthesize contradictory information about an attitude object and that they are compelled to resolve their cognitive, affective, and behavioral inconsistencies (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958; Lewin, 1951; Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995). Discrepancies in one’s thoughts, feelings, or actions are thought to give rise to a state of tension (Lewin, 1951), disequilibrium (Heider, 1958), or dissonance (Festinger, 1957), which activates a need for consonance (Festinger, 1957). Yet, relatively little research has examined whether these theoretical assertions are tenable across cultures. In sharp contrast to Western modes of thinking, Eastern folk epistemologies embrace, rather than eschew, contradiction. In Confucian and Daoist philosophical traditions, the two sides of any contradiction are seen as existing in active harmony, opposed, but mutually connected and interdependent.

11. Naïve Dialecticism

The Eastern and Western views of contradiction are fundamentally different (Peng, 1997; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). The East Asian conception is perhaps best illustrated with the yin/yang (Tai-ji) symbol (see Fig. 11.1a). Yin and yang represent mutually dependent opposites that are balanced, complementary, and harmonious. As outlined in the I-Ching (Book of Changes), yin represents the negative, passive, and feminine, whereas yang represents the positive, active, and masculine. Neither element can exist without the other. Both yin and yang are viewed as coexisting harmoniously within all objects, including the self. From this perspective, a characteristic such as passive is less the "opposite" of active, than it is its natural complement. Because the seeds of passiveness exist within activeness (and vice versa, the seeds of activeness exist within passiveness), both traits are seen as coexisting within all individuals, at all times. Conversely, in the West, there are sharper distinctions between constructs such as passive/active, good/bad, self/other, mind/body, cause/effect, and so on. As illustrated in Fig. 11.1b, the Western view of contradiction is more divisive (e.g., black or white, right or wrong) and contradictory phenomena are conceptualized as separate and dichotomous.

Tact folk beliefs about the nature of contradiction influence the manner in which cultural groups deal with conflicting information and ideas. First, dialectical cultures are less likely to recognize contradictions when they arise, because they assume that the world is in a constant state of flux. If what is true one moment, may not be true the next, then it follows that one should be less attentive and responsive to inconsistencies in the self, others, and the environment. Second, dialectical cultures are less inclined to attempt to reconcile apparent contradictions, because they expect that reality and truth are highly complex and unstable. To illustrate, Peng and Nisbett (1999) have shown that Eastern dialectical thinkers exhibit less disconfirmation bias (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979).

**Figure 11.1**

Eastern and Western views of opposites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a. Eastern view</th>
<th>b. Western view</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Yin/Yang)</td>
<td>(Black/White)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
11. Naive Dialecticism

conceptual selves (dialectical principle of change), then members of dialectical cultures should be inclined to alter their self-judgments when they are presented with information that conflicts with their prevailing self-conceptions (dialectical principle of contradiction). This hypothesis was tested in an experimental study. Chinese and American participants completed a bogus personality test, and they were presented with positive (or negative) feedback that was consistent (or inconsistent) with their reported self-beliefs in the domain of extraversion. The participants then completed a second bogus personality test. In accordance with our predictions and prior research (Peng, 1997; Peng & Nisbett, 1999), Chinese participants modified their self-judgments on the second personality assessment in response to contradictory feedback, whereas American participants exhibited more extreme or polarized self-ratings.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION: LOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRADICTION

Notably, naive dialecticism does not argue that East Asians are less logical or rational than Westerners or that they necessarily accept logical contradiction more than do Westerners (see Peng & Nisbett, 2000). Rather, we submit that dialectical thinkers more comfortably acknowledge and accept psychological, or natural contradiction, in Piagetian terms (Piaget, 1980). Psychological contradiction arises when two or more opposing attitudes, beliefs, memories, emotions, self-perceptions, and so on (e.g., "I am shy" and "I am outgoing") do not easily coexist within the psyche, even though the elements themselves are not strictly logically contradictory. For example, East Asians should not be more likely than Westerners to endorse the self-statements "I am shy" and "I am not shy" at the same time. In this case, the individuals demonstrate inconsistency regarding their perceived level of shyness. They both assert and deny that they possess the quality of shyness, such as a tendency to avoid social contact, to remain quiet during social gatherings, etc. To endorse both propositions would be logically contradictory. Instead, naive dialecticism posits that East Asians demonstrate more apparent or seeming contradiction in their attitudes, beliefs, memories, self-perceptions, and so on, than do Westerners. Thus, East Asians are more likely than Westerners to endorse the contradictory self-statements "I am shy" and "I am outgoing" (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004). In this case, the individuals assert that they possess both the qualities of introversion and extraversion. These individuals might be quiet and timid, they might avoid social contact, etc., in certain contexts (e.g., at school, at work) and they might be talkative and assertive in other contexts (e.g., at home, at church). Although these self-beliefs might not coexist comfortably in one’s mind or perceptions among cultures that emphasize self-consistency, to endorse both statements is not logically contradictory.
SELF-CONCEPT INCONSISTENCY

If dialectical cultures accept, and even embrace, psychological contradiction, then they should exhibit less internal consistency in the content of their self-beliefs. This proposition has received strong empirical support in research conducted by Choi and Choi (2002), and more recently, Spencer-Rodgers et al. (2004). Choi and Choi (2002) found that Koreans are more susceptible to directionality effects. In Study 1, the researchers reported that changing the direction of a question (e.g., asking participants "How extraverted are you?" vs. "How introverted are you?") leads to greater shifts in the self-descriptions of Koreans than Americans. In a second study, Korean and American participants were asked to rate themselves on several personality dimensions relative to their peers. Koreans demonstrated greater fluctuations in their self-ratings depending on the nature of the question (e.g., "How many [students] are more polite than you?" vs. "How many [students] are more rude than you?") than did Americans. In Study 3, Koreans shifted their value preferences more than did Americans, depending on the direction of the comparison (e.g., "Equality is more important to me than ambition" vs. "Ambition is more important to me than equality"). Members of both cultural groups shifted their self-judgments in response to the directional questions, indicating that different components of the self-concept were activated by the stimuli. However, the effects were consistently stronger among Koreans than Americans.

Spencer-Rodgers et al. (2004) have similarly found, across four studies, that Chinese and Japanese possess less internally consistent self-beliefs than do Americans. In Study 1, the dialectical cognitive tendency to endorse seemingly contradictory beliefs about one's personality traits and one's behaviors was investigated using ambivalence/inconsistency scores. These scores provide a valuable numerical index of the extent to which individuals endorse contradictory beliefs about the self at the same time. Chinese and American participants rated a large list of contradictory attributes on separate unidimensional scales (e.g., "To what extent are you humble?" vs. "To what extent are you proud?"). which allow for the possibility of two independent judgments, and ambivalence/inconsistency scores were computed (see Priester & Petty, 1996; Thompson et al., 1995). Members of a prototypical dialectical culture (mainland Chinese) were more likely to rate contradictory attributes (e.g., intelligent/foolish, inventive/unimaginative, etc.) as self-descriptive than were members of a prototypical synthesis-oriented culture (European Americans). The alternative hypothesis that these results could be explained by cultural differences in self-esteem or self-evaluative ambivalence was largely discounted: Among Chinese participants, the tendency to endorse contradictory attributes (many of which are negatively valenced: e.g., foolish, unimaginative, etc.) was not significantly related to lower self-esteem or self-evaluative ambivalence. Thus, a cultural tendency to hold harsher attitudes toward the self and to endorse negative self-descriptors does not appear to give rise to cultural differences in self-concept inconsistency.

In two additional studies, self-concept inconsistency was examined using more implicit measures of the tendency to endorse opposing self-beliefs. In Study 2, Japanese and American participants responded to contradictory stimulus words presented on a computer screen and both their self-ratings (me vs. not me judgments) and response latencies were recorded. As in Study 1, ambivalence/inconsistency scores were used to index self-concept inconsistency. The speed with which participants made the computer-based judgments was used to measure self-concept certainty, or the extent to which individuals were certain of their self-judgments. Replicating results obtained with paper-and-pencil measures (Choi & Choi, 2002; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004, Study 1), members of a dialectical culture (Japanese) reported less internally consistent self-beliefs than did members of a synthesis-oriented culture (Americans). A second purpose of the study was to investigate whether Japanese demonstrate greater inconsistency in their self-beliefs, not because they are more dialectical, but because they are less certain of the content of their self-beliefs than are Americans. If Japanese are less certain of their self-judgments, they might take longer when responding to contradictory personality attributes and they might provide less consistent responses to these attributes. This alternative hypothesis was not supported however, as self-concept certainty (i.e., response latency) was not significantly related to self-concept inconsistency (i.e., ambivalence/inconsistency scores) among Japanese participants.

Contradiction in the spontaneous self-concept was assessed in a third study using a relatively culturally unbiased and unobtrusive assessment instrument. Chinese and American participants completed the open-ended Twenty Statements Test (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954) and their responses were coded for three types of contradiction. Chinese listed more within statement contradictions (e.g., "I am young, yet old at the same time"), between statement contradictions (e.g., "I am hardworking" listed on line 3 and "I am lazy" listed on line 6 of the instrument), and not-self statements (e.g., "I am not from a wealthy family") than did European American participants. Within statement and between statement contradictions are indicative of dialectical thinking in that they reflect units of self-representation that are conceptually contradictory (thesis and antithesis) and a balance between two opposing aspects of the self. Self-statements that convey what a person is not are indicative of dialectical thinking in that the self is defined through the negation of an opposing image of the self. (An alternative self-conception must have been brought to mind, in order for that self-conception to have been negated.) In sum, a greater amount of contradictory self-knowledge appears to be retrieved from memory among dialectical cultures in response to the general stimulus question, "Who am I?"
In a fourth study, dialectical self-constructs were assessed with the Dialectical Self Scale (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2001). The Dialectical Self Scale is composed of three subscales (Contradiction, Cognitive Change, Behavioral Change), which measure the extent to which individuals perceive that they accept psychological contradiction (e.g., “When I hear two sides of an argument, I often agree with both”) and the extent to which they exhibit change in their cognitions and behaviors (e.g., “I prefer to compromise than to hold on to a set of beliefs”). Chinese participants scored higher on naive dialecticism and self-concept inconsistency than did European American participants, and naive dialecticism mediated the association between culture and inconsistency in the content of one's self-beliefs.

Tolerance for psychological contradiction has been documented in other cross-cultural research. Considerable scholarship shows that East Asians exhibit less self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996) as well as greater self-complexity (Heine & Lehman, 1999) than do North Americans. The self is less clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable among Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans than North Americans (Campbell et al., 1996; Choi & Choi, 2002; Kanagawa et al., 2001; Spencer-Rodgers et al., in press; Suh, 2002). Cross-cultural research on self-complexity reveals that there are greater discrepancies between the actual and ideal selves among Japanese than North Americans (Heine & Lehman, 1999). Because dialectical thinkers anticipate less congruence as aspects of the self, they may be less inclined to resolve inconsistencies in their thoughts, feelings, and actions. For example, East Asians expect less congruence between dispositions and behaviors (Norenzayan, Choi, & Nisbett, 2002), attitudes and behaviors (Kashima et al., 1992), and public and private aspects of the self (Triandis, 1995). In contrast to the Western unitary and internally consistent self, Confucian-based cultures possess multiple selves that may oppose or contradict one another.

In the interpersonal domain, studies indicate that East Asians demonstrate a preference for compromise in value-laden disagreements and a preference for mediation and bargaining in conflict resolution (Leung, 1987; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). In a scenario study (Peng & Nisbett, 1999), Chinese and American participants were presented with a series of contradictions drawn from everyday life (e.g., a conflict between a mother and daughter). Americans tended to find fault with one party and they generally opted for a more adversarial approach to conflict resolution (e.g., “mothers should respect their daughters’ independence”). Conversely, Chinese tended to assign blame to both parties of the dispute (e.g., “both mothers and daughters have failed to understand each other”) and they favored a more balanced approach to the resolution of interpersonal conflict.

11. Naive Dialecticism

NAÏVE DIALECTICISM AND EVALUATIVE COMPONENTS OF THE SELF-CONCEPT

In addition to content and structure, the evaluative components of the self-concept are influenced by dialectical folk epistemologies. A large body of research indicates that dialectical cultures (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Koreans) report lower levels of self-esteem and psychological well-being than do synthesis-oriented cultures (Diener & Diener, 1995; Heine & Lehman, 1997; Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). Scholars have examined myriad factors that may account for these group-level differences, including methodological factors (e.g., response styles, feigned modesty, and impression management), societal factors (e.g., individual rights, equality, and social freedom), and socioeconomic conditions (e.g., income, education, and minority status), among others (Diener, Suh, Smith, & Shao, 1995; Heine & Lehman, 1997; Heine, Takata, & Lehman, 2000). To illustrate, a large number of methodological factors have been explored, and largely discounted, as possible explanations for East–West differences in well-being. General negative response sets, moderacy bias (a tendency to avoid extremes and to respond neutrally), and general suppression of mood either do not contribute to these differences or they account for only a very small percentage of the variance (Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1995; Diener et al., 1995; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). Analyses of survey data also suggest that East Asians are not merely presenting themselves in a more humble or modest light (Heine et al., 2000). Historically, low levels of self-esteem among East Asian minorities have been attributed to social stigma, perceptions of prejudice, and other correlates of minority status (for a review, see Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). However, minority standing and socioeconomic factors also do not fully account for the observed group-level differences (Crocker et al., 1998; Diener et al., 1995).

Consequently, scholars have proposed a number of cultural factors that may elucidate East–West differences in self-appraisals and psychological adjustment. One prevailing explanation concerns the classic self-enhancement bias found in Western cultures (Heine & Lehman, 1997). In individualist countries, the cultural norm is to present oneself in a positive, self-enhancing light (Higgins, 1987; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Tesser, 2003), whereas in collectivist societies, the cultural mandate is to present oneself in a self-effacing or self-improving manner (Bond, 1986; Heine & Lehman, 1997). East Asians generally exhibit greater modesty, humility, and self-criticism than do North Americans (Bond, 1986; Heine et al., 2000; Kitayama et al., 1997). For example, Japanese do not discount negative self-relevant feedback and they display harsher attitudes toward their personal shortcomings than do North Americans (Heine, Kitayama, Lehman, Takata, Iide, Leang, & Matsumoto, 2001; Kitayama et al., 1997). East Asians describe themselves in less positive terms (Bond & Cheung, 1983; Heine et al.,...
Naive Dialecticism

11. Naive Dialecticism and they experience more self-effacing emotions, such as guilt and shame, than do Americans (Bond, 1986; Kitayama et al., 2000). Other scholars have attributed East-West differences in self-esteem to a cultural trade-off, in which East Asians, and collectivists more generally, experience a deficit in one aspect of global self-esteem (self-competence), which is partially, but not wholly, counterbalanced by greater self-liking (Tafarodi & Swan, 1996).

To date, much of the theoretical and empirical research on culture and well-being has emphasized the cultural dimensions of individualism-collectivism (Triandis, 1995) and independent-interdependent self-construals (Heine et al., 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Other cultural variables, such as naive dialecticism, may offer additional insight into East-West differences in well-being. In a series of studies, we tested the hypothesis that dialectical cognitive tendencies account, in part, for the observed East-West variance in self-esteem and psychological adjustment (Spencer-Rodgers et al., in press). Relative to Westerners, Confucian-based cultures are inclined to acknowledge and accept evaluative contradiction (positivity/negativity) regarding the self. As a result, East Asians should exhibit greater ambivalence or both-valences in their self-appraisals and judgments of happiness.

In Study 1, this central hypothesis was tested using a traditional self-report measure of self-esteem in five cultural groups that differ on naive dialecticism. As outlined earlier, ambivalence/inconsistency scores were used to index the degree of ambivalence in participants' self-evaluations. Ambivalence arises when the same attitude object, such as the self, is given two distinctly different (positive/negative) evaluations at the same time (Thompson et al., 1995). Operationally, ambivalence is said to exist when individuals endorse response alternatives that have contradictory implications (e.g., "I take a positive attitude toward myself" vs. "I take a negative attitude toward myself") and these alternatives are of equal importance, value, and strength. To calculate the ambivalence/inconsistency scores, we first obtained two, potentially independent, positive and negative evaluations of the self. Thus, global self-esteem was conceptualized as a two-dimensional evaluation of the self as an attitude object and positive and negative self-esteem scores were assessed separately. Ambivalence formulae were then applied to the positive and negative self-esteem scores. We found that dialectical cultures (mainland Chinese, Asian Americans) exhibited greater self-evaluative ambivalence than did synthesis-oriented cultures (European Americans, Latinos, and African Americans).

Naive dialecticism may explain why East Asian cultural groups, including East Asian minorities, report lower global self-esteem and well-being than do Western cultures and European racial/ethnic groups. For dialectically oriented cultures, and dialectically oriented individuals within various cultures, the nature of the world is such that good and bad exist in the same object or event simultaneously. Embracing the positive and negative in oneself is regarded as normative and adaptive in the East. As a result, East Asians are more inclined to acknowledge and accept negative appraisals of the self. For example, Japanese exhibit greater sensitivity to self-critical information than do North Americans and they tend to accept their failures as readily as their successes (Heine et al., 2001; Kitayama et al., 1997). In addition to interdependent self-construals and self-critical tendencies (Heine et al., 1999), these findings may reflect a dialectical cognitive tendency to accept dual evaluations of the self.

Although dialectical cultures more readily endorse negative statements about the self than do synthesis-oriented cultures, it is important to note that the Chinese participants in our research were not more negative than positive in their self-evaluations. In Study 1, global self-esteem was treated as a two-dimensional evaluation of the self as an attitude object, therefore, positive and negative self-esteem scores could be considered separately. At the within-culture level of analysis, we found that dialectical cultures reported significantly more favorable than unfavorable self-evaluations. As illustrated in Fig. 11.2, their self-views tended to be ambivalent or both-valenced, in that both their positive self-esteem scores and negative self-esteem scores approached the midpoint of the scale. Alternatively, European Americans, Latinos, and African Americans reported more polarized positive and negative self-esteem scores than did Chinese and Asian Americans. Rather than reflecting a general negativity bias among East Asians, we posit that this pattern of findings is indicative of a dialectical tendency to possess more balanced self-evaluations (Yin, Yang).

Figure 11.2
Positive and Negative Self-Esteem Scores by Cultural Group

![Bar chart showing positive and negative self-esteem scores by cultural group](attachment://chart.png)
In a second study, we investigated the evaluative components of the spontaneous self-concept using the Twenty Statements Test (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954). Despite potential coding difficulties and other psychometric considerations, the Twenty Statements Test (TST) provides greater ecological validity and a more naturalistic assessment of self-evaluative ambivalence than do traditional self-esteem questionnaires (Cousins, 1989; Kuhn & McPartland, 1954). We compared three groups that provide a contrast between cultures that are known to be dialectical (mainland Chinese), synthesis-oriented (European Americans), and moderate with respect to naïve dialecticism (Asian Americans). Participants completed the TST and their open-ended self-descriptions were coded for valence (negative, neutral, positive) and ambivalence scores were computed. At both the individual and group levels of analysis, a prototypical dialectical culture (mainland Chinese) demonstrated more ambivalent or both-valenced self-views than did a prototypical synthesis-oriented culture (European Americans). Asian Americans possessed moderate scores relative to Chinese and European Americans on each of the dependent variables. Dialectical cultures demonstrated greater self-evaluative ambivalence in their spontaneous thoughts and feelings about themselves, suggesting that cultural differences in self-evaluative ambivalence are unlikely to be due to moderacy bias, response styles, or acquiescence.

In Study 3, we measured naïve dialecticism as an individual difference variable using the Dialectical Self Scale (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2001). We assessed different cultural groups so that they could be situated along a continuum of the cultural dimension of interest, and we tested predictions relating naïve dialecticism to specific psychological measures across cultures. Consistent with a considerable body of research (e.g., Diener & Diener, 1995; Diener et al., 1995), Chinese reported lower self-esteem, self-concept stability, and life satisfaction, as well as greater self-evaluative ambivalence, anxiety, and depression than did European Americans. Mediation analyses revealed that the observed East–West differences in self-esteem and well-being were attributable, in part, to underlying cultural differences in reasoning about psychological contradiction. Naïve dialecticism fully or partially mediated the association between culture and self-evaluative ambivalence, self-esteem (positive, negative, and global self-esteem), and self-concept stability. Naïve dialecticism also had an indirect effect on anxiety, depression, and life satisfaction, mediated through increased self-evaluative ambivalence.

In a final study, we primed naïve dialecticism among Chinese and European Americans. Naïve dialecticism was manipulated in the realm of self-perception, by asking participants to think about and to describe ambivalent (equally positive and negative) life experiences that had important consequences for the self. Chinese participants in the dialectical-prime condition tended to score higher on the Dialectical Self Scale and they reported lower self-esteem, greater self-evaluative ambivalence, and less satisfaction with their lives than did Chinese participants in the control condition. The effects were in the same direction, but were not significant among European Americans. When asked to think about memorable ambivalent experiences, European Americans sought to resolve the contradictions (e.g., "In the end, everything worked out for the best . . ."), whereas Chinese did not attempt to reconcile the evaluatively inconsistent events (e.g., "In every situation, there is some good and some bad . . ."). The Chinese participants focused on both the positive and negative aspects of the experiences and they reported lower self-esteem and psychological well-being than did the European American participants.

Western and Eastern folk epistemologies also have implications for the conceptualization, experience, and expression of emotions (Baggio, D. & Y. 1999; Schimack, Oishi, & Diener, 2002; Spencer-Rodgers et al., in press). In the West, emotions are conceptualized as objective and discrete categories that are distinctly polarized. A person can be happy or sad, proud or ashamed, pleased or disappointed, but not both at the same time. Consequently, in Western samples, frequency judgments of pleasant emotions are perceived in opposition to frequency judgments of unpleasant emotions. Positive and negative affect are typically negatively correlated among Americans, especially European Americans, such that greater positive affect is associated with less negative affect or vice versa (Baggio et al., 1999; Schimack et al., 2002; Spencer-Rodgers et al., in press). In the East, emotions are conceptualized as fluid and diffuse constructs and emphasis is placed on achieving affect balance or harmony. The experience and expression of a balance (positive/negative) of emotions is regarded as desirable and normative in East Asian societies (Baggio et al., 1999; Diener et al., 1995; Kitayama et al., 2000). Consequently, East Asian samples yield weaker negative correlations, nonsignificant associations, and in some cases, even positive correlations (Baggio et al., 1999) between pleasant and unpleasant emotions (Baggio et al., 1999; Kitayama et al., 2000; Schimack et al., 2002; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2001). Research conducted by Schimack et al. (2002) suggests that these effects are moderated by East Asian dialectical philosophies, rather than by individualism-collectivism, response styles, or moderacy bias. Since acknowledging and embracing the good and bad in all things (yin/yang) is considered adaptive (Peng et al., 2001; Peng & Nisbett, 1999), Confucian-based cultures more comfortably accept the coexistence of opposing drives and emotions within themselves.

PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS OF NAÏVE DIALECTICISM

Dialectical thinking may have psychological benefits for the individual. The effects of attending to and accepting both the positive and negative aspects of oneself and one's life depend on a number of factors. For instance, the impact of dialectical thinking on well-being is contingent upon a person's current level of psychological functioning or emotional state as well as his or her present life.
PRINCIPLE OF CHANGE

The dialectical principle of change has received substantial empirical support in the cross-cultural literature. This principle asserts that reality and truth are dynamic, fluid, and variable (Peng, 1997; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Previous research shows that East Asians and Westerners perceive change differently, with Chinese expecting greater change from an initial state than do Americans (Ji, Nisbett, & Su, 2001). If the world is constantly changing, it follows that the categories and concepts that reflect reality, including the self, will be malleable and multifaceted. The classification systems used by East Asians are generally more flexible and diffuse, with less distinct boundaries, than are those used by Westerners (Choi, Nisbett, & Smith, 1997; Morris et al., 1995; Norenzayan, Smith, Kim, & Nisbett, 2002). The categories they employ are also more naturalistic and context-dependent (Nisbett et al., 2001; Norenzayan, Smith, et al., 2002). For example, East Asians learn arbitrary categories less readily from abstract rules (Norenzayan, Smith, et al., 2002), they tend not to dissociate objects from their natural environment (Nisbett et al., 2001), and they are less likely to rely on categorical, rule-based knowledge when making inferences and causal attributions (Choi et al., 1997; Morris et al., 1995). According to dialectical folk theories, categories and concepts, such as self and selfhood, are fluid, subjective, and context-bound; they are not defined by essences, properties, or static dispositions.

The psychological evidence for the flexibility and changeability of the East Asian self-concept has come largely from the study of self-description. Much of this research has employed the Twenty Statements Test (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954), in which research participants list 20 responses to the general stimulus question, “Who am I?” Scholars have found that Japanese and Koreans use more specific, behavioral self-references that are situationally constrained (e.g., “I am someone who plays volleyball on Saturday night”), whereas Americans tend to describe the self using stable personality traits and dispositions (e.g., “I am athletic”) (Bond & Cheung, 1983; Cousins, 1989; Rhee et al., 1995). In our own research, we have found that Chinese describe all of their attributes, including their personality traits, as more changeable than do Americans. They use significantly more dynamic and active statements when describing their personality traits (e.g., “I am someone who tries hard not to lie” vs. “I am honest”), their physical attributes (e.g., “I am fatter than I used to be” vs. “I am fat”), their goals/activities (e.g., “I am learning to ski” vs. “I am a skier”), and so on (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004). In contrast, Americans use more static and enduring self-statements. In a laboratory study, Kanagawa et al. (2001) manipulated the characteristics of the immediate situation and found that Japanese altered their self-descriptions more depending on the social context (e.g., when alone, with a peer, with a group, or with a faculty member) than did Americans,
indicating that the content of the self-concept is more malleable and flexible among Japanese. Similarly, Koreans view themselves differently more across situations than do Americans (Sub, 2002) and Chinese alter their self-beliefs when they are presented with information that contradicts their existing self-conceptions (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004). Taken together, these findings suggest that the Eastern dialectical self is composed of multiple, contradictory selves, which are highly changeable.

PRINCIPLES OF HOLISM

Chinese folk wisdom maintains that everything is relational and connected, not isolated and independent; it is only through knowledge of associations and interconnections that we can come to know anything (Feng, 1997; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). If all phenomena in the universe are interconnected, then the category self must also encompass other human beings, living and nonliving objects, and the spiritual world. Shweder (1995) has likewise argued that the South Asian conception of self, with its emphasis on Hinduism, karma, and reincarnation, is diffused across multiple life forms and different lifetimes. Evidence for the holistic nature of the East Asian self-concept also comes primarily from studies using the Twenty Statements Test (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954). Scholars have found that Japanese and Chinese use more universal self-statements that are removed from the everyday phenomenal realm (e.g., "I am a human being") than do Americans (Cousins, 1989; Kanagawa et al., 2001; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004). In our lab, we have examined the holistic nature of the dialectical self using the Dialectical Coding Scheme (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004). Chinese and American participants completed the TST and their open-ended responses were coded for holism. Relative to Americans, Chinese used significantly more self-statements that acknowledge that human beings are fundamentally related to other living forms (e.g., "I am a living creature"), that the individual self is a relatively insignificant part of a larger whole (e.g., "I am one but many"), and that human beings are connected to other species through a shared biological nature (e.g., "I am a biological entity above all"). These findings stand in sharp contrast to the Western cultural ideal of uniqueness and individuality.

CULTURAL AND INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN DIALECTICAL THINKING

A dialectical mentality is thought to be characteristic of numerous Confucian-based cultures (Feng, 1997; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Ethnographic, survey, and experimental studies suggest that this mode of cognition is highly prevalent among mainland Chinese (Peng, 1997; Peng & Nisbett, 1999; Spencer-Rodgers et al., in press). Naive dialecticism is also thought to pertain to a large number of East Asian cultural groups, including Japanese, Koreans, Malaysians, Singaporeans, and so on. Conversely, a synthesis-oriented or integrative mentality is thought to be more common among Westerners, especially Americans of European descent (Peng et al., 2001; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Our research has revealed reliable group-level differences in dialectical thinking, with Chinese and Japanese scoring significantly higher on the Dialectical Self Scale than do European Americans. Americans of East Asian origin tend to possess moderate scores on the measure, relative to prototypical dialectical (Chinese, Japanese) and synthesis-oriented (European Americans) groups (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004; Spencer-Rodgers et al., in press; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2001).

In addition to systematic group-level differences in naive dialecticism, there is considerable variance in dialectical vs. synthesis/integrative thinking within various cultures (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2001). Indeed, there are many East Asians who are more integrative than dialectical in their cognitive orientation, as well as many Westerners who think more dialectically than integratively (Flynn & Peng, 2002). Aspects of dialectical and synthesis-oriented folk epistemologies undoubtedly exist in most, if not all, cultures. Depending on one's motives and goals and the demands of the situation, individuals in any culture may adopt dialectical or synthesis/integrative mentalities at different times and in different contexts. For example, experimental studies have shown that European Americans can be primed to think dialectically and Chinese and East Asian Americans can be primed to think integratively (Flynn & Peng, 2002; Parker-Tapia & Peng, 2001). As with other cultural variables, such as individualism-collectivism (Triandis, 1995) and independent-interdependent self-construals (Singelis, 1994), dialectical and synthesis/integrative thinking might represent separate factors, rather than opposite poles of a single dimension. Although both dialectical and synthesis/integrative cognitive tendencies exist in many nations and cultures (Peng et al., 2001; Peng & Nisbett, 1999; Spencer-Rodgers et al., in press), for East Asians, a dialectical mentality likely represents the default cognitive orientation, whereas for Westerners, a synthesis/integrative mentality is chronically accessible.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans exhibit less congruence, cross-situational consistency, and temporal stability (Campbell et al., 1996; Choi & Choi, 2002; Heine & Lehman, 1999; Kanagawa et al., 2001; Spencer-Rodgers et al., in press), as well as greater holism (Cousins, 1989; Kanagawa et al., 2001; Spencer-Rodgers et al., in press) in their self-conceptions than do North Americans. Our research suggests that these cultural differences can be explained, in large part, by naive dialecticism. Additional studies are needed to determine the extent to which these findings generalize to other Eastern and Western cultures, including individuals...
in South American, Latin American, and African nations. Large-scale multicity studies, such as those conducted with individualism–collectivism (Triandis, 1995), would help to delineate the nature, scope, and consequences of naive dialecticism among other cultures.

References


11. Naïve Dialecticism


---


