



# The influence of cultural lay beliefs: Dialecticism and indecisiveness in European Canadians and Hong Kong Chinese



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## ABSTRACT

Previous findings in cultural psychology suggest that East Asians are more likely than North Americans to view the world dialectically and that this dialectic view of the world affects their psychological tendencies. Extending these findings, our research examined the relationship between dialecticism and indecisiveness in European Canadians and Hong Kong Chinese. Evidence from three studies demonstrated that: Hong Kong Chinese were more indecisive than European Canadians and that dialecticism mediated this cultural difference (Study 1), dialectically primed individuals were more likely than non-dialectically primed individuals to experience indecisiveness (Study 2), and decisions' importance affected cultural variations: no cultural difference in indecisiveness was found for important decisions, with Hong Kong Chinese reporting a higher level of indecisiveness for less important decisions compared to European Canadians. Furthermore, the cultural variation for less important decisions was mediated by dialecticism (Study 3). The importance of studying decision making processes across cultures is discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In everyday life, we are required to make various decisions of varying importance, from trivial things such as what we eat for dinner to important life decisions such as what career path we should set upon. When engaged in our decision making processes, we may experience difficulty reaching our decisions, experiencing paralyzing *indecisiveness*. We define indecisiveness as the general tendency to experience difficulty making decisions, including the reluctance and avoidance of making decisions (Germeijs & De Boeck, 2002). Indicators of indecisiveness include taking longer times to make decisions (Frost & Shows, 1993), failing to reach decisions (Rassin & Muris, 2005a), and worrying about decisions (Rassin & Muris, 2005b). What differences exist in how people experience indecisiveness in decision making across cultures, and what elements of culture are at play in these differences? Based on previous research, we identified the cultural concept of dialecticism as a likely source of indecisiveness in East Asian cultures.

### 1.1. Dialecticism

Dialecticism refers to a constellation of lay cultural beliefs of how the world is organized, and is grounded in historic East-Asian,

Confucian traditions (for a review, Spencer-Rodgers, Williams, & Peng, 2010). According to Spencer-Rodgers and colleagues, there are three main lay principles relevant to dialecticism. The first principle is the theory of change. It states that the world is in a constant state of flux, ever changing in an unpredictable, dynamic fashion. The second principle, the theory of contradiction, states that the world is full of contradictions and seemingly contradictory states may be true simultaneously. Finally, holism holds that things and events in the world are connected and interdependent such that parts (isolated things or events) cannot be understood without a greater understanding of the whole.

Past studies have shown that dialecticism is more prevalent among East Asians (e.g., Chinese, Japanese and Koreans) than North Americans and this difference has explained various cultural differences in cognition, emotion, and behavior (e.g., Hui, Fok, & Bond, 2009; Masuda & Nisbett, 2001; Spencer-Rodgers, Peng, Wang, & Hou, 2004).

### 1.2. Dialecticism and decision-making

Culture and decision making studies have also shown that culturally dialectic people seemingly apply their dialectic beliefs to their decisions and judgements. For instance, some studies have demonstrated that East Asians are more likely than North Americans to show a holistic view of phenomena, believing that phenomena are influenced by multiple causes and that the

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phenomena lead to multiple consequences (Maddux & Yuki, 2006; Spina et al., 2010). East Asians also tend to predict that future consequences of decisions are broader in scope, making decisions based on the assumption that future trends could change and be very different from current ones (e.g., Ji, Zhang, & Guo, 2008). In addition, dialectic individuals tend to holistically view information when making decisions and are less motivated to discard available, peripheral information (Choi, Dalal, Kim-Prieto, & Park, 2003). These findings give some evidence that dialecticism may also play an important role in the East Asian decision-making process.

### 1.3. Dialecticism and indecisiveness

While some cross-cultural research has been done in indecisiveness (e.g., Mann et al., 1998; Tse, Lee, Vertinsky, & Wehrung, 1988; Yates, Lee, Shinotsuka, Patalano, & Sieck, 1998; Yates et al., 2010), no research has directly touched on the role of dialecticism in indecisiveness. However, other research indirectly supports our assumption that dialecticism may be related to indecisiveness, finding that dialecticism is related to ambivalence. For example, Hamamura (2004) found that dialecticism mediates attitude ambivalence in a wide range of social issues for European and Asian Canadians. Similarly, Hamamura, Heine, and Paulhus (2008) found that dialecticism also mediates ambivalent response-styles in personality self-ratings for European and Asian Canadians. These findings suggest that dialecticism is related to more ambivalent experiences. We believed that this dialectically related sense of ambivalence would transfer over to the decision making process, making it more difficult for dialectic people to make decisions, making them more indecisive.

### 1.4. Importance of decisions

People also use different strategies to solve decisions, depending on the importance of the decision (e.g., Ladouceur et al., 1995). Prior research has found that people's general indecisive tendencies are more predictive of less important decisions (e.g., dinner decisions) as compared to more important decisions (e.g., career decisions) (Germeijs & De Boeck, 2002; Milgram & Tenne, 2000). In such, we thought that the importance of decisions would also moderate the relationship between dialecticism and indecisiveness. We assumed that, this relationship would be strongest for less important decisions—where indecisive tendencies are most predictive, becoming much weaker for more important decisions—because important decisions may have lasting consequences that require a greater amount of indecisiveness, regardless of cultural beliefs.

Does dialecticism influence the experience of indecisiveness across cultures? Would exposure to dialectic beliefs increase indecisiveness? Does the importance of decisions affect the relationship between dialecticism and indecisiveness? We predicted that: (1) East Asians would generally be more indecisive in their decisions than North Americans (Study 1), (2) dialecticism would mediate this culture difference in indecisiveness (Study 1); (3) those dialectically primed would be more indecisive than those non-dialectically primed (Study 2); and (4) decision importance would be a key factor in indecisiveness, with dialecticism playing a role in indecisiveness for less important decisions, but not important decisions (Study 3).

## 2. Study 1

We first aimed to identify a positive association between dialecticism and indecisiveness across cross-cultural contexts. To this end, Hong Kong Chinese and European Canadians were recruited

based on prior findings in cultural psychology showing that East Asians are more dialectical than North Americans (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010).

### 2.1. Participants

We recruited 40 European Canadian undergraduates (18 males;  $Age_{mean} = 20.59$ ; with English as first language) from the University of Alberta and 40 Chinese undergraduates (20 males;  $Age_{mean} = 20.51$ ; with Cantonese as a first language) from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. For participation, Canadian students earned course credit and Chinese students received an honorarium.

### 2.2. Procedure and materials

Upon arrival, participants completed two scales. First, participants completed the 32-item Dialectical Self Scale (DSS; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010; European Canadians:  $\alpha = .89$ ; Hong Kong Chinese:  $\alpha = .71$ ), rating self-beliefs on a Likert-scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). Sample items for this scale are, "There are always two sides to everything, depending on how you look at it" and "When I hear two sides of an argument, I often agree with both". After which, participants completed a 15-item indecisiveness scale (Frost & Shows, 1993; European Canadians:  $\alpha = .80$ ; Hong Kong Chinese:  $\alpha = .84$ ), measuring general indecisiveness in decision making (1: *Strongly disagree*; 7: *Strongly agree*). Sample items for this scale are, "It seems that deciding on the most trivial thing takes me a long time", and "I always know exactly what I want" (reverse scored).

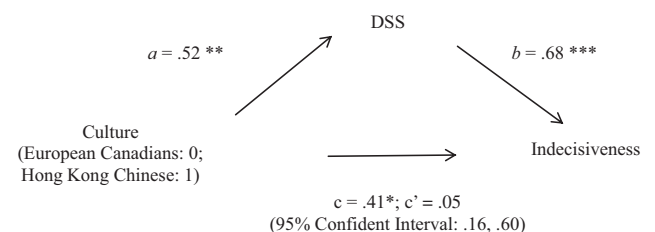
### 2.3. Results

#### 2.3.1. Mean scores

Hong Kong Chinese reported significantly higher scores on the DSS ( $M = 4.09$ ,  $SD = .42$ ) than European Canadians ( $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = .79$ ),  $F(1, 78) = 13.45$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .147$ , replicating prior findings (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010). For indecisiveness, Hong Kong Chinese reported significantly higher scores ( $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = .80$ ) than European Canadians ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = .82$ ),  $F(1, 78) = 5.02$ ,  $p = .028$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .06$ , supporting our assumption that East Asians are more indecisive than North Americans.

#### 2.3.2. Mediation effect of DSS on the cultural difference in indecisiveness

Adopting the mediation analysis procedure suggested by Preacher and Hayes (2008), 5000 Bootstrap samples and a bias corrected confidence interval was used to test the mediational effect of the DSS on the cultural difference in indecisiveness. For this procedure, mediation effects are considered significant when confidence intervals do not contain zero. As shown in Figure 1,



Note. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; coefficients are unstandardized.

**Fig. 1.** The relationship between culture, DSS, and indecisiveness—dialecticism fully mediates seen cultural differences in indecisiveness between European Canadians and Hong Kong Chinese in Study 1.

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