



Cultural differences in response styles: The role of dialectical thinking

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Abstract

Cultural differences in questionnaire response styles have been reported in a number of studies. Compared to those of European-heritage, responses from individuals of East-Asian heritage tend to be more ambivalent and moderate. These stylistic differences warrant attention because they may contaminate substantive conclusions about cultural differences. One possible source of these stylistic differences is the East-Asian tendency toward *dialectical thinking*, that is, a tolerance of contradictory beliefs. In Study 1 ($N = 4835$), we exemplify the difficulty of demonstrating cultural differences in response styles using the Rosenberg self-esteem scale: the problem is that ambivalence and moderacy indices are inextricably confounded with mean levels of self-esteem. In Study 2 ($N = 185$), we use a broader set of personality measures to show that cultural differences in ambivalence and moderacy can be established independently of mean levels. We go further to show that dialectical thinking mediates the cultural differences in moderacy and ambivalence. Together, these studies demonstrate the importance of considering dialectical thinking when interpreting results from cross-cultural surveys.

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1. Introduction

Cross-cultural researchers continue to rely heavily on self-report questionnaires, largely because of their ease and convenience. Unfortunately, the self-report method is prone to well-known response styles. These include socially desirable responding, acquiescent responding, and extreme responding. A wealth of research on Western respondents indicates that all three can contaminate self-reports (Paulhus & Vazire, 2007).

Accumulating research also indicates that the use of response styles differs across cultural groups. The best documented case concerns *extreme response style* (preference for the highest and lowest response options), which is typically contrasted with a *moderate response style* (preference for middle response options). Compared to North Americans of European-heritage, higher levels of extreme responding have been observed in African-Americans (Bachman & O'Malley, 1984) and Latino Americans (Hui & Triandis, 1989). In contrast, East Asians seem to show more moderacy than samples of European-heritage (Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1995).

This burgeoning literature raises concerns about the possible contaminating effect of response styles in cross-cultural research. Some researchers have concluded that response styles such as extremity are not a problem in cross-cultural research (e.g., Chen et al., 1995; Schmitt & Allik, 2005). Others raise concerns that apparent substantive differences across cultures may be artifactual, deriving (at least in part) from differences in response styles (e.g., van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). Debates about how to interpret cultural variation in questionnaire responses would be sharpened if we could confirm that cross-cultural differences in response styles actually exist independently of mean level differences.

1.1. Psychological mechanisms responsible for cross-cultural variations in response styles

Cultural tendencies in response styles may simply be superficial response habits that are only manifested in questionnaire behavior. Alternatively, those response style differences may arise from differences in deeper psychological constructs (Smith, 2004): that is, they may reflect the fundamentally different ways that members of different cultures construe themselves and their social worlds. In this paper, we consider a possible role for dialecticism in the manner that people answer questions on Likert scales.

Dialectical thinking: Cultures differ in *dialectical thinking*, that is, the tolerance for holding apparently contradictory beliefs (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). In particular, dialectical thinking appears to be more common among East Asians than North Americans. For example, Peng and Nisbett (1999) found that Chinese often endorsed both of two arguments that Americans viewed as incompatible.

Dialectical thinking is also evident in the way that East Asians think of themselves. For example, Choi and Choi (2002) showed that, compared to Americans, Koreans displayed self-beliefs that were less consistent (e.g., I'm outgoing but somewhat shy). Spencer-Rodgers, Peng, Wang, and Hou (2004) found that, compared to Americans, Chinese self-evaluations are more ambivalent in the sense of incorporating both positive and negative self-evaluations.

In the domain of self-reported affect, the relation of positive and negative affect tends to be orthogonal among North Americans but slightly positive among East Asians (Bagozzi, Wong, & Yi, 1999). In sum, a growing body of research indicates that, compared to North Americans, East Asians describe themselves and their feelings in a more dialectical fashion.

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