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Cultural differences in indecisiveness: The role of naïve dialecticism



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ABSTRACT

East Asians exhibit naïve dialecticism, a set of worldviews that tolerates contradictions. As influenced by naïve dialecticism, East Asians are more likely to hold and less likely to change ambivalent attitudes, compared with European North Americans. If East Asians have a heightened tendency to see both positive and negative aspects of an object or issue, but a lesser inclination to resolve these inconsistencies, East Asians (vs. European North Americans) may experience more difficulty in committing to an action, and thus be more indecisive. Consistent with this hypothesis, we found that East Asian Canadians scored higher on a measure of chronic indecisiveness than did European Canadians and South Asian Canadians, and that naïve dialecticism and need for cognition mediated the relationship between culture and indecisiveness. These results add to the extant literature on indecisiveness, demonstrating cultural variations in indecisiveness and an underlying cultural factor that is responsible for these cultural differences.

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1. Introduction

It is not uncommon for people to encounter at least some difficulty or anxiety when a decision needs to be made. Some people, however, are more chronically indecisive than others. Indecisiveness is an individual difference variable that refers to the degree to which an individual experiences choice and decision difficulty across domains and situations (Germeijs & de Boeck, 2002; cf. van den Bos, 2009).¹ In the present paper we examine how indecisive tendencies might vary across cultural groups, in order to expand our understanding of the nature of indecisiveness. Specifically, we propose that the worldview of naïve dialecticism might explain why people from some cultures are more likely to experience decision difficulty than those from other cultures.

1.1. Culture and indecisiveness

A review of the literature revealed only a handful of studies in which researchers investigated cultural differences in informational uncertainty and indecisiveness. In an early study on marketing decision making with business executives from China, Hong Kong, and Canada using an alternative preference rating task,

Tse, Lee, Vertinsky, and Wehrung (1988) found that mainland Chinese managers were less indecisive than both Hong Kong Chinese managers and Canadian managers, whereas the latter two groups did not differ from each other. In another study, the Melbourne Decision Making Questionnaire (Mann, Burnett, Radford, & Ford, 1997) was administered to university students from Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States (Mann et al., 1998). Based on this measure, East Asian participants were more likely to exhibit decision avoidance behaviors than their Western counterparts. More recently, researchers examined how thorough participants from different cultures were when deliberating between two alternatives on a general knowledge test (Yates et al., 2010). Japanese participants spent more time on each item and generated more arguments for each item compared to Chinese and European American participants, indicating more indecisiveness.

As a whole, the results of these past studies are quite mixed and difficult to reconcile into a coherent picture of cultural differences in indecisiveness. Importantly, these seemingly discrepant findings are not amenable to direct comparison because each study tapped into a specific aspect of indecisiveness and within a specific domain (cf. Mann et al., 1998). Hence, it may be more fruitful to turn to studies in which researchers examined cultural differences in general indecisiveness using the same comprehensive measure of indecisiveness – the Indecisiveness Scale (IS; Frost & Shows, 1993). In a study conducted in the United States, Americans of East Asian cultural backgrounds scored higher on the IS than did Americans of European cultural backgrounds (Wengrovitz & Patalano,

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¹ This general indecisiveness should not be confused with anxious uncertainty, the anxiety induced by uncertainty about the self (van den Bos, 2009), which often results in uncertainty reduction behaviors, such as ideological convictions and religious extremism (McGregor, Nash, & Prentice, 2010).

2004, as cited in [Patalano & Wengrovitz, 2006](#)). However, when these same researchers conducted a cross-national study comparing Chinese participants with American ones, they did not find any cultural differences ([Patalano & Wengrovitz, 2006](#)). Also using the IS, [Yates and colleagues \(2010\)](#) found that Japanese participants were more indecisive than Chinese and American participants, with the Chinese no more indecisive than American participants. In sum, even when researchers use the same measure of general indecisiveness, the results remain inconsistent across studies. When interpreting these findings, however, there are certain issues that need to be considered.

The first issue concerns the potential confounding of culture-contingent internal and external factors. There are two sources of cultural influences on chronic indecisiveness – internal and external. First, people with certain cultural backgrounds may be more indecisive than people with other cultural backgrounds because of internalized cultural values or worldviews that can affect the perceived difficulty of choice and decision making. Second, certain cultural contexts may create the experience of decision difficulty because of environmental inputs. One source of greater decision difficulty could come from the society's level of economic development. Economic development typically increases the number of options that people in the society can have. A prototypical example is the United States, which is famous for the abundance of choices that are available in all parts of life ([Schwartz, 2004](#)). It is reasonable to expect that people in more affluent countries, especially those with more of a capitalist orientation (e.g., the United States, Japan) have to face a larger number of options when a choice needs to be made, and thus are more likely to be indecisive compared with people in less affluent countries, especially those with more of a socialist orientation (e.g., mainland China). Alternatively, it is possible that in environments in which frequent choices have to be made, people may become more experienced in decision making, and thus find it less demanding. In any case, an attempt to separate culture-contingent internal and external factors should be useful in gaining a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between culture and indecisiveness.

When taking into consideration these two distinct types of cultural influences on indecisiveness, some insights into the seemingly inconsistent results of past research become possible. In the only study in which the socio-cultural environment was kept constant (i.e., the United States), participants of East Asian cultural backgrounds experienced more indecisiveness than did participants of European cultural backgrounds. Hence, when the larger socio-economic environment is held relatively constant, the results seem to suggest that there are culture-contingent internal factors that make East Asian Americans more indecisive. Comparing this study with the cross-national study that tested Chinese and American participants but revealed no cultural differences in chronic indecisiveness, it implies the possibility that the Chinese (vs. American) context may provide fewer choices and opportunities which makes decision-making less demanding. With regard to the previous cross-national study that found that Japanese participants were more indecisive than Chinese participants ([Yates et al., 2010](#)), this may reflect the higher level of economic development, in conjunction with a more capitalist system in Japan, compared with China. When economic development is similarly high in the two nations, as is the case of Japan and the United States, the Japanese are more indecisive than Americans. This is conceptually similar to the finding that East Asian Americans are more indecisive than European Americans. Taking these factors into account, it seems that East Asians may be more indecisive than Westerners when culture-contingent external factors are minimized.

The second issue is that most of these studies did not test for the mediating effect of a cultural factor, rendering the reason for cultural differences unclear. The only exception is one study by

Yates and colleagues (2010, Study 2), who found that social values associated with indecisive behaviors mediated the cultural differences in indecisiveness. However, it remains unclear exactly what cultural antecedents give rise to these social values which in turn translate into indecisive behaviors.

The third limitation concerns potential measurement biases. To our knowledge, past cross-cultural studies on indecisiveness did not address measurement invariance. Without first ensuring that no measurement item is culturally biased, group mean differences or lack thereof cannot be meaningfully interpreted.

1.1.1. *Naïve dialecticism*

The culture-contingent internal factor that we have chosen to focus on in the present paper is naïve dialecticism ([Peng & Nisbett, 1999](#)). Grounded in East Asian philosophies, naïve dialecticism refers to a worldview that objects and events are inextricably interconnected and constantly changing, and our world is full of contradictions. Guided by this set of lay beliefs, it has been found that East Asians are less inclined to resolve inconsistencies compared with Westerners. Instead, they are more likely to retain elements of opposing perspectives and adopt a compromising or “middle ground” approach to deal with contradictions ([Peng & Nisbett, 1999](#)). Furthermore, East Asians are more likely to hold conflicted evaluations toward the self ([Spencer-Rodgers, Peng, Wang, & Hou, 2004](#)) as well as everyday objects and events ([Ng, Hynie, & MacDonald, 2010](#)), and are more inclined to experience positive and negative emotions concurrently, compared to Westerners (e.g., [Bagozzi, Wong, & Yi, 1999](#)). If East Asians are more likely to hold conflicted evaluations and see both positive and negative aspects of an issue, it may be more difficult for them to commit to an action making them more indecisive. Consistent with this idea, conflicted evaluations appear to induce psychological discomfort only when a decision needs to be made ([van Harreveld, Rutjens, Rotteveel, Nordgren, & van, 2009](#)). We therefore propose that East Asians, due to their dialectical worldview, may experience more difficulty in decision-making, compared with Westerners.

1.1.2. *Need for cognition*

Need for cognition refers to the “tendency to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive endeavors” ([Cacioppo & Petty, 1982](#)). People who are high in need for cognition expend more effort to process issue-relevant information, and their attitudes toward an issue are more predictive of their issue relevant behavior at a later time ([Cacioppo, Petty, Kao, & Rodriguez, 1986](#)). Moreover, [Weary and Edwards \(1994\)](#) found that people who are intrinsically motivated to expend cognitive effort are less likely to have a feeling of uncertainty. As feeling uncertain about an issue can be conceived of as an aspect of indecisiveness, it is reasonable to expect that people who are relatively high in need for cognition would also be relatively low in indecisiveness. Indeed, more recent research did find a negative correlation between need for cognition and indecisiveness ([Curşeu, 2006](#)). Hence, it is also important to explore potential cultural differences in need for cognition and how these might also contribute to cultural variations in indecisiveness. Furthermore, as people who are more (vs. less) intrinsically motivated to engage in cognitive activities may be more inclined to resolve opposing or seemingly contradictory viewpoints, they may be less likely to endorse both of these contradictory beliefs. Thus, we also expected that need for cognition might be negatively associated with naïve dialecticism.

1.2. *The present research*

In the present research we investigated cultural differences in indecisiveness and how naïve dialecticism may contribute to these differences. To control for the potential effects of culture-conti-

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