

# THE *Current*

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[Keith Hamm](#)

## **Culture plays key role in people comfortable with contradiction and change**

In times of robust civil discourse and related divisiveness, a person's capacity to hold opposing points of view simultaneously may help them sort noise from news. But where does that tolerance for contradiction come from, and why do some people accept change better than others? New research shines a light.

The study, "[The Dialectical Self Around the World: A Meta-Analysis of Country-Level Means](#)," found that dialectical thinking — the acceptance, for example, that a person can be happy and sad at the same time — varies across cultures. The research analyzed 139 studies across 28 countries, finding that culture often shapes how comfortable people are with contradiction and change. Co-authors include UC Santa Barbara students Isabella Major-Siciliano and Lauren McKenzie, who were undergraduate research interns in psychological and brain sciences when the study was conducted. The paper was principally authored by Julie Spencer-Rodgers, a professor of psychology and child development at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo.

"Someone might say, 'I love my partner, and sometimes they drive me absolutely crazy,'" said Spencer-Rodgers. "Both feelings can be true at once."

"Some people instinctively try to resolve contradictions," she added. "Others accept them, and even expect them — this deeper contemplation is known as dialectical

thinking. Dialectical thinkers are comfortable with paradox and change.”

As the project advanced, clear regional patterns emerged. East Asian societies — such as South Korea, Japan and China — showed the highest levels of dialectical thinking, while many Western English-speaking countries scored closer to the middle of the scale. Latin American nations — including Venezuela, Guatemala and Colombia — tended to show lower average levels of dialectical thinking.

Similar patterns appeared within multicultural societies. People of Asian descent, such as Asian Americans and Asian Canadians, tended to show higher levels of dialectical thinking than other ethnic groups living in the same countries.

By way of explanation, scholars often trace dialectical thinking to philosophical and Buddhist religious traditions in East Asia that emphasize balance, cyclical change and the coexistence of opposites.

However, Spencer-Rodgers added, “culture does not determine how any individual thinks. There are large individual differences within every culture. Not everyone in East Asia thinks dialectically, and many people in Western cultures do.”

“This project meant a lot to me due to my heavy involvement throughout the process and being able to co-author the paper while still an undergrad,” said Major-Siciliano, now a neuroscience researcher at UC San Francisco who will be starting doctoral work at UMass Boston this fall. “The experiences and process of this project have been the true catalyst of my success in my research career.”

“I loved reviewing prior studies, analyzing data and honing my writing skills as we wrote the paper,” said McKenzie, who is now pursuing a masters in clinical counseling at Point Loma Nazarene University. “Overall, it was such an impactful experience on my career. Julie (Spencer-Rodgers) helped decrease the barrier to entering the research field, and I was so thankful for that opportunity to be included as an author.”

Psychologists believe dialectical thinking develops through culture and experience and can be strengthened through practices such as perspective-taking and learning to tolerate ambiguity.

“Many of the challenges we face today, from political polarization to global conflict, are fueled by the belief that only one perspective can be correct,” Spencer-Rodgers

said. “Dialectical thinking encourages people to recognize that opposing ideas may both hold value.”

Learning to accept contradiction can also support emotional well-being, she added. When people believe their thoughts, emotions or choices must always be consistent, they may experience psychological tension known as cognitive dissonance. Accepting that conflicting feelings or outcomes can coexist may help people approach uncertainty with greater calm. “In an era marked by increasing political polarization, understanding how people tolerate — or reject — contradictory ideas may be especially important.”

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