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## Religious influences on holistic/analytical thinking and rates of mental illness

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### ABSTRACT

*Differences in thinking styles, particularly holistic versus analytical between Eastern and Western cultures, might be the reason behind different rates of mental illness between the two. In my paper, I explore the potential determinants of these divergent thinking styles, specifically focusing on religion. Through literature review, I make the case that Buddhist and Christian beliefs are associated with holistic and analytical thinking styles, respectively, and ultimately lead to varying rates of mental illness between the two cultures.*

**Keywords**— *Holistic Thinking, Analytical Thinking, Religion, Buddhism, Christianity, Affective Disorder*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Previous studies have shown East Asians have lower rates of affective disorder diagnoses compared to Westerners despite equivalent symptom endorsement between the two groups. A reason for these differences may be varied modes of thinking: holistic and analytical. However, the rationale for this disparity is unclear. Drawing from research exploring cultural differences (Sagioglou 2013; Biemel 2021), religion may partially explain the different ways of thinking. Particularly, Buddhism and Christianity might affect the likelihood of someone becoming a holistic or an analytical thinker.

First, I review evidence that supports the notion that holistic versus analytical thinking partially explains the asymmetrical rates of affective disorder between East Asian and Western cultures. Second, I examine previous studies that made arguments about why these cultural differences exist in the ways of thinking. Third, I evaluate previous research examining a correlation between Buddhism and holistic thinking and Christianity and analytical thinking. I argue that the link between Christianity and analytical thinking is strengthened by central

Christian beliefs that lead to the intolerance of contradiction and the discomfort experienced when positive and negative emotions co-occur. On the other hand, Buddhism and holistic thinking embrace tolerance of ambiguity and understanding the self in context.

### 2. EVIDENCE FOR VARIED THINKING IN RATES OF AFFECTIVE DISORDER

Rates of clinical depression and anxiety disorders in the West tend to be approximately 4 to 10 times greater than those in Asia. One reason for this disparity might be that Asian cultures think differently about emotion than Western cultures. Such differences may explain why negative affect does not rise to the level of clinical diagnosis at the same rate.

Peng and Nisbett (1999) conducted a study with Chinese and American participants to prove that the Chinese participants had a compromise approach towards contradiction - a key feature of holistic way of thinking. A fundamental aspect of holistic thinking is the expectation of change. In Chinese philosophical thinking, reality is construed to be active and changeable as opposed to fixed and identifiable with the latter viewpoint being associated as an analytic way of thinking. The holistic way of viewing the world as constantly changing, and that positive and negative emotions co-occur and negative emotions do not last, is consistent with research demonstrating that Chinese participants were more probable to choose nonlinear patterns as a representative of their happiness. On the other hand, thinking analytically depicts emotions as discrete events that become “sticky”, congruent to the research, which indicates that Americans view their lives as getting better or worse in a linear fashion (Ji, Nisbett, & Su, 2001).

A primary characteristic of holistic thinkers is to perceive the self as connected with the social context in adaptive and fluctuating manners. They are more likely to pay attention to the context or field rather than analytic thinkers who pay more attention to an object to comprehend its behavior. Analytic thinkers think of the self as stable and unaffected by social factors.

The acceptance of contradiction and the idea that positive and negative emotions can co-occur suggest more adaptive responses to negative emotions. Viewing positive and negative emotions as existing simultaneously reduces the tendency to overvalue positive emotions and undervalue negative emotions.

Because Westerners tend to highly value positive emotions, they also tend to disregard negative emotions. However, through the lens of a holistic thinker, negative affect is not necessarily discouraged, but can lead to positive outcomes. This viewpoint places less emphasis on happiness, and in fact, being overly happy is viewed to have potentially negative effects. Similarly, failures are associated with more self-improvement and success among holistic thinkers than analytic thinkers (Zhang & Cross, 2011). Summarizing the evidence above, there is a clear positive relation between holistic thinkers and Easterners and analytic thinkers and Westerners. For a better understanding of factors that lead to divergent thinking styles, societal and cultural factors such as age, gender, and the type of society (individualistic vs. collectivist) need to be examined.

### **3. FACTORS FOR DIVERGENT THINKING STYLES**

A person's age plays a critical role in determining their thinking style. Specifically, younger children have been reported to be more dialectic, a key feature of holistic thinking style. Dialecticism refers to a general tolerance for and expectation of contradiction, change, and balance (Peng & Nisbett, 1999); a dialectical view of the self refers to perceiving contradiction, change, and balance in one's own characteristics and behavior (Sims et al. 2015). A study comparing Americans—members of a more individualistic and analytical society—and Indians—those of a more collectivist and holistic society, evaluated the varied within-group thinking styles related to age groups. The findings suggest that more dialectical thinkers have shown to focus on the context of a person or an object than its dispositional qualities. American adults usually emphasized dispositional qualities such as characteristics of a person, for example: “She is friendly and gregarious” (Fiske & Cox, 1979, p.148), compared to their children counterparts who place importance on interpersonal relationships and contextual aspects, for example: “She goes skating every Thursday” or “She has three brothers” (Livesley & Bromley, 1973, p.123). Indians emphasized holistic traits such as family traditions and membership, business dealings, and education (C Konsky et. al. 2000).

From a cognitive perspective, previous studies hinted that children present a tendency to categorize objects in a dialectical system on the principle of spatiotemporal relationships between the objects, an orientation common among holistic thinkers (Bruner & Olver, 1963; Inhelder & Piaget, 1964; Olver & Hornsby, 1966; Vygotsky, 1962). On the other hand, adults seem to classify objects on the foundation of conceptual similarity. For example, an adult would associate the words ‘Collector’ and ‘Officer’ similarly. ‘Collector’ is a hyponym of the word ‘Officer,’ and both these words are synonyms of the idea of a person holding an office of authority, causing adults to view these two words as similar. However, it is important to note that some young children and certain non-Westerners fail to allude to dispositional modes of attribution (e.g., personality traits, abilities, and feelings) due to the lack of exposure to more modern experiential conditions (Goody & Watt, 1968; Greenfield, 1972; Horton, 1967; Scribner & Cole, 1973) and not necessarily out of their holistic thinking style. Some attributors may not be surrounded by sufficient diversity to pinpoint dispositional characteristics to differentiate an individual's behavior from that of others in the same circumstances or situations (Super, Harkness, & Baldwin, 1977).

Another important factor that has shown to influence thinking styles is gender. Miller and Hoffmann (1995) signified that women were more holistic and empathic than men, whereas men were more analytical. An explanation for this phenomenon is the historical, although outdated, structural location of males and females in society—this will be addressed further in later sections. Perhaps one of the most important factors in determining thinking styles is a type of society. Individualistic societies reinforce analytical thinking because their members are perceived to be self-governing and in control of their actions. Researchers have found that self-schemas in these types of societies tend to be less bound to contextual factors. This promotes analytical thinking as people, objects, and ideas are viewed prudently. On the other hand, collectivist cultures fortify holistic thinking. Unlike individualistic societies, self-schemas in collectivist societies tend to be bound to context, and conformity is more emphasized than singularity or individualism. Hence, engrossment in collectivism could shape thinking into more context-focused patterns which are found in holistic thinking style.

### **4. RELIGION AND SOCIETY**

One of the most fundamental determinants of society is its religious influences. Christianity is a predominantly analytic and thus individualistic religion due to how Christian believers prize their personal faith in God. Buddhism, on the other hand, is perceived to be a more collectivist ideology that follows high ethical concepts of tolerance, respect for the individual, non-violence, love of animals and nature and fundamental spiritual equality of all human beings (C. Konsky et. al. 2000). Even though Buddhism is a branch of Hinduism, Buddha disapproved of the Hindu Caste distinction which presumed that all men were equal in spiritual potential, demonstrating the core principles of dialecticism in Buddhism.

In addition, Buddhism influences modern society, particularly in Eastern cultures, which place emphasis on collectivist values and beliefs that can be traced back to Buddha's teachings centuries ago. For example, practices like familial traditions, business dealings, and education are holistic features that are prioritized in Asian societies. There is a higher tolerance of contradiction, and this can be observed in the avoidance of disagreements and conflicts in a family. This is noted frequently as Asian cultures stress upon harmony within relationships, even in contradicting situations—a collectivistic quality (C. Konsky et. al. 2000). In other words, it is deeply rooted among many Easterner cultures to find a “middle way” in opposing circumstances.

### **5. RELIGION AND THINKING STYLES**

I argue that religious differences, such as Buddhism versus Christianity, are one of the most influential determinants that shape a holistic or an analytical society. Analytical thinkers focus on objects as opposed to contexts and stress upon categories, formal logic, and rules to govern an object's behaviour (De Vaus et. al. 2018). They are more intolerant of contradiction, and in terms of emotions, they struggle to see how positive and negative emotions can co-occur.

According to my hypothesis, Christianity leads to more analytical thinking and Buddhism leads to more holistic thinking. This can be seen in Kim-Prieto and Diener (2009) where they investigated the frequency and desirability of varied emotions that Christians and Buddhists experienced. Christians wanted to experience love more frequently than Buddhists, indicating that analytical thinking common among Christians can lead to a higher need for positive emotions and a greater discomfort in the presence of negative emotions. On the other hand, Buddhists reported fewer dips in any type of emotion compared to Christians, showing that they can accept that negative and positive emotions can co-occur. Moreover, Western Christians emphasized high-arousal positive states, such as excitement, while East Asian Buddhists preferred low arousal positive states, such as calm. This idiosyncrasy between Christians and Buddhists demonstrates that Buddhists are less prone to the desire for homogenous emotions such as excitement and Christians prefer to experience pure happy emotions and avoid mixed states of feeling. Furthermore, Kim-Prieto (2009) suggested that a Pentecostal Christian would seek to not only experience positive emotions, but also experience them at a high intensity (Griffith, 1997). Whereas, a Zen Buddhist might seek to experience emotions less intensely, preferring to modulate experience and dampen the intensity of emotions (Groth-Marnat, 1992; Tsai, 2007).

There are other elements in Christianity that also correlate with analytical style thinking. For instance, Smith (1991) described Jesus as an “energizing power” who used “gigantesque” language and possessed an “extravagance” and “passionate quality,” which are qualities found in analytic thinkers as they incline towards experiencing mainly positive emotions which in turn overvalues these positive emotions. Buddha on the other hand was described as “cool,” “dispassionate,” and “calm,” all characteristics that have a positive state of low-arousal, a trait of holistic thinkers.

High arousal positive states are more common in analytical thinkers, whereas Low arousal positive states are more common in dialectical thinkers. Christianity fosters the idea of “alter[ing] the world to make it fit their own Christian percepts” (Weisz et al., 1984). In contrast, Buddhism encourages its practitioners to “change their orientation toward those realities.” The desire to influence others was associated with valuing high arousal positive states, whereas the need to adapt to others was associated with valuing low arousal positive states (Tsai et. al 2006).

This correlation shows that Christians are more likely to be analytical thinkers, whilst Buddhists are more likely to be holistic thinkers. Furthermore, Sagioglou et al. (2013) hypothesized that the Christian norm of good versus bad would shift a person’s cognitive style towards a greater intolerance for ambiguity, which is a more analytical and categorial way of thinking. Low tolerant participants were oversensitive to the aversive consequences of ambiguity and thus experienced greater levels of discomfort than participants who had a higher tolerance. The authors therefore deduced that this intolerance should motivate people to perform behaviors aimed at reducing it. As ambiguity and contradiction are commonly experienced in life, the greater sense of discomfort could hint at why Westerners, who are more analytical and less holistic than Easterners, have higher rates of mental illness than Easterners.

## **6. LIMITATIONS**

The goal of this study was to use the data on religion and thinking styles to frame an argument about how religion affects different modes of thinking and ultimately rates of mental illness. However, I would like to acknowledge a few limitations after conducting this review. First, like in any other study, generalization could lead to inaccurate conclusions. Not all Easterners are holistic, and not all Westerners are analytical. Although my study assumes this about the two cultures, this generalization is likely true only to a certain extent. Factors other than religion can certainly shape thinking styles of different cultural groups.

Further emphasizing this danger of generalization, group characteristics are not always fully reflective of individuals within those groups. This study only looked at different thinking styles at a between-group level but not at a within-group level. In fact, in a given Western society, more religious individuals have shown to be more of holistic thinkers (McCutcheon et.al. 2014).

Second, the definition of analytical thinking is rather ill-defined. After reviewing multiple scholarly articles on analytical thinking, it became quickly clear that there is some asymmetry in the definitions of what constitutes analytical thinking. Nisbett (2001) defined analytical thought as involving detachment of the object from its context, a tendency to focus on attributes of the object to assign it to categories, and a preference for using rules about the categories to interpret and predict the object’s behavior. It can be inferred that analytical thinking follows the practice of decontextualizing structure from content, the use of formal logic, and avoidance of contradiction. While the definition of analytical thinking used in this paper is construed primarily from the interpretation above, other articles have described analytical thinking style as one where rule and logic are emphasized. For example, Biemel et. al. (2020) used a mathematical and logic-based Cognitive Reflection Test to measure objectively correct responses and used those as indices for analytical thinking. Future studies will thus benefit from clarifying how analytical thinking is defined.

Third, no religion is purely analytical or holistic. My review assumed Christianity to be a mostly analytical religion and Buddhism to be holistic; however, evidence suggests each religion has traits that oppose their natural style of thinking. Christians value participation in a religious community, which is a more collectivistic and holistic trait, whereas Buddhism includes teachings and beliefs which are more individualistic and analytical, such as cultivation of internal mind-sets, the *ātman* (C. Kinsky et. al. 2001). Lastly, some of the evidence presented is outdated, particularly regarding how gender influences religion and thinking styles. According to “Pascal’s wager,” religious belief is viewed as risk averse and nonreligious belief as risk taking. Risk taking is seen as a more masculine trait that proclaims bravery, while females are shaped to be more gentle and passive. During the 1900s, women had a considerably higher participation rate in household and maternal duties and lower participation in labour forces. Lower participation gave women ample time to spend on religious activities as it gave them a sense of identity. This led to men abstaining from religious practice and women tending towards religion. The hierarchy in society is less strict now in most modern societies, and women are more involved in the Labour force and therefore seen more equal to males in more circumstances.

## 7. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Because the present study primarily drew its conclusions at a group level, only intergroup differences were considered. To inform psychological processes behind religion and thinking styles, there needs to be more research at the individual level which looks at discrepancies in dialecticism and analytical thinking, along with Buddhism and Christianity, within an individual.

Moreover, given that only two cultures and two religions were taken into account in the present study, future studies examining other religions, such as Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism, may provide more nuanced and descriptive conclusions. By the same token, more cultures other than Eastern and Western should be reviewed, including African descent and European. Categorizing cultures as simply “Western” and “Eastern” should be re-examined to provide more accurate conclusions that relate religion and the different modes of thinking.

The determinants of thinking styles in the present study were limited to societal influences. However, deeper research into the biological basis of thinking styles as a mechanism for mental illness may provide more insight to the range of factors which govern thought and mental health outcomes.

## 8. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The evidence reviewed above supports the notion that thinking styles are influenced by religion. Specifically, holistic thinking is influenced by Buddhism and analytical thinking is influenced by Christianity. I argue that certain beliefs in Christianity such as intolerance of contradiction and overvaluing positive emotions are very much analytical. In Buddhism, low-arousal states, tolerance of positive and negative emotions co-occurring, and understanding the self-in context are beliefs that are fortified and lean toward a more holistic way of thinking. My study compared the two different types of thinking and utilized evidence linking particular ideologies in each religion to the respective style of thinking. My review further supports the possibility that different religions lead to different thinking styles which in turn lead to asymmetrical rates of mental illness across Eastern and Western cultures. Easterners' dialectical way of thinking allows for greater emotion regulation strategies which means they are less likely to go on to develop affective disorder. However, Westerners' analytical way of thinking results in overvaluing positive emotions and experiencing greater discomfort in contradicting situations. This may cause higher rates of affective disorder in Western cultures.

In sum, my study suggests that there is much to be learned from a cross-cultural comparison of how religion can play a role in thinking styles and ultimately rates of mental illness. I hope that by providing a model that explains the correlation between these concepts at a societal and psychological level, I can provide the groundwork not only for understanding what causes the different ways of thinking, but also for gaining insight into religions and how these styles of thinking can be further considered in therapy. The asymmetrical rates of mental illness in East and West are rooted in Western and analytical ideas of overvaluing positive emotions and experiencing difficulty coping with unwanted negative emotions which may in part originate from Christian beliefs. Taking a cross-cultural approach provides for reflection on this tendency and offers a useful perspective from which to understand and relate religions, thinking styles, and mental illness.

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