



# Dialectic Thought in Asian, American, and Pacific Islander Student Populations

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## Introduction

Dialectical thinking is the process of objectively considering opposing aspects of the same issue simultaneously. A practical application of this kind of thought is the "students' abilities to 'enter into thoughts and feelings other than their own'" (as cited in Gong, 2005). Gong (2005) also said of children, "From their earliest days, they come up against opposing points of view, differing interpretations of events, contradictory judgments, and incompatible lines of reasoning." As can be seen, dialectical thinking is an aspect of most everyone's early years. The question at hand is: How do international student groups display it over time at college?

Studies in the past have often compared Americans and Asians. Some studies have suggested that both people from both the west and the east can think dialectically. They often give examples of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Marx and Engels who each were western thinkers who made significant contributions concerning dialectical thought (Enns, 2005).

Yet most studies have still found Asians more likely to display dialectical thought. This may be because "ability alone is not enough to ensure ongoing performance. Just as having the ability to play the piano does not guarantee the disposition to do so, having certain thinking skills does not mean that one will use them" (Tishman, Jay, & Perkins, 1993).

Though western thinkers and eastern thinkers are often compared in this area, there are virtually no studies involving Pacific Islanders.

The aim of this study is to determine the impact of studying at an American university on Asian, American, and Pacific Islander students' tendency toward dialectical thought.

We hypothesize that all students will increase in dialectical thought from their freshmen year to their senior year because the university setting often nurtures this thought process. We also hypothesize that like other studies Asians will display more dialectical thought than Americans. Due to lack of previous research utilizing Pacific Islanders we cannot hypothesize whether they will be more or less likely to display dialectic thought than their American or Asian counterparts.

## Method

### Participants

Of the 48 participants 20 were Seniors, 10 were Sophomores, 15 were Juniors, and 2 were Freshmen. They were also classified by Home Area; 16 were from Asia, 20 from the Mainland USA (ie. continental states) and 12 were from the Pacific Islands.

### Apparatus

We utilized two portions of the apparatuses utilized by Peng & Nisbett in 1999.

In section one the participants were asked to respond to two short issues. For example: "Mary, Phoebe, and Julie all have daughters. Each mother has held a set of values which has guided her efforts to raise her daughter. Now the daughters have grown up, and each of them is rejecting many of her mother's values. How did it happen and what should they do?"

In section two the participants were presented with a dialectical argument and a non-dialectical argument that reach the same conclusion. They were asked to choose which argument was more persuasive and which they liked more personally. They did this for two separate sets of arguments- one set argued against certain laws of physics as set forth by Aristotle and the other set argued the existence of God.

### Procedure

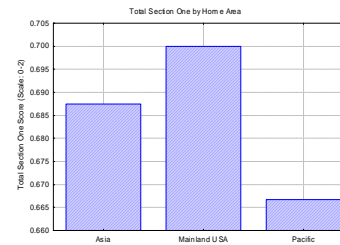
The survey was placed online for students to complete at their leisure. Extra credit was offered to Psychology students as an incentive to participate. Other students participated with no incentive.

Once responses were collected for the first section a panel of researchers reviewed the responses and categorized them as either dialectical or non-dialectical according to criteria established by Peng & Nisbett (1999).

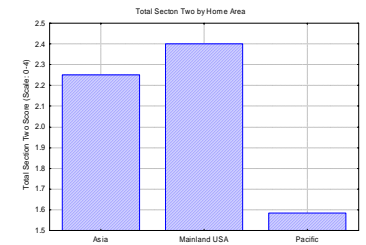
Concerning the scale, each dialectical response was worth one point. Therefore, in section one participants could have between 0 and 2 points. In section two they could receive up to 4 points. These points were utilized in all the analyses.

## Results

Two separate one-way ANOVA's (section one and section two) utilized Home Area as the categorical variable. These analyses revealed that students from Asia and from the Mainland USA appeared almost equally likely to display dialectical thinking while students from Pacific Islands appeared much less likely to display dialectical thinking.

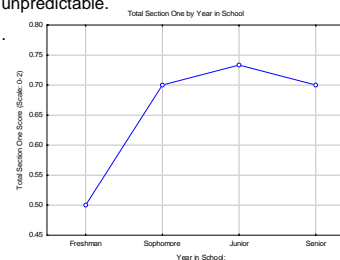


Left Figure: Total Section One Score by Home Area.

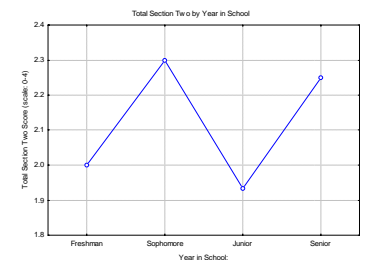


Right Figure: Total Section Two Score by Home Area.

Two more separate one-way ANOVA's (section one and section two) utilized Year in School as the categorical variable. These analyses suggested that, though Seniors are more likely to think dialectically, the Junior year especially may be unpredictable.



Left Figure: Total Section One Score by Year in School.



Right Figure: Total Section Two Score by Year in School.

## Conclusion

The trends in this study were clear. There was an increase in dialectical thinking from Freshmen to Seniors in college. As it is not linear, it does not appear as though students increase steadily from Freshmen to Senior years, with much of their growth occurring during their first 2 years of college.

A more interesting trend showed that, though students from Asia and the Mainland USA do not display a large difference in their dialectic thinking, students from the Pacific Islands seem to think less dialectically. This finding should be considered in the education of these different groups and it may be beneficial to better describe and justify alternate points of view for the Pacific Island students.

While these studies would benefit from more subjects, further studies will need to confirm these conclusions.

## References

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