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Thinking style across cultures: An interview with Richard Nisbett

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On a recent visit to the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), Professor Richard Nisbett, a pioneer in research on cultural differences in social cognition, gave a public lecture on 'Culture and Cognition'. During his stay, Professor Nisbett met with Dr Hyun-Jung Lee and talked his half-century long intellectual journey. In this interview, he discussed how he first became interested in cultural differences in cognition and reasoning, what his insights are on the cultural differences in thinking style, and why and how we might benefit from understanding different thinking style of Others. Here he shares the journey and insights gleaned in his career-long focus on culture and our evolving understanding of the phenomena.

Richard E. Nisbett is is the Theodore M. Newcomb Distinguished University Professor and Research Professor in Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, in the US. He was trained as cognitive social psychologist (PhD, Columbia Universty USA, 1966). After spending five years at Yale University as Assistant Professor of Psychology, Professor Nisbett moved to the University of Michigan in 1971 and has stayed there ever since. His research during the 1970s and 1980s represents the mainstream cognitive social psychology; on reasoning, errors and biases in reasoning and social judgments. Later in the 1990s his research expands to include the issues such as violence, aggression and culture of honor in U.S. regional culture, focusing on the US South specifically, which was a little detour from the mainstream cognitive social psychology. Moving to the 2000s Professor Nisbett's research primarily focuses on societal cultural differences in social cognition. Among his many achievements and

contributions, the book *The geography of thought: How Asians and Westerners think differently and why* (2003) remains a particular inspiration for many, including the cross-cultural management scholars. His most recent book is *Mindware: Tools for Smart Thinking* (2015).

CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN THINKING STYLE: ANALYTICAL AND HOLISTIC THINKING

HJ Lee: Professor Nisbett, so, how did it all start? You are a cognitive social psychologist, trained in the field where “cultural differences” are typically treated as “noise”, or something to be controlled for in research design. Tell me about how you got interested in the cultural differences in cognitive reasoning and thinking style.

R Nisbett: My whole career is about people’s reasoning, specially errors in reasoning, and how to fix the errors in reasoning, with one little detour on violence¹. There are some particular problems that Kahneman and Tversky, and people like me, focused on, the problems that made people particularly difficult to think straight about. For example, heuristics are so powerful. But most of these tools are easy to apply as long as you know how you frame events. If you use the frame correctly, that’s not that hard to deal with. Anyway, this was my career in a paragraph... up until I met Kaiping Peng². Well, one little detour. Before I met him, I read a book, by a Japanese philosopher³ entitled “Ways of thinking of Eastern Peoples”. I don’t know why I read it, but it tells the notion of holism, the notion of dialecticism, the lack of interest in formal logic among these Eastern Peoples. It is all in there. I thought, hmm..., very interesting, I was sure there was something to it..., but not much. (Here, the professor pauses to laugh) It didn’t really occur to me that what he was describing in the book was so fundamental. Well, I am an

¹ He refers to a series of his reseach in the 1990s on violent behavior, aggression and culture of honor in southern US.

² Kaiping Peng is Associate Professor Emeritus in Department of Psychology, University of California Berkely. He received PhD in Social Psycholoy at the University of Michigan in 1997.

³ Nakamura, H. (1964). Ways of thinking of Eastern people. London: Kegan Paul International.

American, and Americans don't believe in culture. Americans think everybody is an American, all are the same. I mean that they know that there are attitudes differences, preferences differences and so on, they know that French are different, well, but, in the end, they are all the same, like us, Americans. I was so universalist. I used to say, "...if there is anything I can demonstrate in a laboratory with human beings, I can demonstrate in some way in other primates". That's how much a universalist that I was.

HJ Lee: So, you didn't initially take it seriously enough to shift your research direction towards cultural comparison then. What made you to take this seriously, what inspired you to take this 'fun' stuff to research? What happened next?

R Nisbett: When I met Kaiping, he told me, "you and I think in completely different ways". Well, I was certainly interested, and I was kind of indulgent like in a...., 'oh, sure, tell me more', sort of way. He told me, then, a version of the story that we ended up telling later in our work. And again, when Kaiping told me this, my initial reaction was still similar to when I first read the Japanese philosopher's book that, well, I am sure there was surely something to that. But when we started doing research in our lab, there were literally qualitative differences; differences across lots of things between subjects from different cultures. The Asian subjects were thinking one way, and the American subjects were thinking another way. That was so striking to see how big, and how qualitative, the differences were.

Then I just had some incredible luck. Around this time, there was a stream of brilliant East Asian graduate students who were pursuing the same sort of research as Kaiping Peng. The next one was the incredibly brilliant research scholar Incheol Choi, from Korea. He added a great deal to what I learned from Kaiping. There were other people as well, such as another East Asian, Takahiko Masuda from Japan. Essentially, these are the people with whom I associated to a substantial degree over the next 10 or 12 years that followed. These East Asian students whom I met, they are so damn brilliant, not in the way I was accustomed to. So I wanted to learn

why they are so brilliant. If they were reasonably bright people, it might not have had such an impact on me. And of course I read widely, lots on cultural differences, some very interesting stuff out there. Lots of sharp people, mostly philosophers, talked about the cultural differences on the thinking style, the intellectual style. So, first it was my reading, and our research that made me aware of the differences across culture. As for critical analytical thinking, I didn't need the notion of holistic thinking to start to be critical, because I was already critical about the limitations of analytical thinking. And as I observed how my East Asian students thought, they became part of the motives that lead me to take the cultural differences seriously.

ROLE OF CONTEXT AND SOCIAL RELATIONS IN REASONING AND DECISION MAKING

HJ Lee: Your work on comparative studies- mainly between East Asians and US Americans- began to appear in the mid 1990s. The following decade or so you devoted much of your research to cultural differences in cognitive reasoning, mainly focusing on East Asians. What are the key discoveries and messages that you would share with the cross-cultural management community?

R Nisbett: I am a critic of reasoning. My interest is not so much in researching comparative reasoning, but I am interested primarily in 'who is doing better'. For example, Westerners conceived and developed the notion of logic, and studying the concept of logic does hold great value. However, in Ancient China there was no concern about formal logic, to the amazement of Western thinkers. Logical thinking, in general, has tremendous advantages as habits of mind. Categorization, assignment of rules, etc., are what gave rise to science, and this thinking is immensely valuable. But before I ever encountered East Asian students, I was very much aware of the limitations of logical thinking and the inclination of many people, especially scholars and scientists, to engage in 'hyper'-logicizing. To illustrate, formal modelling has a long history in the field of psychology. Although there are some spectacular triumphs in formal modelling,

many of those formal approaches had become so dry that psychologists had forgotten about the phenomenon, were no longer interested in the phenomenon, or were only interested in formal modelling as an exercise. In essence, the phenomena have become disconnected from the model. I have always had my suspicions that economists are particularly abstract, and their approaches to economic models have similar limitations as those in psychology.

Alternatively, there is this more holistic way of thinking, the advantage of which became more clear through my research. East Asians, who predominantly think in a holistic way, notice much more about the physical world than Euro-Americans, who predominantly think in an analytic way. I think that this comes from their social requirements that, in order to be effective, you really need to take the context into account, in thinking and decision making. From my perspective, the desired nature of social relations determines the way of thinking in any society. In a broader context, I believe the origin of all these differences is economic. The way you earn a living determines your social relations, which in turn determines the way you think. There is a good evidence for this. The most spectacular study is one showing that Chinese who are wheat farmers are more inclined towards analytic thinking, whereas rice farmers are more inclined towards holistic thinking: as such, wheat farmers and rice farmers think differently. (*Note from HJ Lee: Rice farming requires intense collective efforts among farmers such as communal irrigation, coordinated transplanting and harvesting; by contrast, wheat farming does not require as much as collective, coordinated actions among farmers.*) We found further evidence on a much smaller scale. It seems that farmers and fishers in a small area of Turkey are holistic in their thinking, as compared to herders, because the latter don't have to regularly deal with, and depend on, other people. In Europe, the Industrial Revolution had pushed Europeans and their respective cultures very much more into an analytical direction because the Industrial Revolution created a great deal freedom of action. The US version of this is that entrepreneurs view themselves as a sort of cowboys. In contrast, it is clear that the holistic way of thinking takes into account temporal contexts, social contexts and the social factors that affect decisions about other people.

I believe the differences in thinking style have strong business implications internationally. To Chinese, for example, Western law is perceived as extremely rigid and seen as creating miscalculated decisions, because you are forcing the phenomenon you are dealing with to fit to some formal legal structure, even though this may not be optimal. Thus, the Chinese are likely to see some Western legal practices as poor and inefficient. I have a striking example. A group of our students from here at the University of Michigan were sent to China for a multi-week field study trip seminar. A group of them were involved in an argument with a taxi driver in China, and it was clear that the students behaved badly. The president of the university made the decision to put all of the students on a plane to get them back home the very next day. To my Chinese friend, this seemed incredibly cruel, but to me it seemed perfectly reasonable and thus I agreed with the university president: since the students' behavior was not acceptable, we wanted to demonstrate the extent to which we thought it was unacceptable, so we needed to take this extreme action. There is a moral principle in the West dictating that the law applies equally to everybody. In holistic approach, however, more attention is given to the contexts and more attention is given to preserving relationships. It's different, and of course abuses are possible here. In any case, it is the focus on 'behavior' itself, versus, taking into account the 'context' of behavior that is important in decision making. I don't know how much relevance this difference makes in the business context...

HJ Lee: This is absolutely relevant and is in fact one of the key issues in cross-cultural management. Contrasting a universalistic approach and a particularistic approach to decision making is one of the most debated issues amongst scholars. We find this particularly so in the ethical dilemma situations where two or more different perspectives have to be reconciled, such as between headquarters' and subsidiaries' or between different local operations.

R Nisbett: Yes, it should be noted that the distinction between the two styles is not really between the East and the West. It is between extreme individualism, independence and

analytical thinking, versus the rest of the world, which is more collectivist, interdependent and holistic... English speaking cultures like Australian, Canadian and American belong to this extreme individualistic, analytical focus. The key contrast centers on the desired nature of social relations. There can be big problems for Americans, and even the British, in that there is so little recognition of the importance of social relations when dealing with people in different cultures. For example, a team of American business men would likely criticize one of their own for a failure. There are American expressions that reflect this such as 'being hung out to dry', meaning "you messed up, therefore you get the blame...", but this does not happen in all nations. My own research on Italians, for example, finds that the northern Italians are closer to the thinking style of northern Europeans, whereas the southern Italians are similar in thinking style to Chinese in many ways, specifically in terms of the importance of social relations among them. As such, they wouldn't single out one person to blame like Americans do, because social relations are so important.

COMPLEMENTARITY OF DIFFERENT THINKING STYLES: WHY AND HOW WE BENEFIT FROM DIFFERENT THINKING STYLE

HJ Lee: You mentioned yesterday in the LSE public lecture that East Asians such as Chinese and Koreans have already absorbed the analytical way of thinking into their holism framework, but the Westerners (or North Americans) have not absorbed the holistic way of thinking. Will you tell me more about the interactions or contacts between the two key thinking styles, and why might East Asians have incorporated more analytic thinking, but Westerners have not embraced the holistic approach as yet?

R Nisbett: First of all, the reason for Westerners' lack of learning of holistic thinking has to do with Western arrogance and superiority. As you know, I am from the US and my experience with the stereotype of Americans is that they reflect more imperialistic thinking. There is a

belief that "we are the ones who initiated the Industrial Revolution, so we know how to be successful", which reflects superiority over other cultures. However, I doubt that most Americans think that China, for example, is superior in any sense. But, I must say that this also has to do with the difficulty Westerners have with grasping the complexity of the holistic way of thinking. The analytical Western-leaning cognitive tools characterized by formal logic are easier to comprehend. The habits of categorization are not difficult to master; they are not complex for those who want to learn them. The holistic Eastern-leaning intellectual tools are tremendously difficult to master. Instead of relying on formal logic, Westerners need to more clearly recognize contexts and more distinctly appreciate social relations, and taking these intricate issues into account in their reasoning.

HJ Lee: You have praised holistic thinking as a key way to compensate for the limitations in Western analytic thinking. Would you define your views on cultural 'contact' between different thinking style as focusing more on the positive than the negative?

R Nisbett: Yes, definitely. I was very surprised to hear from you that in your Cross Cultural Management field there is this negative bias towards cultural differences, or where the differences are bad so to speak. As a cognitive social psychologist, I cannot think of anything negative about cultural differences, because viewing problems through different approaches helps address them, the problems and limitations of your own style. For example, you know much more than I do about this, but South Korean society is tremendously successful. It seems that they adapted to the analytic Western style of thinking, which directly contrasts with their holistic Eastern style of thinking. This is amazing. Their GDP per capita right after the Korean war was the same as Kenya. Can you believe how rapidly they have progressed! There is something there, possibly a hybridization, that has proved to be beneficial.

The Western intellectual virtues are purely cognitive, whereas the Eastern intellectual virtues are embedded in social relations and emotional stances. For example, when you have

two apparently contradictory propositions, and both of which may be correct, and you have to make a decision between the two. Say one alternative is only slightly more favourable than another, a ratio of 51 to 49. Applying the purely cognitive, analytic approach, you would go for the one with 51, and this is probably one reasonable way to go... But the Eastern holistic thinking style may not approve such a decision as reasonable since the decision is social in origin and would ultimately influence cognitive behavior. So it is difficult to determine if one of the two intellectual virtues is better suited than the other, but Westerners would benefit if they were more aware of the intellectual virtue of acceptance of contradiction. The truth probably lies somewhere in-between, rather than an 'either-or' resolution.

HJ Lee: Looking into the future, what would you recommend for those who want to learn about different thinking styles, especially for those from the cultures with a predominantly analytic approach?

R Nisbett: Reading books as I did on these topics is a good place to start. For example, I would recommend reading my book, the geography of thought, as well as some others on the topic, of which there are many. Another recommendation I would make is an article by a man named Galtung⁴. He wrote about the four intellectual styles of different civilizations- Saxonian, Gallic (mainly French), Nipponic (Japanese) and Teutonic (Germanic and related). His writing on the four very different intellectual approaches is both interesting and humorous, and you will gain much insight from this book. It seems applicable to US Americans and other Westerners especially. For example, I receive a lot of letters of appreciation from Westerners who have read my book, stating that they learned so much about the Eastern way of thinking and it challenges them to reflect on their own reasoning styles. Interestingly, I never get such letters of thanks

⁴ Galtung, J. (1981). Structure, culture, and intellectual style: An essay comparing saxonian, teutonic, gallic and nipponic approaches. *Theory and Methods*, 20(6): 817-856.

from the East Asians, as it seems they already know, basically, the Western way of thinking.
(And with this comment, the professor conjures one final laugh!)

CONCLUSIONS

In this interview Professor Nisbett recollects his first reaction to reading a book about East Asian people's thinking style, and describes how his interaction with people whose thinking style was totally different from his own helped enrich his research activities. His reflection on his own journey from his early academic career as a young scientist who he describes as an extreme universalist, to a mature intellectual who understands and appreciates different, at times contradictory, thinking style, is a concrete example of how differences can lead to the positive. He convincingly demonstrates how the efforts to understand different cognitive and intellectual styles can help reduce limitations of one's own way of reasoning. His relentless curiosity on cultural differences, critical stance towards his accustomed thinking style, and intense positive interaction with people from different thinking tradition sum up the recipe for positive outcome of cross-cultural contact. Professor Nisbett recently published a book "*Mindware: Tools for Smart Thinking*" (2015) in which he provides a tool kit for better thinking and wiser decisions. His efforts to help address errors in thinking, the efforts that he started 50 years ago, continue.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Hyun-Jung (HJ) Lee is an Assistant Professor of Employment Relations and Organizational Behavior at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), in the UK. She received her PhD from LSE. Trained as psychologist, she has taught undergraduate, Master's, and executive programmes around Asia and Europe more than a decade. She has advised and

worked with many organizations including Samsung, LG, Hyundai, HSBC, Standard Chartered, Rolls-Royce, and several UN organizations. Her research interests center on the impact of multiple cultures on individuals and organizations, with an emphasis on transcultural collaborations and cosmopolitanism in multicultural and global contexts.