



A cross-lagged model of self-esteem and life satisfaction: Gender differences among Chinese university students

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ABSTRACT

Past research has shown a close relationship between self-esteem (SE) and life satisfaction (LS). Using cross-lagged structural equation modeling, the current longitudinal study examined the directionality of the relationship among a sample of Chinese university students (214 males and 134 females). In the model, SE and LS at Time 1 were used to predict SE and LS at Time 2, with socioeconomic status (SES) as the independent variable of both constructs. Results showed that SE consistently predicted subsequent LS among both genders, whereas no significant effects of LS on subsequent SE were found. Furthermore, SES had significant effects on LS among both genders. Its influence on SE, however, was significant among females only. Implications and limitations are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Life satisfaction (LS) is the cognitive component of subjective well-being (SWB), which reflects an individual's overall evaluation about his or her quality of life (Diener & Diener, 1995). Unlike the emotional components of SWB (pleasant and unpleasant affective experience) that can be influenced by transient mood, life satisfaction is a more enduring assessment of one's life and therefore is commonly used as the indicator of one's subjective well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Consequently, the construct of LS and its correlates have attracted much research attention in recent decades (Eid & Larsen, 2008). Existing literature has documented that high LS is associated with less psychological problems as well as positive attributes and outcomes (e.g., Diener, 1994; Diener, Suh, & Oishi, 1997).

Among the constructs, self-esteem (SE) has been found to be a robust correlate of LS for people across cultures and gender (e.g., Chen, Cheung, Bond, & Leung, 2006; Diener & Diener, 1995). For instance, in a large cross-national study by Diener and Diener (1995), SE and LS were significantly correlated at $r = .47$. Moreover, the association was stronger among people in individualistic cultures than those in collectivistic cultures. Diener and Diener explained that individualists were typically socialized to attend to internal over external attributes and thus tend to evaluate lives based on personal attributes (such as SE); while collectivists were often socialized to value social norms and make judgment about lives

according to external sources (such as relationships with others). The finding is congruent with self-construal theory (Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995), which argues that people in collectivistic cultures tend to develop an interdependent self-construal, whereas people in individualistic cultures usually adopt an independent self-construal.

The framework can also be used to explain gender differences in the association between SE and LS. Most cultures encourage males to develop an independent self-construal and females to form an interdependent self-construal (Cross & Madson, 1997; Markus & Oyserman, 1989). Therefore, when people make life evaluations, males (like individualists) would put more weight on internal sources and females would emphasize more on external sources. Consistent with this prediction, Reid's (2004) study among 206 American college students showed that self-esteem predicted men's well-being to a larger extent than it predicted women's well-being, whereas relationship harmony had a significant effect on well-being among women but not men. Similar gender difference can also be found in research on self-efficacy and life satisfaction (e.g., Vecchio, Gerbino, Pastorelli, Del Bove, & Caprara, 2007).

Though previous studies have established clear association between SE and LS and provided sound explanation for cultural as well as gender differences in the association, little is known about the directionality of the relationship. In their comprehensive review of self-esteem literature, Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, and Vohs (2003) acknowledged that previous research had not clearly established causation of SE and happiness, although people often assume or believe that higher SE leads to greater happiness. The authors cautioned that intervention based on incorrect

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assumption of causality could bring about undesirable effects. They explained, with the relationship between SE and academic performance as an example, if self-esteem is not the cause but effect of academic performance, intervention aiming at enhancing self-esteem would not benefit academic performance. On the contrary, it can harm academic performance because students may pay less effort when they feel more satisfied with themselves. Similarly, it is also dangerous to assume that SE causes LS and disregard the other possibility before clear evidence is obtained from empirical studies.

The present study endeavors to contribute to the current understanding in the following ways. First, the study is to test the directionality of the relationship between SE and LS. Although researchers often regard happiness as the outcome, recent empirical studies have shown happiness can be the cause as well. For instance, it was found that happiness could lead to various successes (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005) and positive changes in people's behaviors (Salmela-Aro & Tuominen-Soini, 2010). To address the issue, this study applies longitudinal design and analyzes data with cross-lagged structural equation modeling, which is to be described later in details (see also Finkel, 1995; Taris, 2000). Furthermore, the study examines the relationship in a Chinese context, which is regarded as a typical collectivistic culture (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). As the majority of previous studies were conducted among individualistic cultures, findings from the study will add useful information to the current literature and facilitate future systematic examination (e.g., meta-analysis) of the phenomenon.

Second, the study attempts to investigate the differences and similarities of the directional relationship between SE and LS across gender. Researchers have argued that in collectivistic cultures, where social norms and relationship harmony are highly valued, both males and females tend to form an interdependent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Therefore, it is possible that gender differences in the relationship between SE and LS reported in previous Western studies may not be pronounced for people in collectivistic cultures. So far, only one study has examined the moderating effect of gender on the SE–LS relation among Chinese populations (Zhang & Leung, 2002) and reported a non-significant gender effect. More evidence on this issue is needed in order to fully understand the moderating effect of gender on the SE–LS relation in different cultures.

Third, when testing the directionality of the relationship between variables, researchers need to take into account the effect of the common cause. Previous work has often shown that higher social economic status (SES) is associated with both higher levels of SWB (Kousha & Mohseni, 1997) and self-esteem (Orth, Trzesniewski, & Robins, 2010; Twenge & Campbell, 2002). In order to disentangle the relationship between SE and LS, the effect of SES must be taken into account carefully. Current literature has shown that the effect of SES varies across countries as well as gender. For example, SES was more strongly correlated with LS in poorer countries than in wealthy countries where people have satisfied their basic needs (Diener & Oishi, 2000; Oishi, Diener, Lucas, & Suh, 1999). Several studies have shown that the prediction of SES on SWB is stronger for men than for women (Adelmann, 1987; Aryee, 1999), due to the different gender roles. Because of males' traditional role as household breadwinners and females' as caregivers, men are likely to find more life satisfaction in their achievements in occupation-related fields whereas women would derive more happiness from relationships and family. Considering the rapid changes of social and economic systems in modern China, one may wonder to what extent these findings could be applied to Chinese context to help us to understand the relationship between SE and LS among males and females in China. As numerous recent studies have shown, contemporary Chinese people's conceptualization of masculinity and femininity, gender role adoption, and attitudes toward women's social roles are different from those of Western people (e.g., Chang, 1999; Tang & Lau, 1995; Wu, 1996; Yu & Xie, 2008). For example, Wu (1996) reported that parents of only children believed that boys and girls should enjoy equal levels of education, dramatically different from the traditional gender-differentiated expectations about educational achievement. These characteristics of Chinese society might have important implications on the way Chinese young people evaluate their lives as well as themselves. Therefore, it would be interesting to examine whether the relationship of SES with LS and SE would be different for Chinese men and women nowadays.

In sum, the study endeavors to investigate three main questions among a Chinese sample. First, the study aims to clarify the directional relationship between LS and SE. Second, the study attempts to explore gender differences in the relationship. Finally, the role of SES in the relationship between LS and SE is examined.

2. Method

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2.1. Participants and procedure

Three hundred and forty-eight students (214 males and 134 females) from a large university in Mainland China participated in the study. The students were from a variety of science and art disciplines including history, philosophy, law, information technology, and physics. The age range was from 16 to 24 years ($M = 20.00$, $SD = 0.99$).

The inventories were administered to the participants on two occasions with an interval of 8 months. The scales were translated from English into Chinese, with back-translation procedure to ensure accuracy and equivalency. Students were told that data were collected for research purposes, that participation was completely voluntary, and that confidentiality would be assured. Small gifts were given to the students as an incentive of participation.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Life satisfaction

The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) is a five-item scale that assesses individuals' life satisfaction, the cognitive component of subjective well-being. The SWLS typically uses a 7-point response format (ranging from *not at all true of me* to *exactly true of me*). A higher scale score indicates a higher level of life satisfaction. Since it was developed, the SWLS has been widely used in measuring general life satisfaction and has shown favorable psychometric properties in various languages and samples including Chinese (e.g., Abdallah, 1998; Neto, 1993; Sachs, 2004). For the current study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .77 and .81 for the two measurement occasions, respectively.

2.2.2. Self-esteem

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1989) is a 10-item scale that has been widely used for assessing general self-esteem. For consistency, this study applied a 7-point Likert scale (ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*). The RSES consists of five positively and five negatively worded items. Past research has shown satisfactory internal consistency of the scale among Chinese samples (e.g., Chen et al., 2006) and provided evidence for the cross-cultural invariance of the construct (e.g., Russell, Crockett, Shen, & Lee, 2008). However, recent psychometric studies using various scales and languages have generally suggested that including negatively worded items, although helping to reduce response set, could complicate the factor structure by

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