



Was he happy? Cultural difference in conceptions of Jesus

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 2 December 2010

Keywords:

Culture
Personality
Emotion
Happiness

ABSTRACT

In two studies, we examined whether (a) conceptions of Jesus would differ between Koreans and Americans, and whether (b) national differences in self-reported personality and well-being are mediated by the cultural norm for personality and well-being. Because there is only one Jesus, different conceptions held by Koreans and Americans are likely to reflect cultural construction processes. In Study 1, we asked Korean and American participants to engage in a free association task with Jesus as a target. Americans associated Jesus with primarily positive connotations (“awesome”) and rarely with negative connotations (“pain”), whereas Koreans associated Jesus with both positive and negative connotations. In Study 2, we asked Korean and American participants to rate Jesus and themselves using personality and well-being scales. Americans rated both Jesus and themselves as more extraverted, agreeable, conscientious, open, and happier than did Koreans. Most important, national differences in self-reported agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness, and happiness were partially mediated by conceptions of Jesus.

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1. Introduction

Over the past 20 years, the cultural psychological perspective has offered important insights into the socio-cultural aspects of emotion (Markus & Kitayama, 1994; Mesquita & Frijda, 1992). Many cultural psychologists argue that the very concept of emotion is socially constructed, and that emotional experiences often follow culturally specific scripts (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1994), while acknowledging some universal cognitive and biological processes in these experiences (e.g., Levenson, Ekman, Heider, & Friesen, 1992; Matusmoto, 1990; Scherer, 1997). The crux of this argument lies in the importance of social construction and cultural norms in emotional experiences (Kitayama & Markus, 2000). That is, the norm for a particular emotional experience influences actual experiences, and to the extent that the norm for emotion varies across cultures, emotional experiences could also vary cross-culturally. The present research aims to extend the literature on norms and emotion to personality traits and subjective well-being. It examines (a) the degree to which the norm for personality traits and subjective well-being is different across cultures, and (b) the degree to which the norm explains cultural differences in self-reported personality and subjective well-being. By investigating these issues, the present research also seeks to answer a simple yet important question in the culture and personality literature:

“Are national differences in self-reports of personality and subjective well-being byproducts of cultural differences in the concept of normative personality and well-being?”

1.1. Norms for emotion

Anthropologists have documented striking cultural variations in the norm and experience of emotion. For instance, Briggs (1970) reports that anger is an extremely undesirable and inappropriate emotion among the Utku Eskimos, and that the expression of anger is very rare among them. Similarly, Lutz (1987) observes that the Ifaluk of Micronesia have a strong norm for avoiding physical aggression, and indeed, there is no word corresponding to the English word anger in the Ifaluk language (see Mesquita & Frijda, 1992 for review). Furthermore, experimental evidence from Strack, Martin, and Stepper (1988) suggests that not engaging in certain emotional expressions also inhibits the actual experience of the same expressions. Using latent class analysis, Eid and Diener (2001) highlighted cultural similarities and differences in emotional norms. In all the samples examined (i.e., US, Australia, China, Taiwan), they found a “class” of participants viewing all positive emotions as desirable. However, there was a class of Chinese participants who viewed positive emotions as neither desirable nor undesirable, and negative emotions as desirable. This class did not exist in other samples. Overall, Eid and Diener showed that Americans have a tighter norm for positive emotions than Chinese and Taiwanese (see Kim-Prieto & Eid, 2004 for African nations). More recently, Tsai and colleagues found that the ideal positive

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emotion entailed high activation (e.g., excitement) for North Americans, whereas it entailed low activation (e.g., calm) for East Asians (Tsai, Knutson, & Fung, 2006; Tsai, Louie, Chen, & Uchida, 2007; Tsai, Miao, & Seppala, 2007). These findings show that the meanings of “being well” and “positive” emotion can differ across cultures.

Although the anthropological literature suggests a direct link between the norm and experience of emotion, this connection is not as straightforward as one might expect. For instance, Eid and Diener (2001) found a positive correlation between the desirability and the self-reported frequency of positive emotional experiences. However, they found virtually no correlation between the norm and the experience of negative emotions (see also Tsai et al., 2006 for a similar result). That is, individuals who viewed positive emotional experiences as very desirable were more likely to experience positive emotions than those who did not, whereas individuals who viewed negative emotional experiences as very undesirable were equally likely to experience negative emotions as others who viewed negative emotional experiences as less undesirable.

More important, few studies have examined the mediating role of culturally-influenced emotional norms in emotional experiences (Mauss, Butler, Roberts, & Chu, 2010, for anger). There are numerous studies that show cultural differences in self-reported frequency of emotion (e.g., Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000; Mesquita & Karasawa, 2002; Scollon, Diener, Oishi, & Biswas-Diener, 2004). There are also studies that have shown cultural differences in norms for emotional experiences (Eid & Diener, 2001; Tsai et al., 2006). However, it is unclear whether cultural differences in self-reported emotion found in the previous research are due to cultural differences in the norm for emotion. If norms mediate cultural differences in self-reported emotion, then previously found cultural differences in the frequency of emotion could be caused by cultural differences in the relative desirability of the emotion concepts under study. In contrast, if norms do not fully explain cultural differences in self-reported emotion, then cultural differences observed in self-reported frequency of emotion reflect other factors (e.g., interpersonal contexts, physical environments, temperaments) that deserve further investigation.

1.2. Personality, well-being, and culture

Like culture and emotion researchers, culture and personality researchers have also identified mean differences in various personality traits (e.g., Huang, Church, & Katigbak, 1997; McCrae, Yik, Trapnell, Bond, & Paulhus, 1998; Schmitt, Allik, McCrae, Benet-Martinez, et al., 2007, see Church, 2000; McCrae, 2000; Triandis & Suh, 2002 for a general review on this topic). For instance, East Asians typically report lower levels of extraversion, life satisfaction, and happiness than North Americans (see Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003 for review). Building on the emotion and norm literature, then, it could be hypothesized that normative personality and well-being are different across cultures and that cultural differences in norms produce cultural differences in self-reported personality and well-being. The present research tests this possibility.

We used conceptions of Jesus as a proxy for perceived norms of personality and well-being (that is, what kinds of personality and what levels of well-being are deemed desirable). We used the perception of Jesus as an indicator of normative personality and well-being in the current research for several reasons. First, Jesus is a well-known pan-cultural icon, especially in the US and South Korea. According to the *Association of Religion Data Archives* (2010), Christianity is the dominant religion in the US and South Korea, comprising 82.3% and 41.2% of the population respectively. Second, given that the Bible's descriptions of Jesus are the same

across various cultures (assuming no large translation inconsistencies), differences in the perception of Jesus could reflect the effect of cultural construction processes regarding normative personhood. To the extent that culture influences what people consider to be good, virtuous, and moral (Shweder, 2003), culture is also likely to influence people's ideas of what personality traits and levels of happiness are desirable. Our study is inspired by Hayashi's (1996) work on cultural differences in the adaptation of a famous Aesop fable, *the ant and the grasshopper*. In the ancient story, the ant tells the grasshopper, who asks for food though he played all summer long and didn't help the ant, to go away and lets the grasshopper die. In most contemporary American versions, the ant lets the grasshopper in and feeds him, whereas in most German versions the ant remains tough and does not feed the grasshopper. Just as the different versions of *the ant and the grasshopper* reveal a lot about the cultural ethos of each society, we believe that the conceptions of Jesus provide a window through which we can observe the cultural construction of normative personhood and normative levels of happiness.

We used two different approaches to assess the conceptions of Jesus across cultures. In Study 1, we asked participants to engage in a free association task. In Study 2, we asked participants to rate the perceived personality and happiness of Jesus, employing a widely used rating scale. We then examined whether national differences in self-reported personality and subjective well-being were mediated by cultural differences in the image of Jesus. In sum, the present research (a) examined the potential cultural variation in normative personality and subjective well-being, using a novel approach, and (b) demonstrated that cultural differences in self-reported personality and well-being are in part explained by cultural differences in normative personality and subjective well-being.

2. Study 1: a free association study

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Seventy-one (43 men, 28 women) European American students at the University of Virginia and 59 (41 men, 18 women) Korean students at Seoul National University in Korea participated in this study. Of the European American participants, 52 (73%) were Christians, 7 (10%) belonged to non-Christian religions, and 12 (17%) were not religious. Of the Korean participants, 38 (64%) were Christians, 1 (1.7%) belonged to a non-Christian religion, and 16 (27%) were not religious. The mean age was 22.83 for Korean students, and 18.85 for European American students.

2.1.2. Materials and procedure

Participants were asked to write any words, phrases, sentences, or stories that came to mind when they thought about Jesus¹. Participants were given as much time as needed. Two Korean American coders, who were bilingual in English and Korean and unaware of our hypotheses, read participants' free associations in the original language and rated the extent to which the free associations involved positive versus negative connotations using a 7-point scale (1 = *negative*; 7 = *positive*). We instructed the coders to view words such as “love,” “glory,” and “joy” as positive and words such as “death,” “sin,” and “crucified” as negative. There was considerable agreement between coders ($r = .67, p < .001$). In the analysis below, we took the mean of the two ratings for each participant.

In addition to rating the valence of free associations on a 7-point scale, the assistants also coded the contents of each partici-

¹ On average, Koreans generated more words than did Americans ($M = 32.85$ versus $M = 22.25, t = 2.01, p < .05$).

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