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Two ways to achieve happiness: when the East meets the West

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Abstract

The independent/interdependent self-construals were proposed to be the culture-general determinants of happiness, acting through the mediating variables of control belief/harmony belief, and further through subjective experiences in social interactions. Data collected from 550 Taiwanese and 196 British community residents supported the above two ways of achieving happiness. The value of adding interdependent self-construal and harmony belief to the study of subjective well-being to reflect an alternative collectivistic cultural perspective was highlighted.

In addition, the seemingly contrasting views of self and beliefs about social interaction were found to coexist among Taiwanese. This evidence offered valuable support for the coexistence modernity model.

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1. Introduction

Happiness or subjective well-being (SWB) as a positive inner experience, as ‘the highest good’ and ‘the ultimate motivator’ for all human behaviors has attracted ever increasing attention from psychologists over the past two decades (see Argyle, 1987; Diener, 1984; Veenhoven, 1993 for reviews). The empirical definition of happiness refers to a predominance of positive over negative

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affect, and satisfaction with life as a whole (Argyle, Martin & Crossland, 1989; Diener, 1984), thus encompassing both affective and cognitive aspects.

However, cross-cultural evidence on this universally important construct is slim. Studies of happiness from alternative cultural vantage points are even scarcer. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to explore happiness from the cross-cultural perspective with a culture-sensitive approach.

1.1. Predictors for happiness: cross cultural evidence

Culture has been proposed to be a major force in constructing the conception of happiness (Lu & Shih, 1997), and consequently constricting its subjective experiences (Chiasson, Dube & Blondin, 1996; Lu, Gilmour & Kao, in press). Most existing comparative studies demonstrated quite substantial national differences in happiness, especially across the East (Asian)–West (European/North American) divide. Diener and his associates asserted that individualism is the only reliable predictor of happiness after controlling for statistical errors. They also found that self-esteem was a more powerful predictor of life satisfaction in individualist cultures than in collectivist cultures (Diener & Diener, 1995). However, using a nation-level measure of Individualism, the above researchers may have committed an ‘ecological fallacy’ (Kim, Triandis, Kegitcibasi, Choi & Yoon, 1994). An individual-level measure of culture may be more appropriate and fruitful for psychological inquiries.

Using such an approach, Lu et al., in press conducted a direct comparison of the East against the West with equivalent samples, and unravelled culture-dependent as well as culture-general effects of values on happiness. Values such as ‘social integration’ and ‘human-heartedness’ led to happiness for the Chinese but not for the British, whereas work-related values were equally important to happiness in both cultures. It is possible, therefore, that there are powerful variables other than individualism and self-esteem exerting influence on happiness in collectivist culture systems.

1.2. Contrasting cultures, self-construal and beliefs about interaction

Similarly, from a cross-cultural perspective, Markus and Kitayama (1991, 1994) have challenged the universal importance of the self-esteem construct in the West (e.g. Rosenberg, 1965). Their central thesis is that people of different cultures can hold remarkably different construals of the self, of others, and of the relation between the self and others in society. They further conceptualize the variations on what individuals believe about the self-others relation into two contrasting self-construals: independent and interdependent views of self.

An independent view of self derives from a belief in the wholeness and separateness of each individual’s configuration of internal attributes. This construal places emphases on ‘self-actualization’, ‘realizing oneself’, ‘expressing one’s unique configuration of needs, rights and capacities’, and ‘developing one’s distinct potential’. This is the prototypical Western characterization of the self, which locates crucial self-representations *within the individual*.

In contrast, an interdependent view of self derives from a belief in the individual’s connectedness and interdependence to others. This construal places emphases on ‘fitting in’, ‘belonging to’, ‘fulfilling and creating obligations’ and ‘becoming part of various of social units’. This is the

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