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Chinese Singaporeans' lay beliefs, adherence to Asian values, and subjective well-being

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationships among Chinese Singaporeans' lay beliefs about subjective well-being, adherence to Asian values (as measured by the Asian American Values Scale), and self-reported subjective well-being (as measured by the Satisfaction with Life Scale and the International Positive and Negative Affect Schedule Short Form). Participants were 210 undergraduate students of Chinese descent (mean age = 21.01 years) in a Singaporean university. Participants provided responses to an open-ended question about what it means to be happy. Participants' responses were coded according to whether they endorsed positivity beliefs and dialectical beliefs about happiness. Positivity beliefs were positively related to life satisfaction, but only among those with low adherence to Asian values. Among participants who strongly adhered to Asian values, positivity beliefs were not significantly related to life satisfaction. Beliefs about happiness were not related to negative affect. However, participants who endorsed dialectical beliefs reported less positive affect.

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1. Introduction

Individuals' experience of subjective well-being (SWB) is inherently linked to their culture. Although SWB might be a universal experience, culture shapes its causes, level, expression, meaning, and consequences (Suh & Koo, 2008; Tov & Diener, 2007).

Within the field of culture and SWB, a promising line of research is the influence of culture on lay conceptions of SWB (Tov & Diener, 2007). The study of lay beliefs about SWB in diverse cultures may play an important role in challenging the philosophical assumptions underlining current conceptualizations of SWB (Lu & Gilmour, 2004). Currently, most Western psychologists conceptualize SWB as being synonymous with what lay people refer to as "happiness" (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003) and consisting of a cognitive judgment about life satisfaction, maximizing positive affect, and minimizing negative affect (Diener, 1984). Nevertheless, if there are other beliefs about SWB that are salient in non-Western cultures, then caution should be exercised in using these constructs as universal yardsticks of SWB. Using the example of the Buddhist belief that life is characterized by suffering and hopelessness, Constantine and Sue

(2006) pointed out that positive psychology constructs, such as happiness, are inherently culture bound.

Additionally, Suh and Koo (2008) proposed that cultural differences in self-reported SWB could be due to different conceptions about SWB held by people from diverse cultures. For example, people who hold positivity beliefs about SWB (i.e., belief that SWB involves maximizing one's personal positive experiences) might seek out experiences that would enhance their life satisfaction and affective well-being. Nonetheless, research on the intersection of culture, lay beliefs, and self-reported SWB is lacking. To address this gap in the literature, we sought in this study to examine the interface of culturally-informed lay beliefs about SWB and self-reported SWB. In particular, we aimed to extend the research on culture and lay beliefs about SWB in several new directions. First, an important limitation of research in this area is the neglect of within-group differences in a cultural group (Diener et al., 2003). Thus far, most studies on culture and lay beliefs about SWB have focused on cross-cultural and cross-national comparisons (e.g., Pflug, 2009; Uchida & Kitayama, 2009). Although such a focus can help elucidate the influence of culture on lay beliefs about SWB, it may also have the unintended effect of over-emphasizing cultural differences. The investigation of within-group cultural differences is critical because individuals within the same culture or country may have been exposed to multiple cultural influences (Tov & Diener, 2007) and may therefore embrace a variety of culturally-informed beliefs about SWB.

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In this regard, Singapore may be an ideal context to study within-group cultural differences because of its unique cultural–historical background. As a former British colony located in Southeast Asia, Singapore has been described as a country infused with Asian and Western cultural influences (Li, Ngin, & Teo, 2008). For instance, a cross-national study of 61 countries (Li et al., 2008) found that Singapore was highly ranked on some cultural dimensions that are consistent with Asian values (e.g., ranked 11th on institutional collectivism) as well as other dimensions that are more consistent with Western values (e.g., ranked 11th on gender egalitarianism). Although the majority of Singaporean citizens and permanent residents speak an Asian language at home, a 2005 household survey found that a significant minority (35%) of Singaporean children and young adults aged 5–24 used English as their main language at home (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2009). Additionally, English is the language of instruction in Singaporean public schools and universities.

In the context of lay beliefs about SWB, we might surmise that because of the cultural heterogeneity in Singapore, Singaporeans would vary in the extent to which they embrace Western- and Asian-influenced lay beliefs about SWB. Furthermore, we followed the lead of previous research that examined the role of cultural values as a moderator between lay beliefs and other outcomes within a specific cultural group (Wong, Tran, Kim, Van Horn Kerne, & Calfa, 2010). Such an approach acknowledges that people within a cultural group vary in the degree to which they embrace the values of their culture. Applied to the current study, we sought to examine how Singaporeans' adherence to Asian cultural values might moderate the link between lay beliefs about SWB and self-reported SWB.

Second, we aimed to extend the research on culture and lay beliefs about SWB beyond the well-known constructs of individualism and collectivism, which have served as the dominant theoretical foundation for most studies on culture and SWB (Diener & Suh, 1999). A less well-known but emerging line of research is the application of dialectical cultural worldviews to the study of lay beliefs about SWB.

1.1. Dialecticism

Dialecticism is a set of worldviews that has been posited to be common in many East Asian cultures (e.g., Chinese, Korean, and Japanese cultures; Spencer-Rodgers, Williams, & Peng, 2010). Rooted in East Asian philosophical and religious traditions such as Confucianism and Buddhism, dialecticism is based on three principles: (a) the principle of contradiction (two opposing propositions may be simultaneously true), (b) the principle of change (the universe and life experiences are unpredictable and in a constant state of flux), and (c) the principle of holism (the interconnectedness of all things in the universe; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Applied

to the study of SWB, dialectical beliefs can be contrasted with Western-influenced positivity beliefs about SWB that focus on maximizing one's personal positive experiences. Specifically, dialectical beliefs about SWB emphasize (a) the transient and dynamic nature of happiness, (b) that both positive and negative aspects of life should be embraced, (c) that moderation and balance is to be preferred to a sole focus on positive experiences; (d) a greater acceptance of negative affect and a more cautious attitude toward positive affect (Lu & Gilmour, 2004; Spencer-Rodgers, Peng, Wang, & Hou, 2004; Wong, Tran, & Lai, 2009).

Support for the relevance of dialectical beliefs about SWB in East Asian cultures was found in a study demonstrating that Chinese college students were more likely than their Americans counterparts to predict a non-linear trajectory of their own life happiness. For example, Chinese participants were more likely to expect that their life happiness would reverse course (Ji, Nisbett, & Su, 2001). In another study (Uchida & Kitayama, 2009), Americans' conceptions of happiness was found to be unequivocally positive. However, as was consistent with dialectical beliefs, Japanese's conceptions of happiness were more likely to include ambivalent features, such as social disruption and transcendental reappraisal. Despite this emerging body of research on dialecticism, we are unaware of any study that has investigated the influence of dialectical beliefs about SWB on self-reported SWB.

1.2. The current study

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the potential influence of dialectical beliefs and positivity beliefs about SWB on self-reported SWB among Chinese Singaporean undergraduates. Based on the foregoing literature review, we proposed a conceptual framework to guide our research questions in the current study (see Fig. 1). In this framework, lay beliefs about SWB are posited to influence self-reported SWB and adherence to Asian values is proposed as a moderator of this relationship. SWB was operationalized in terms of three outcome variables – life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect. Further, because individuals tend to seek out SWB experiences that are consistent with their beliefs about SWB (McMahan & Estes, *in press*), we posit that lay beliefs about SWB would be differentially related to self-reported SWB.

Specifically, we had two sets of hypotheses. First, because positivity beliefs about SWB are consistent with the notion of maximizing one's personal positive experiences, we hypothesized that positivity beliefs about SWB would be positively related to life satisfaction and positive affect, but inversely related to negative affect. In contrast, because dialectical beliefs about SWB tend to be antithetical to the notion of maximizing positive personal experiences (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004), we hypothesized that dialectical beliefs would be inversely related to life satisfaction and positive affect, but positively related to negative affect. Our second

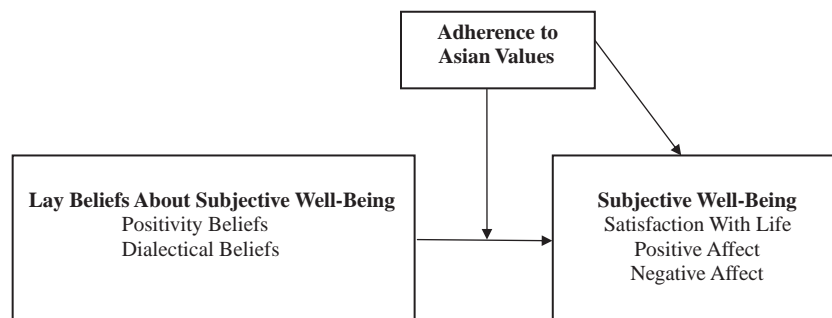


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework depicting the influence of lay beliefs about subjective well-being on subjective well-being. Adherence to Asian values is theorized to moderate the relationship between lay beliefs and subjective well-being.

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