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Cultural Processes Underlying Subjective Well-Being

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The subjective well-being (SWB) of an individual refers to her or his own sense of wellness and consists of a variety of cognitive and emotional components. Cognitive SWB includes life satisfaction, which taps into individuals' own evaluation of their lives. Emotional SWB is commonly assessed by the frequency of pleasant emotions and infrequency of negative emotions. Although survey studies of SWB have been conducted since the mid-20th century (see Diener, 1984), extensive research on SWB – cross-cultural research in particular – did not begin to accumulate until the 1990s. In particular, overall levels of SWB as well as its correlates and possible psychological causes have been of great interest to recent cross-cultural researchers.

In this chapter, we highlight cross-cultural differences in SWB and provide a theoretical foundation for understanding the psychological processes related to those differences. We restrict our comparisons to those between European American and East Asian (Chinese, Korean, and Japanese) samples in part because research on these groups is extensive. In both groups, SWB may be influenced by common psychological factors (e.g., goal attainment, self-esteem). The nature of these factors and the degree to which they covary with SWB may differ across groups, however. For example, self-esteem is more strongly correlated with SWB in Western nations (around .60) than in Asian nations (around .40; Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995). In other words, how positively individuals perceive themselves might be less predictive of life satisfaction in East Asian cultures. Our interpretation of these differences draws largely on the cultural psychology of self-construals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), which assumes that individuals can define themselves either in reference to or in isolation from their social roles and that certain cultures may value one type of self-construal over another.

We will first elaborate on self-construal theory and how it applies to European American and East Asian cultural patterns. We will then discuss

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how these divergent patterns might explain two common findings in culture and well-being research: differences in (a) the correlates and causes and (b) the mean levels of SWB across cultures.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

It is a theme in social psychology that our cognition, motivation, and emotions are often influenced by others. The presence of other people is more essential and critical in East Asians' cognition and behavior than in those European Americans, however. The self is primarily a member of a social group (e.g., family), and being mindful of one's interrelation with others is a culturally valued way of being. Markus and Kitayama (1991) defined this influence of other people on East Asians' cognition, motivation, and emotion as an interdependent self-construal in which "one's behavior is determined, contingent on, and, to a large extent organized by what the actor perceives to be the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others in the relationship" (p. 227). This theory implies that East Asians' SWB (emotional and cognitive states) should be related to their perception of other people. These perceptions matter in two ways. First, they frequently guide behavior and feelings. In combination with other aspects of East Asian culture (e.g., valuing adjustment and self-criticism; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999), attention to others may influence the desirability and frequency of various emotions and cognitions. Second, they include perceptions of what others *think* about the self. Triandis (1989) referred to such perceptions as the collective self, and maintained that such beliefs are distinguishable from what one privately believes about oneself, as well as what one believes about others (other-perceptions). If interpersonal roles are indeed central to East Asian self-definitions, then collective self-perceptions may be particularly important. Thus, we theorize that the SWB of East Asians is enhanced by collective self-perceptions and other-perceptions that imply that the self is in good social standing. In detail, East Asians are happy when (a) they perceive that other people approve of their lives, (b) they perceive that other people think they are good agents, (c) they perceive that they are in good relational harmony with other people, and (d) they perceive emotional support from other people. The first two beliefs are examples of collective self-perceptions, whereas the latter two beliefs are examples of other-perceptions.

In contrast, compared with East Asians, European American self-definitions are less influenced by the presence of other people. Instead, European Americans put more weight and importance on their own distinctive qualities, independent of other people. The self that is culturally

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valued is a unique, active agent responsible for one's own cognitive, emotional, and behavioral manifestation. Markus and Kitayama (1991) labeled this an *independent* self-construal in which "behavior is organized and made meaningful primarily by reference to one's own internal repertoire of thoughts, feelings, and action, rather than by reference to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others" (p. 226). Thus, the SWB of European Americans may be more strongly associated with their own, private self-perceptions than with their collective self-perceptions or other-perceptions. Therefore, we postulate that European Americans are happy when they perceive themselves to be in good states. In detail, European Americans are happy when (a) they have positive self-regard, (b) they perceive self-consistency, and (c) they pursue self-oriented goals.

We propose that cultural differences in the predominant forms of self-construal affect well-being in two ways. First, whether the self is emphasized in reference to or separate from social roles influences the correlates and causes of SWB. Second, within the ethos of each culture, chronic attention to self versus others influences the frequency and desirability of certain emotions, with implications for overall mean levels of SWB. Thus, the *nature* of well-being is shaped not by self-construals alone, but *in combination with* other values and beliefs specific to each culture.

THE CORRELATES AND CAUSES OF SWB ACROSS CULTURES

There are many factors that play a role in individuals' SWB differentially and dynamically across cultures. We will flesh out the dynamics of these factors in terms of how they are related to private and collective self-perception as well as other-perceptions. Research on culture and well-being suggests that private self-perceptions may be central to the SWB of European Americans, whereas collective self-perceptions and other-perceptions may be particularly important for the SWB of East Asians. Simply put, European Americans are happy when they are *perceived by themselves* as good *independent* agents in their cultural contexts. This premise is based on the theoretical framework that the self of European Americans is constructed as an *independent* agent. In contrast, East Asians are happy when they are *perceived by other people* as good *interdependent* agents in their cultural contexts. This premise is based on the assumption that the self of East Asians is developed as an *interdependent* agent. In short, self-perceptions help validate and affirm self-construals. Moreover, self-construals influence the informational value of private and collective self-perceptions.

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We do not mean to oversimplify these cultural differences. Both types of self-perceptions are related to SWB across cultures. We believe, however, that cultural variation in the correlates and causes of SWB is influenced by the relative importance of private and collective self-perceptions, as well as other-perceptions. First, how strongly other-perceptions and self-perceptions relate to SWB may differ in magnitude across cultures. Second, the motivation to maintain different self-perceptions might influence which goals are pursued and which are predictive of SWB. Third, striving to maintain positive collective self-perceptions might reduce the importance of self-consistency for well-being. We now will explore each of these possibilities.

Relation of Self-Perceptions and Other-Perceptions to SWB

Self-Perceptions and SWB

If European Americans rely more on independent self-construals, then their own thoughts and feelings should be referenced when judging their well-being. In contrast, if East Asians rely more on interdependent self-construals, then the thoughts and feelings of others should be referenced when judging their well-being. It follows that private self-perceptions such as self-esteem should be strong predictors of well-being for European Americans, whereas other types of perceptions should be important for East Asian well-being. Consistent with this interpretation, Park and Huebner (2005) found this pattern in a sample of U.S. and Korean adolescents.

This, however, does not mean that East Asians' SWB is not predicted from positive private self-perceptions at all. East Asians' SWB is also influenced by their positive private self-perception. For example, in data from Diener, Diener, and Diener (1995), the correlation between self-esteem and life satisfaction among Japanese participants was .44. Similarly and interestingly enough, Kim, Cai, Gilliand, Tov, Tam, Peng, Xia, and Lee (2010, Study 1) found that Asian-Americans' life satisfaction was predicted from the private positive perception on their past self as well as on their current self. In contrast, life satisfaction of European Americans was predicted from the private positive perception on their current self only. In another study, Kim, Cai, and colleagues (2010, Study 2) experimentally demonstrated that Chinese participants reported higher SWB after they described an interpersonal event that happened at least three months before and made them feel good about themselves than after they described a negative event in the past. This difference also was found after describing a current positive (vs. negative) interpersonal event although the effect was weaker. Among European Americans,

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this difference was found only after they had described the current positive (vs. negative) interpersonal event, which made them feel good (vs. bad) about themselves. This finding might suggest that the present is a continuation of the past to Asians so that their current SWB is also affected by their perception of the past, whereas the present is a distinctive time frame from the past to European Americans so that their current SWB should not be influenced by how they think of the past. The important point here, beyond the discussion of this cross-cultural difference, is that positive self-perceptions predict SWB quite well across European Americans and East Asians.

In both European American and East Asian samples, other researchers observed that self-esteem correlated with various psychological well-being scales (positive affectivity, negative affectivity, and emotional self-criticism; Kurman, 2003) and other measures such as goal-setting, perceived optimism, challenge seeking, and intellectual persistency (Kim, Peng, & Chiu, 2008). Taken together, the extant research implies that SWB is predicted from positive private self-perceptions, but this trend is stronger among European Americans than among East Asians.

Other-Perceptions to SWB

For East Asians, the smaller association of self-esteem with SWB may be attributable to the importance of other-perceptions and collective self-perceptions. Three types of other-perceptions that may be important for East Asians' SWB are (a) perceived norms for life satisfaction, (b) relationship harmony, and (c) perceived emotional support from others. The perceived normative or *ideal* level of life satisfaction in a culture might influence East Asians' judgments of their own life satisfaction. Suh, Diener, Oishi, and Triandis (1998) found that, in collectivist cultures (including China and South Korea), life satisfaction was predicted not only from one's emotions, but also from the perceived norm for life satisfaction. In contrast, in individualist cultures (e.g., the United States), life satisfaction was more strongly predicted from emotions than from perceived norms. The dominant influence of emotions in judgments of life satisfaction in individualist contexts is consistent with the notion that European Americans' independent self-construals lead them to prioritize their own thoughts and feelings when forming judgments.

Relationship harmony may be another correlate of SWB for East Asians. Distinguishing it from relationship satisfaction, Kwan, Bond, and Singelis (1997) defined relationship harmony as an evaluation of the balance and quality of one's relationships with others. Whereas relationship satisfaction

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concerns how one feels about a relationship, relationship harmony is an appraisal of the relationship *itself*. Kwan and colleagues (1997) found that, for European Americans, life satisfaction was more strongly associated with self-esteem than with relationship harmony. In contrast, for Hong Kong Chinese, self-esteem and relationship harmony were equally associated with life satisfaction. Kang, Shaver, Sue, Min, and Jing (2003) replicated these findings in Korea and mainland China and also observed that relationship quality was associated with greater self-esteem in these samples. Thus, other-perceptions might have indirect effects on SWB by supporting positive, private self-perceptions. We speculate that East Asians who perceive relationship harmony might also feel well-adjusted and competent in their social relationships, with added benefits for their mental health.

A construct related to relationship harmony is perceived emotional support from other people. Uchida, Kitayama, Mesquita, and Rayes (2001) found that, among participants from Japan and the Philippines, happiness was predicted by perceived emotional support from other people as well as self-esteem. In contrast, happiness was predicted only from self-esteem among Americans. A possible implication of perceived emotional support may be seen in a cross-cultural study of the influence of divorce on children's life satisfaction. Gohm, Oishi, Darlington, and Diener (1998) found that college students whose parents divorced reported higher life satisfaction than those whose parents were in high-conflict marriages. This pattern, however, was found only in samples from collectivist cultures. One conjecture is that children of divorced parents are more likely to receive emotional support from their family networks in collectivist than in individualist cultures.

Research on the implications of collective self-perceptions for SWB is a relatively recent development. Although past research has tended to emphasize private self-perceptions, we believe that important aspects of East Asians' well-being may have been overlooked in the process. Whereas people in European-American cultural contexts tend to describe themselves in terms of their personal abilities, uniqueness, traits, and characteristics, people in East Asian cultural contexts tend to describe themselves in terms of their diverse relationships with other people, their roles in various groups, and their social obligations (see Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Consistent with these findings, several studies have shown that people in East Asian cultures are more concerned with other people's judgments and approval than are people in European-American cultures (e.g., Suh, 2002) and that East Asians may be more likely than people from European-American cultures to take into consideration the other person's perspective when experiencing the self (Cohen & Gunz, 2002; Leung & Cohen, 2007), and they may be more

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sensitive to the social context (Haberstroh, Oyserman, Schwarz, Kuhen, & Ji, 2002).

Research suggests that SWB of East Asians might be related to how they perceive that other people perceive them. Hitherto, we have not addressed the issue of causality, and much of the preceding literature on SWB and other- and self-perception has been correlational in nature. An experimental study by Kim and Cohen (2008), however, may shed light on the relation between self-perceptions and SWB. To investigate the causal effect of East Asians' collective self-perceptions on their SWB, Kim and Cohen (2010) manipulated participants' private and collective self-perceptions of their social relationships and then had the participants complete a life satisfaction measure. Participants answered 14 questions about the quality of their social relationships (e.g., How many friends can you call up to borrow $50.00 in an emergency situation? How many friends can drop by your house without prior notice?). To test the causal effect, four different questionnaire forms were developed and given randomly to each participant. Each questionnaire form corresponded to one of four experimental conditions: high private self-perception condition, low private self-perception condition, high collective self-perception condition, and low collective self-perception condition. In the *high* private self-perception (PS) condition, responses were made using a low frequency scale ranging from 0 to more than 4 friends, leading most participants to infer that they possessed a very high quality of social relationships. In the *low* PS condition, responses were made using a high frequency scale ranging from fewer than 5 to more than 14 friends, leading most participants to infer that they did not possess a high quality of social relationships. In both collective self-perception (CS) conditions, participants were instructed to think of how significant others in their life might see them and then answer the questions as if those significant others were filling out the questionnaires (e.g., Significant others think that I have ( ) friends to call to borrow $50.00 in an emergency situation). The scale manipulation (low vs. high frequency) was the same. Finally, in all conditions, participants rated their own satisfaction with life.

The results indicated that Asian-American participants' life satisfaction was significantly higher in the high CS condition than in the low CS condition. In other words, Asian-American participants were happier when collective self-perceptions implied that they were in good rather than poor social relationships. No differences in life satisfaction were found, however, between the high and low PS conditions. Thus, in this study, Asian-American participants' SWB was more affected by collective self-perceptions than private self-perceptions of their relationships. The exact reverse pattern was

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found among European Americans: Life satisfaction was higher when participants believed that they were in good social relationships than when they thought that they were not in good social relationships. Their perception of other people's perception of them did not make any difference in their life satisfaction, however. Thus, European Americans' SWB was more affected by private self-perceptions than by collective self-perceptions of their relationships. In sum, this study suggests the indespensible importance of positive collective self-perceptions in the life satisfaction judgments of East Asians.

Goals and the Motivation to Maintain Positive Self-Perceptions

Previous studies of goal-systems theory (see Kruglanski et al., 2002) suggest that people experience positive emotions when they experience the attainment of their goals because people may feel right (or good) after achieving their own goals (Camacho, Higgins, & Luger, 2003; Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004; Spiegel, Grant-Pillow, & Higgins, 2004). There are cross-cultural differences, however, in the type of goals that are associated with SWB. For instance, Oishi and Diener (2001) found that European-Americans' life satisfaction was predicted from attaining *independent* goals, which concern personal enjoyment. In contrast, East Asian and Asian-Americans' life satisfaction was related to attaining *interdependent* goals, which concern bringing well-being to their significant others. Again, this does not mean that European Americans (East Asians) are not happy when they achieve interdependent (independent) goals. For example, Sheldon and colleagues (2003) showed that both European Americans and East Asians were happy when they achieved goals they freely had chosen. In sum, it might be universal for individuals to feel good when they achieve their chosen goals, but, for East Asians, achieving interdependent goals may be more strongly associated with SWB than may be achieving independent goals. The reverse may be true for European Americans. These findings map onto the self-construals believed to be dominant within each cultural group.

The exact process by which goal attainment enhances SWB across cultures remains to be studied. We propose that self-construals acquire motivational force in part by influencing the desirability of different self-perceptions. The desirability of different self-perceptions in turn affects how ready one is to pursue independent or interdependent goals. For East Asians, the dominance of interdependent self-construals implies that positive collective self-perceptions are particularly desirable. If significant others think and feel positively toward one's self, then one is succeeding as

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an interdependent agent. Pursuing and attaining interdependent goals may help to foster and sustain positive collective self-perceptions and SWB. For European Americans, the dominance of independent self-construals implies that positive private self-perceptions are particularly desirable. If one can think and feel positively about one's *own* self, then one is succeeding as an independent agent. Thus, pursuing and attaining independent goals may help foster and sustain positive private self-perceptions and SWB.

The desire to maintain different self-perceptions may influence not only the type of goals that are pursued, but also the manner in which they are pursued in different cultures. European Americans may focus on approach and promotion (maximizing gains). Such goals are related mainly to personal achievement and becoming distinctive from other people, which helps substantiate positive private self-perceptions. In contrast, East Asians might aim at avoidance and prevention goals (minimizing losses). Such goals may involve fitting in and not distinguishing oneself from others, which helps maintain positive collective self-perceptions. Indeed, Elliot, Chirkov, Kim, and Sheldon (2001) found that Koreans listed more avoidance goals than did European Americans. Moreover, avoidance goals were negatively associated with SWB for European Americans, but were not associated with SWB for Koreans. Noting that their measures of SWB consisted of emotions and life satisfaction, Elliot and colleagues (2001) suggested that, for East Asians, avoidance goals might predict other aspects of well-being, such as relationship harmony. In addition, future research should assess not just the quantity but also the attainment of avoidance goals, along with self-perceptions. If maintaining self-perceptions does indeed motivate the manner of goal pursuit, then attaining avoidance goals should be associated with positive collective self-perceptions and greater SWB for East Asians.

The Importance of Self-Consistency to SWB

Self-consistency, as it has often been operationalized, primarily concerns the coherence of personal beliefs about the self (i.e., private self-perceptions). Across cultures, preference for one type of self-construal over another might influence the importance of perceiving a self that is consistent across situations and social roles. To construct *independent* self-construals in Western cultures, individuals should strive to be coherent and congruent across situations. This consistency motivation was shown to be stronger among individualists than collectivists (Cialdini, Wosinska, Barrett, Butner, & Gornik-Durose, 1999), perhaps because consistency in attitudes helps individualists maintain private self-perceptions that one is a coherent, context-independent entity. For example, North American undergraduates

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who rate themselves as extroverted do not rate themselves as introverted, and vice versa (Choi & Choi, 2002). Furthermore, North Americans tend to agree with positive self-statements and disagree with negative self-statements and to attribute many more positive than negative characteristics to the self (Spencer-Rodgers, Peng, Wang, & Hou, 2004). East Asians, however, are encouraged to adjust themselves to social situations as an *interdependent* self. Although adjustment may help East Asians preserve positive collective self-perceptions, it may also result in inconsistent self-ratings. For example, Koreans rate themselves more extroverted when asked how extroverted they are than when asked how introverted they are (Choi & Choi, 2002). Additionally, Chinese people tend to agree with both positive self-statements (e.g., "I feel that I have a number of good qualities") and negative self-statements (e.g., "I think I am not good at all") (Kim, Peng, & Chiu, 2008).

As a consequence, the positive relationship between self-consistency across situations and psychological outcomes observed in Western cultures (e.g., Swann, de la Ronde, & Hixon, 1994) may not generalize to East Asian cultures. Consistent with this prediction, Suh (2002) found that European Americans showed greater role consistency across situations than did Koreans and that consistency was a stronger predictor of life satisfaction for European Americans than for Koreans. In contrast, perceived social-appraisal (believing that others approve of one's life) was a much stronger predictor of life satisfaction for Koreans than for European Americans. Interestingly, Suh (2002) also found evidence that consistent individuals are rewarded differently in the two cultures. Such individuals were rated as more likable and socially skilled by European-American informants than by Korean informants. Although this work needs to be replicated with other samples, it suggests that the value that East Asians place on collective self-perceptions may simultaneously reduce the emphasis on self-consistency. Again, we are not arguing that East Asians do not value self-consistency motivation or that SWB among East Asians is not explained by self-consistency. Rather, we posit that self-consistency is particularly functional in supporting private self-perceptions and independent self-construals and that, as a consequence, SWB is more strongly predicted from self-consistency among people who follow the values of individualist societies.

SELF-CONSTRUALS AND THE MEANING OF MEAN LEVELS OF SWB

A common finding in culture and SWB research is that aggregate levels of SWB are lower in East Asian samples than in samples from North America, Latin America, and Western Europe (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995; Kang et al., 2003; Park & Huebner, 2005; Suh, 2002). Oftentimes life satisfaction

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is the measure of SWB employed. Similar differences have been reported, however, using measures of emotion such as affect balance. Higher scores on affect balance suggest that positive emotions are experienced more frequently than negative emotions. Oishi and Diener (2003) found that East Asians not only report lower life satisfaction than do people from other cultures, but they also tend to have lower affect balance scores.

A critical question is whether measures of SWB can be compared across cultures. If they cannot, then mean level differences may not be meaningful. A few researchers have closely investigated the psychometric properties of the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Vittersø, Røysamb, and Diener (2002) conducted extensive confirmatory factor analyses on the SWLS and concluded that the concept of life satisfaction was fairly coherent across the 41 nations in their sample. More recently, Oishi (2006) applied item response theory to an analysis of the SWLS in Chinese and American respondents. He found that Chinese and Americans tended to respond differently to two items. Chinese who were satisfied with their lives were still less likely than Americans to endorse such items as "So far I have gotten the important things I want in life" and "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing." Even when these items were weighted less than unbiased items, however, Chinese participants still manifested lower mean levels of life satisfaction than did Americans. These findings suggest that comparisons can be made, but with caution (see Tov & Diener, 2007, for an extended discussion).

Although levels of SWB are lower among East Asians, it is important to note that the difference is relative rather than absolute. That is, *relative* to European Americans and other groups, East Asians report lower life satisfaction and affect balance. Their life satisfaction is still above the midpoint (i.e., slightly positive), however, and affect balance is still greater than zero (rarely negative). In the remainder of this section, we consider several theories that might account for the lower levels of SWB in East Asians. We believe that self-construals are still relevant to the discussion, but other elements of East Asian cultural ethos must also be considered. These elements include (a) the value of self-improvement, self-criticism, and modesty; (b) the valuation of low-arousal rather than high-arousal affective states; and (c) philosophical beliefs about moderation and dialecticism.

Self-Improvement, Self-Criticism, and Modesty

Cross-cultural differences in mean levels of SWB might be explained, in part, by East Asians' greater emphasis on self-discipline and self-improvement. Heine and colleagues (1999) argued that the self-improvement ethic in Japan

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is related to the importance of fulfilling social roles and maintaining harmony within the group. To know what to improve upon, one must develop a tendency to be self-critical – to be mindful of one's shortcomings. The importance of self-improvement among East Asians (Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997; Heine et al., 1999; Miller, Wang, Sandel, & Cho, 2002; Oishi & Sullivan, 2005) might influence their willingness to express or report that they are satisfied with themselves and their lives. If individuals are already satisfied with themselves, what motivation is there to improve? Instead, a modest, self-critical self might be a more successful interdependent agent. The value of self-criticism might explain why Chinese respondents were reluctant to report that they have everything they want or would never change anything even when they were generally satisfied with the external conditions of their lives (Oishi, 2006). Another illustration of self-criticism might be East Asians' greater tendency to agree with negative traits compared to European Americans (Kim, Peng, & Chiu, 2008; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004).

The self-criticism hypothesis suggests two possible interpretations. The first is that East Asians are actually much happier, but report lower levels of SWB to appear modest. If this is so, then East Asians might tend to give neutral responses in their judgments of satisfaction. Diener, Suh, Smith, and Shao (1995), however, did not find support for this hypothesis in their sample of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean respondents. More research on self-presentation strategies are needed before firm conclusions can be drawn. The second interpretation is that self-criticism influences the actual experience of well-being. The formulation of self-criticism by Heine and colleagues (1999) suggests that East Asians may be especially likely to self-criticize when they experience success. Furthermore, when failure is experienced, East Asians may tend to infer that greater effort is required. Such a pattern of self-criticism would constrain the frequency of pleasant emotions without necessarily increasing unpleasant emotions. For this reason, self-criticism would result in lower affect balance scores and influence life satisfaction judgments to some extent (cf. Suh et al., 1998). Indeed, using experience sampling, Scollon, Diener, Oishi, and Biswas-Diener (2004) found that Asians in their samples reported less frequent experiences of pleasant emotions than did European Americans but did not differ in the frequency of unpleasant emotions. The emotion regulatory function of self-criticism is an interesting possibility but has not been well-researched.

Affect Valuation

The interdependent self-construal of East Asians might influence the desirability of certain emotions, with implications for the meaning of mean levels

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of emotional well-being. If East Asians tend to construe the self as interdependent with others, then their attention might be drawn more toward the social field than toward their own internal states (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). As a result, East Asians might prefer certain affective states over others. Namely, low-arousal positive emotions (e.g., serenity) might be preferable over high-arousal emotions (e.g., excitement) because the former facilitates attention toward others. Tsai, Knutson, and Fung (2006) suggested that discrepancies between the emotions that people *want* to feel (ideal affect) and the emotions that they *actually* feel (real affect) have implications for mental health. They found that for Hong Kong Chinese, discrepancy in low-arousal but not high-arousal positive affect was significantly associated with depression. The reverse was true for European Americans.

Another dimension of emotions that might be differentially valued by East Asians and European Americans is the extent to which the emotion involves a focus on the self versus others. The independent self-construal of European Americans implies that self-focused positive emotions such as pride might be valued concomitants of positive private self-perceptions. The interdependent self-construal of East Asians, in contrast, implies that other-focused emotions might be valued concomitants of positive collective self-perceptions or other-perceptions. Kitayama, Markus, and Kurokawa (2000) referred to emotions that were self-focused as *disengaged* and to those that were other-focused as *engaged*. They showed that the general happiness of Japanese participants was more strongly related to positive *engaged* emotions (e.g., friendly feelings) than to positive *disengaged* emotions. In contrast, the general happiness of European Americans was more strongly related to the latter than to the former.

Affect valuation might influence mean levels of emotional well-being by determining frequency and recall of emotions. For instance, if East Asians place less value on high-arousal positive emotions, they may be less likely to pursue situations to experience these states (see, e.g., Oishi & Diener, 2003). Alternatively, individuals may simply pay more attention to and remember emotional experiences that are valued. A possible implication of these findings is that the meaning of emotional well-being may differ across cultures. Although affect balance scores are lower among East Asians, the positive emotions that researchers have used may not have been the ones that East Asians value. For instance, Scollon and colleagues (2004) examined happiness, affection, pride, and joy. Two of the four emotions could be interpreted as high-arousal (joy) or self-focused (pride). If more low-arousal or other-focused emotions are included, then mean levels of

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emotional well-being in East Asians may not be lower than those in European Americans.

Philosophical Beliefs

The influence of specific philosophical beliefs has occasionally been evoked to explain the emotional experience of East Asians. For instance, Asian philosophies such as Buddhism and Taoism may encourage dialectical thinking. According to Peng and Nisbett (1999), East Asians may be prone to dialectical thinking entailing a more holistic perspective such that both sides of a contradiction are accepted as equally likely. In contrast, European Americans favor a more linear, analytical style of thought. For example, Kim, Peng, and Chiu (2008) showed that Chinese-American differences in self-esteem level were driven primarily by Chinese participants' greater tendency to agree with negatively worded self-esteem items. As a consequence, the negative correlation between the five positive and five negative items of the self-esteem scale was greater among European Americans than among East Asians. In other words, among East Asians, reporting negative attributes does not mean the absence of positive attributes, whereas this is true among European Americans.

Differences in reasoning may influence the value of and memory for emotional experiences. For instance, whereas European Americans consistently value pleasant emotions over unpleasant emotions, East Asians have been found to value both equally (Diener & Suh, 1999). Moreover, the reported frequencies of pleasant and unpleasant emotions are less negatively correlated among East Asians than among European Americans (Bagozzi, Wong, & Yi, 1999; Kitayama et al., 2000; Schimmack, Oishi, & Diener, 2002). If East Asians do indeed engage in more holistic thinking, then they may be more likely to remember negative as well as positive experiences. To date, however, few studies have specifically measured and examined holistic thinking and its influence on emotional experience.

Instead of holistic or dialectical thinking, other theorists have highlighted the ideal of moderation in East Asian philosophies (Markus & Kitayama, 1994). Rather than focusing on contradiction, the notion of moderation simply emphasizes balance. In practice, however, the ideal of moderation might be applied asymmetrically. That is, the frequency of pleasant emotions may be regulated downward, but the frequency of unpleasant emotions may not necessarily be regulated upward. In contrast, the cultural ethos of European Americans encourages pleasant emotions and positive self-perceptions. Numerous studies indicate that the European Americans

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who maintain unrealistically positive self-perceptions show higher levels of well-being (Taylor & Brown, 1988). These positive illusions may manifest themselves in recalled experiences of well-being. For example, a one-week daily diary study found that European Americans and East Asians did not differ in levels of daily satisfaction (Oishi, 2002). When participants judged their satisfaction over the past week, however, European Americans overestimated their level of satisfaction, whereas East Asians did not.

Both holistic thinking and moderation hypotheses predict lower affect balance scores in East Asians. If holism, however, leads East Asians to take a broader view in assessing their well-being, one might expect them to recall more negative experiences than would European Americans. Although this might lower life satisfaction, it might also increase reported frequencies of unpleasant emotions. East Asians do not consistently report more unpleasant emotions than do European Americans, however. Thus it seems that the evidence tentatively favors the moderation hypothesis that East Asians simply down-regulate pleasant emotions, which lowers their overall level of affect balance. More systematic studies are clearly needed.

CONCLUSION

It is a well-known saying that most people want to be happy. Consistently, research evidence suggests that happiness is one of the most important goals in individuals' lives. Recent cross-cultural studies claim, however, that culture plays a role in the correlates and causes as well as the levels of individuals' SWB dynamically. East Asians' emphasis on the *interdependent* self-construal that imposes importance to sensitivity to other people leads them to be happy when they think that other people perceive them as good *interdependent* agents. In contrast, European Americans are happy when they perceive themselves as good *independent* agents, independent of how other people perceive them.

In addition, the well-established lower levels of SWB among East Asians compared with European Americans may also be explained by cross-cultural differences in self-construal and related values and norms. In interdependent societies where individuals are socialized to focus on self-improvement, moderation, and modesty, evaluating their life in an unrealistically positive way is restricted. In contrast, remembering and reporting more pleasant emotions, relative to unpleasant emotions, and evaluating lives in positive ways are encouraged and promoted in independent societies.

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