

LUO LU and ROBIN GILMOUR

**CULTURE AND CONCEPTIONS OF HAPPINESS:
INDIVIDUAL ORIENTED AND SOCIAL ORIENTED SWB**

ABSTRACT. Adopting a cultural psychological approach, we believe that culture and SWB are most productively analyzed together as a dynamic of mutual constitution. We outline a cultural theory of SWB to systematically analyze conceptions of happiness as embedded in both Euro-American and Asian cultures. Our cultural theory posits that distinct and different characteristics of the conceptions of happiness are prevalent in Asian and Euro-American cultures. For Asians, socially oriented SWB emphasizes role obligation and dialectical balance; for Euro-Americans, individually oriented SWB emphasizes personal accountability and explicit pursuit. The present paper provides empirical data on American conceptions of happiness and contrasts these with previously collected Chinese data. Both similarities and differences were observed and were in general consonant with our theoretical propositions.

KEY WORDS: conceptions of happiness, cultural psychological approach, individual oriented SWB, social oriented SWB.

Consider the following quotations:

- a. Happiness is a mental state. Only when the spirit is rich, the mind is peaceful and steady, is happiness possible.
- b. For me, happiness can be defined in four aspects: (1) free of physical sufferings, illnesses or disabilities; (2) being socially acceptable, getting along well with other people, being respected and cared for, not being isolated; (3) free of worries and hardships, being able to live a carefree and joyful life; and (4) possessing a healthy, normal mind, being accepted by the society.
- c. Happiness is absolutely great and one of the most important states of being a person or living thing could ever pursue. The pursuit of happiness is one of my supreme goals in life.
- d. To me happiness is doing and being who I want to be without being held back by the restrictions of society. Happiness is a reward for all the hard work you employ.

These four statements were extracts from essays written under the title of “what is happiness?” All of the respondents were university



students of the same age, though, as it happens, the first two students were Chinese and the last two were American. In some respects, these definitional accounts of happiness are similar to one another; they all consider happiness as a desirable, positive inner state of mind. At the same time, there are some distinct differences between them and between other Chinese and American accounts. For example, the Chinese accounts seem more solemn and introspective, with more emphasis on spiritual cultivation and psychological transcendence. The American accounts, by comparison, seem more uplifting, elated, exciting, and show more emphasis on enjoying life in the physical sense and present time. Furthermore, the Chinese students appear to desire a more balanced life, with social expectations finely integrated into their sense of well-being. The American students, in contrast, appear to uphold personal happiness as the supreme value of life, and blatantly assert individual agency against social restrictions.

In this paper we take the position that the *conception* of happiness is a critical aspect of subjective well-being (SWB), which has largely been neglected thus far. We then set out to ask whether there are systematic differences between American and Chinese conceptions of happiness, and what such differences might mean.

Because meanings and concepts are molded by culture (Bruner, 1990), it seems necessary to explore what people think about happiness as embedded in the world of meanings/values construed by a unique cultural tradition. Drawing on the rich heritage of the Chinese culture, our recent study (Lu, 2001) systematically explored both philosophical thinking and students' spontaneous accounts of happiness. Such a vantage point is in distinct contrast to the predominant Western cultural perspective in most SWB research. That endeavour was also among the first attempts to bridge the gap between scholarly theories of SWB and ordinary people's lived experiences and deeply held beliefs about human happiness. Although exploratory in nature, the result is a clear map of the psychological space of Chinese happiness. The present paper continues this line of enquiry, analyzing conceptions of happiness as embedded in both the Euro-American and Asian cultures, and providing empirical data on American conceptions of happiness to be contrasted with our previously collected Chinese data.

CULTURE AND SWB

Our views of culture and human behavior are consonant with the cultural psychological approach, whose goal is to examine the ways in which culture and the psyche intersect and interact (Markus and Kitayama, 1998; Shweder, 1991). The cultural perspective assumes that psychological processes – in this case the nature and experiences of SWB – are thoroughly culturally constituted. Thus, culture and SWB are most productively analyzed together as a dynamic of mutual constitution (Kitayama and Markus, 2000).

Furthermore, a cultural psychological approach does not automatically assume that all behavior can be explained by the same set of constructs and measures, and enquires first whether a given construct is meaningful and how it is used in a given cultural context. In other words, a Western conception of SWB should not be superimposed on other cultures; instead, indigenous conceptions of SWB bred in particular cultural contexts should be unraveled and systematically mapped out. This is exactly what we attempted in our systematic examination of Chinese SWB-related concepts and ideas in the Tripartite of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, as well as our detailed description of people's lived experiences of happiness (Lu, 1998, 2001; Lu and Shih, 1997).

Nonetheless, the predominant Western conception of SWB is itself one of the indigenous conceptions. Its cultural contexts, tacit understandings, implicit assumptions, invisible commitments, as well as its lived experiences for ordinary people need to be explored and contrasted with other indigenous conceptions such as those of the Chinese. In the following sections, we will adopt this cultural psychological approach to outline a cultural theory of SWB and incorporate some much needed data to help refine it.

Our central thesis is as follows. Culture can be a major force constructing the conception of happiness and consequently shaping its subjective experiences. In particular, members of different cultures may hold diverse views of happiness, covering definitions, nature, meaning and ways to strive for SWB. Culture also constrains preferences for different types of SWB (individually oriented vs. socially oriented), and thus prescribes different sources and conditions of SWB for its members. Beyond such

direct impact on SWB, culture also influences SWB in the way it gives shape and form to the self. Different self views (e.g. independent self vs. interdependent self) function as regulatory mechanisms when the individual attempts to judge his or her well-being. These self-regulatory mechanisms guide the individual to attend to and process information pertaining to certain aspects of the environment emphasized by the culture. Such mechanisms also determine how people think, feel and behave in the pursuit of SWB.

As an additional point of interest, in a time of cultural fusion, people living in the collectivist East are learning to adopt cultural values, self views, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors from the West. Consequently, they may now subscribe to both individual and socially oriented conceptions of SWB, and have access to both Eastern and Western repertoires of striving for SWB. A parallel trend in the individualist West in the opposite direction may be less salient due to a certain asymmetry in cross-cultural impact, not least because the very nature of core values at issue inclines Westerners to impact more aggressively on their environment, including other cultures.

One approach guided by this cultural theory of SWB is to look at various ways of achieving SWB for people living in individualistic and in collectivist societies. We have proposed that these pathways start from a particular self view, proceed through corresponding beliefs about social relations, then through subjective experiences generated in actual social interactions, to lead eventually to SWB. This pan-cultural multiple-way SWB model was largely supported by empirical evidence (Lu et al., 2001b, 2002). For both Chinese and British people, an interdependent self was a very strong determinant of harmony beliefs, as well as primary and secondary control beliefs, whereas an independent self was a strong determinant of primary and secondary control beliefs. Furthermore, for both groups, beliefs about social relations affected experiences of daily interactions, which in turn contributed to SWB. Thus, it was shown that these various ways of achieving SWB were independent and pervasive across the two markedly contrasting cultural groups.

Another bi-cultural individual level analysis also showed that values closely related to the core of collectivism, such as “social

integration” and “human-heartedness” led to greater happiness for the Chinese but not the British (Lu et al., 2001a). All the evidence suggests that culture impacts on SWB through multiple mediators and complex mechanisms. Specifically, the degree of congruence between people’s individual psychological culture and the larger cultural environment within which they live may be crucial for psychological adjustment. If the larger cultural tradition is individualistic, people with an independent self may find it easier to achieve SWB. If, in contrast, the larger cultural tradition is collectivistic, people with an interdependent self may find it easier to achieve SWB. This is exactly what we have found in our above reported series of studies. Ratzlaff et al. (2000) have also reported some preliminary evidence suggesting that a discrepancy in cultural values may be important in predicting health and well-being.

Yet another line of research that can be developed following our cultural theory of SWB is to look directly at meanings of SWB for people of different cultures. A cultural theory of SWB is useful in this respect because it points up the weakness that most current theories of SWB and research practices (e.g. selection of possible mediators such as self-esteem) are rooted in Western philosophical presumptions. As Kitayama and Markus (2000) point out, well-being is a “collaborative project”, in the sense that the very nature of what it means to be well or to experience well-being takes culture-specific forms (Shweder, 1998). These variations can make a difference not only for the meaning of SWB, but also in the ways that people achieve and maintain well-being, as already shown by our series of studies (Lu, 2001; Lu and Shih, 1997; Lu et al., 2001a, b, 2002). In the following section, we will contrast two such cultural systems of SWB: Asian socially oriented and Euro-American individually oriented SWB.

EURO-AMERICAN INDIVIDUALLY ORIENTED SWB

The study of SWB has mostly developed within a European American framework, and it incorporates a web of tacit understanding and implicit assumptions that are shared by both researchers and participants (Markus and Kitayama, 1998). Borrowing Suh’s (2000, p. 63) metaphor of “self as the hyphen between culture and subjective well-being”, the construction of

self and the participation of self in social institutions and the daily lived world may hold the key to our understanding of the meaning of happiness in various culture systems.

Western Euro-American theories of SWB are firmly based on a highly individual self concept. Geertz (1975, p. 48) gave the most vivid description of a person from a Western point of view. He described the person as “a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background”. Such a view of the person as a bounded, coherent, stable, autonomous, free entity is what Markus and Kitayama call the independent self (Markus and Kitayama, 1991) or Euro-American selfways (Markus and Kitayama, 1998). An independent view of self derives from a belief in the wholeness and separateness of each individual’s configuration of internal attributes. This is the prototypical Western characterization of the self, which locates crucial self-representations *within the individual*.

In such a culture of individualism (Hofstede, 1980; Kim et al., 1994; Triandis, 1994), social customs, institutions and the media all conspire to foster the *agentive* way of being, emphasizing free will and individual reason (Markus and Kitayama, 1998). In particular, American culture has been depicted as a “rugged” individualism (Hsu, 1971), for it advocates relentless pursuit of individual interests and generously rewards personal successes. Furthermore, the dominant Christian religion in the West asserts that every man is created equal, thus defending personal rights is the most important moral value in the Western culture (Hwang, in press).

Embedded in such a historical and cultural milieu, Euro-American style SWB has two distinct characteristics: personal accountability and explicit pursuit. In the West, with an infrastructure of democracy and social equality, a constitution that upholds individual rights, and social customs that encourage personal striving and reward achievement, the opportunities and freedom to pursue happiness are abundant. Moreover, happiness is a dominant concern for most Americans – indeed the American Declaration of Independence proclaims that the pursuit of hap-

piness is an inalienable right of every individual. Happiness is not only the best reward for personal striving and hard work, as the “American dream” presents, it is also given many positive associations. For example, Americans believe that happy people are more likely to go to Heaven after death (King and Napa, 1998). Happiness is also closely related to health and life satisfaction (Lu, 1995). The active and explicit pursuit of happiness is one of the best ways of living out an independent personhood, which masters and controls the external environment, identifies and realizes potentials, creates and achieves goals. Such a Euro-American style of SWB can thus usefully be described as individually oriented SWB.

ASIAN SOCIALLY ORIENTED SWB

Though an independent model of self may seem a natural one for most Westerners, it is by no means the only viable one. Even Geertz (1975) conceded that the Western view of personhood looks rather peculiar to people of other cultures. The Asian view of the self, in sharp contrast to the Western view, is of a connected, fluid, flexible, committed being who is bound to others. This is what Markus and Kitayama call the interdependent self (Markus and Kitayama, 1991), or Asian selfways (Markus and Kitayama, 1998). An interdependent view of self derives from a belief in the individual’s connectedness and interdependence to others. This is the prototypical Eastern characterization of the self, which locates crucial self-representations not within unique individual attributes, but within his or her social *relationships*.

Another way of characterizing a critical element of Asian societies is in terms of Collectivism (Hofstede, 1980; Kim et al., 1994; Triandis, 1994). Social customs, institutions and the media all conspire to foster the *relational* way of being, emphasizing roles, statuses and in-group membership (Markus and Kitayama, 1998). In particular, the Chinese culture has been depicted as a family-style collectivism and the Chinese people as fundamentally social oriented (Yang, 1995). Thus, many Asian cultures advocate priority of collective welfare and reward self-control, diligent role performance, and rigorous self-cultivation.

Within this particular historical and cultural milieu, Asian-style SWB has a distinct characteristic: role obligation. There has been clear evidence showing that the prevalent use of self maintenance strategies (e.g. self-enhancement) among Westerners is not to be found among Asians. In contrast, the Japanese (for instance) frequently exhibit a tendency of self-criticism and self-effacement (Heine et al., 1999; Kitayama and Markus, 2000). It is obvious that the need for positive regard in the Western sense of personal ability and achievement is not the most important concern of the Asian self. Instead, the pursuit of socially desirable and culturally mandated achievement is the most characteristic mode of the participating socially oriented self. For example, in Chinese societies socially oriented achievement needs are far more prominent than individually oriented ones: there is a pursuit of externally defined goals and a striving for socially prescribed distinction (Yu and Yang, 1994). Consequently, in the Asian socially oriented conceptions of SWB, the integration of an individual's inner attributes, the gratification of personal needs and desires, the amplification of personal achievement, the creation and protection of individual uniqueness are not important concerns: instead, the fulfillment of role obligations in interdependent social relationships, the creation and maintenance of interpersonal harmony, the striving to promote the welfare and prosperity of the collective (e.g. family) are the core issues. Such a view of SWB is consonant with a Confucian obligation-based moral discourse, in contrast to a Western right-based one (Hwang, in press). It is a realization of the Confucian's highest aspired state of achievement in life: self-cultivation, family harmony, state prosperity, and peace in the world, each of a higher level (Bauer, 1976; Chiang, 1996).

Accordingly, empirical evidence has confirmed that both self-esteem and self-consistency are less powerful predictors of SWB for members of Eastern collectivist cultures (Diener and Diener, 1995; Suh, 2000). Kwan et al. (1997) conducted a bi-cultural study (USA vs. Hong Kong) examining possible mediators between culture and SWB. Results indicated that while self-esteem was a strong predictor for Americans, both self-esteem and relationship harmony were equally important for the SWB of the Chinese. Lu et al. (2001a) conducted a direct comparison of the East against

the West with equivalent samples, and unraveled 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.

In fact, there are a number of ways to achieve happiness and these are developed in consonance with a culturally constituted world. For Euro-Americans, individually oriented SWB is achieved through the nurturance and participation of an independent self along with its active striving to master the environment (e.g. primary control); For Asians, socially oriented SWB is achieved through the nurturance and participation of an interdependent self along with its constant striving to submerge within the environment and accomplish role obligations (e.g. secondary control and harmony) (Lu et al., 2001b, 2002). Such socially oriented SWB with a clear emphasis on role obligations is actually a striving for the happiness of society (Bauer, 1976).

Another defining characteristic of Asian socially oriented conceptions of SWB is a view of dialectical balance. The Japanese culture exhibits a “habit of hesitation” towards happiness (Miyama, 1971, p. 34). This characteristic oriental reservation may be traced back to the ancient *Yin–Yang* philosophy which takes a cosmological view that everything from the cosmos to human life is a never-ending, cyclic process of change, between good and bad, happiness and misery, well-being and ill-being. To exemplify in the case of happiness/unhappiness: “Happiness is dependent on unhappiness, while unhappiness is hidden in happiness” (Lu, 1998).

Such a dialectical view of SWB may imply some ambivalence towards happiness, but may also foster a somewhat calmer and more solemn attitude. Empirical evidence has shown that Chinese students attached lower importance to happiness than American and Australian students (Diener et al., 1995; Feather, 1986). Compared to Americans, Chinese students worried less often whether they were happy or satisfied with life (Diener et al., 1995). Furthermore, the level of ideal life satisfaction was lower for Koreans than Americans, and Koreans attached less importance to positive affect such as happiness (Diener et al., 1996).

This evidence supports our assertion that individualist and collectivist cultures produce different meanings for SWB, and through active participation of the individual, subjective conceptions of happiness are systematically varied across cultural systems through the world. Striving for personal happiness and the recognition of such striving are the defining features of individually oriented conceptions of SWB, whereas role obligations and dialectical reservation are defining features of socially oriented conceptions. The former is more prototypical of Euro-American culture, whereas the latter is more prototypical of Asian culture.

THE EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE: THE CHINESE CONCEPTIONS OF HAPPINESS

The number of studies of SWB from a cultural psychological perspective is still small, and we very much need hard data derived from testing theoretical propositions. In addition, the literature on SWB has so far been largely based on surveys and self-report measures. The cultural perspective however, suggests that cultural meanings are often tacit, normative, taken-for-granted, dense descriptions of the lived world of people, and that people's spontaneous accounts may be more effective ways to unravel the cultural construction of SWB.

In the rest of this article, we will present data and analyses from American students' spontaneous accounts of happiness. These dense descriptions of the lived world of the American people will be compared to those of the Chinese people, and related to the above theoretical analysis. Such interplay of theory and empirical data will, we hope, be of benefit to research on SWB in general, as well as to the application of a cultural psychological approach to the field.

As space does not allow detailed elaboration of our previous study regarding Chinese conceptions of SWB (Lu, 2001), only a sketch of the empirical findings is presented below for the purpose of later comparisons with those of the American students. One hundred and forty-two undergraduate Chinese students wrote free-format essays in response to a simple question, "What is happiness?" Using thematic analysis, four main themes were found:

(1) Happiness can be defined in terms of (a) a mental state of satisfaction and contentment; (b) positive feelings/emotions; (c) a harmonious homeostasis; (d) achievement and hope; and (e) freedom from ill-being.

(2) Happiness is a harmonious state of existence, under the following conditions: (a) the individual is satisfied or content; (b) the individual is the agent of his own happiness; (c) spiritual enrichment is emphasized more than material satisfaction; and (d) the individual maintains a positive outlook for the future.

(3) The relationship between happiness and unhappiness is dialectical. These two distinct entities are locked in a never-ending relationship of interdependence: each depends on the other for contrast and meaning. Moreover this relationship between the two opposites is also dynamic and constantly changing.

(4) Happiness can be achieved, provided that one has the following abilities: (a) the wisdom of discovery; (b) the wisdom of contentment and gratitude; (c) the wisdom of giving; and (d) the wisdom of self-cultivation.

THE EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE: AMERICAN CONCEPTIONS OF HAPPINESS

Participants

A total of 202 undergraduate students participated in the study. To minimize the impact of cultural fusion, only data on the 97 white Caucasian Americans aged 17–25, with both parents being American citizens were reported below.

Procedure

To reflect the exploratory nature of the present study, a qualitative approach was adopted. Participants wrote free-format essays in response to a simple question, “What is happiness?” There was no restriction on perspectives, topics, materials, formats, length, and time of completion. However, it was stressed that participants should freely and fully express their views and thoughts about happiness. Data were collected in early 2002.

All the essays were then coded using thematic analysis. The first author independently analyzed all the transcripts and developed a

master scheme to organize the data under major themes and sub-themes. This is actually a dynamic process moving to and fro between the data and the scheme. The final version was then independently verified by the second author and some of the participants. Minor modifications were made at this final stage of analysis. These procedures helped to achieve inter-subjectivity between researchers of different cultural background (East vs. West), and between researchers and participants. We thus believe that a reasonable degree of “trustworthiness” has been ensured for the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented below and are grouped into subheadings that reflect the main themes to arise from the essays. As the purpose of this study was to explore the Americans’ conceptions of happiness, no content analyses or frequency counts were conducted. Instead, qualitative summary methods were employed to present the results. As the amount of materials was considerable, only sample quotes from respondents are given to illustrate each point made below, but these examples typify characteristic positions in the sample.

Many scholars think that happiness is too elusive and abstract to be pinned down, and defining it is only possible at the operational level. Some participants expressed similar concerns and hesitation when confronted with a direct, almost sharp inquiry such as “what is happiness?” Such a failure to commit to a clear and definite definition of happiness appeared to be due to three fundamental aspects of the happiness experience. First, happiness is *abstract*, hence its meaning is difficult to capture in language. As one subject remarked: “Happiness is something which can’t be described in words, rather it must only be felt”. Second, happiness is subjective; hence there could be considerable *individual differences* in definitions: “happiness is as individual as your fingerprint”, as one respondent put it. Third, happiness has *different levels*, and hence definitions may vary as a function of age and life circumstances where different levels are desirable. In our previous study, Chinese students expressed similar concerns on the first two points, but the last one was not mentioned.

However, the majority of participants took up the challenge to define happiness. Consonant with the observation that happiness is subjective, so is its definition. Nonetheless, all the diverse definitions that were offered by the various participants in the study could be seen, on closer inspection, to relate to a limited number – seven – of underlying themes, although no single definition dealt with all. These themes are explored below.

Happiness as a Mental State of Satisfaction and Contentment

Many participants referred to happiness as a profound mental state of satisfaction and contentment. This mental state of happiness can be evoked from a positive evaluation of one's *current state of life*. As one participant stated: "Happiness is feeling content about your current situation in life and being able to smile about it – 'Life is good'". Others elaborated this view: "Happiness to me is feeling that life couldn't get any better at that moment. You're satisfied at every possible aspect of life". Some introduced the *future* dimension and said, for example, that: "Happiness is a feeling of contentment with life in the present and a sense of optimism for the future".

Whether specific or general, these views of happiness are quite similar to those expressed by the Chinese students. However, a very different psychological perspective of accepting and welcoming one's fate with gratitude and heart-felt thankfulness expressed by many of the Chinese students was completely absent here. The *ability to be content* seems to produce a kind of happiness more profound and long lasting for the Chinese, reflecting Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist influences.

Happiness as Positive Feelings/Emotions

Satisfaction/contentment often goes hand-in-hand with various positive feelings and emotions in experiences of happiness. Some participants defined happiness in terms of *simple joy and hedonistic pleasures*, such as joy, elation, and enjoyment, reflected in statements like: "Happiness can come at many different times but when I am happy it is like a natural high ... laughing is my happiness", and "Happiness is smiling and laughing, living for the moment". However, some chose to represent happiness in *deeper emotions*, such as security, and feelings of love: "Happiness is

being at peace with yourself and letting this inner peace radiate out towards others positively". For some individuals, this serene state of happiness is evoked by natural beauty such as lakes, mountains, or even the smell of perfume.

All these representations of happiness were also mentioned by the Chinese students. However, a very different psychological state of "being ordinary" was on the list of the Chinese "happy emotions" but not on the American one. Moreover, for Chinese, intense hedonic emotions are not stressed, although they are recognized as part of the happiness experience. Instead, "being ordinary" as a means of self-control and maintaining group harmony is a life practice of the Confucian ideal of self-cultivation and prioritizing group welfare.

Happiness as Achievement and Control

Some participants stressed the sense of *achievement and accomplishment* as a defining feature of happiness, which often led to satisfaction and contentment. This state of happiness is usually brought about through the attainment of goals and rewards for efforts. "Happiness is the feeling of succeeding in the things I do and learning from it when I don't". Or "Happiness is a reward for all the hard work you employ". One student viewed happiness as simply "victory". This view of happiness also implies a *positive outlook*: "Happiness to me is feeling like everything will turn out to be right in the end". Or: "It doesn't mean that everything at that moment is perfect but you are able to overlook the bad and find good in things. Happiness is being able to laugh at your bad day".

The above views were also expressed by the Chinese students. For them, a view of happiness as achievement is unusually uplifting, active, and initiating. However, hope and keeping faith is even more important than any actual accomplishment. Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism all preach a philosophy of submission to, rather than conquering the environment. Hope and faith thus become important strategies of maintaining personal control, albeit psychological, in the face of hardship and uncertainty. The subdued tone and texture of the Chinese "hope and faith" is subtly different from the more actively uplifting spirit of American optimism.

Happiness as Self-autonomy

Many of our participants stressed personal responsibility in their happiness conceptions. Three aspects of the self-autonomy were mentioned. First, the individual is dynamic, and should strive to create a meaningful life for himself (*self-agency*). For instance: “I feel happiness is what you make of things. Happiness is all up to an individual”. Furthermore, happiness is not just a personal state, it can affect others too: “Happiness is occasionally stepping outside yourself to bring happiness and love to other people”. “Making others happy” seems an interesting extension of the agentic self.

Second, the exercise of self-autonomy must be based on a *positive self-evaluation*. “Happiness to me is something that makes you feel great about yourself”. Or, more simply: “Happiness is self-esteem”.

Third, self-autonomy is complete only with full *freedom to be oneself*. “To me happiness is doing and being who I want to be without being held back by the restrictions of society”. And: “Happiness is doing what you love and being who you are”. One respondent expressed strong envy for the “truly happy few who live their life according to their own standards and rules and don’t give a damn about what anyone thinks about them. Those who are happy are truly blessed”.

Although the Chinese students expressed the view that the individual is the agent of his or her own happiness, there are some fundamental differences in the view of self-autonomy between the two cultural groups. For the Americans, self-autonomy is more than controlling one’s own destiny; it often implies influencing one’s social surroundings as well, including other people and events in life. For them, self-autonomy also aspires to a complete personal freedom to realize one’s potential, fulfill one’s desires, and become the true authentic self. In sharp contrast, for the Chinese, personal striving must be governed by moral principles, and a meaningful life is a virtuous life. Morality is held as a defining feature of *zuo ren* (becoming a man) in Confucian philosophy. There is no absolute freedom in the Western sense, only culturally mandated duties. Further, for the Chinese, while the individual is accorded autonomy, s/he is also expected to accept whatever fate may bring. To summarize, the Chinese notion of human agency is

pre-determined by fate, which is fundamentally different from the position advocated in the West. Chinese ways of executing agency focus on accepting and coming to terms with the consequences, which are also different from Western ways. As the Chinese say: “When man has done his work, the rest is up to the Heaven”.

Happiness as Freedom from Ill-being

The four conceptual approaches to happiness described so far all adopt a perspective of possessing or achieving something, be it a fulfillment, a feeling/emotion, an accomplishment or self-mastery. However, happiness can also be defined from the opposite perspective of not having something bad, unpleasant, undesirable or unsettling happen. Specifically, the ills may be *negative emotions*, such as sadness, regret or pain. For instance: “Happiness is not having any regrets about the past”. Or: “Happiness is the lack of unhappiness. Happiness is when you’re not feeling sad, depressed, angry or lonely. It is the absence of all negative feelings”.

This “negative” view of happiness was present among the Chinese students too. Their conception of happiness can actually alternate between two opposing perspectives yet manage to convey a rather coherent and meaningful view. It seems that “having” and “not having” may be equally important in people’s thoughts about happiness, in both the East and West.

Happiness as Relating to People

Perhaps a little surprisingly, many of our American students mentioned their social relationships while contemplating definitions of happiness. The most significant relationships are those with *family and friends*. As one respondent put it: “True happiness I feel is to love and be loved. To have friends and family who love you and whom you love in return is the best feeling in the world. Happiness can come from any situation in which you are with these people”. Many others echoed this view of “*to love and be loved*” and would extend this particular perspective to include romantic love.

What then are the defining features of such important relationships? Our participants mentioned various elements of *social support*, such as comfort, respect and companionship. Happiness is “having people around who comfort, challenge, love you”;

“Happiness, for me, is feeling loved and respected and always having people there for you”. In addition, *being oneself* within a relationship is vital for the quality of love: “Happiness is being surrounded by people I can be myself with, people I relate to”.

For the Chinese, social relationships are perhaps the most prominent element in their conception of happiness, as well as sources of happiness (Lu and Shih, 1997). To be loved, cared about, especially in one’s relationships with family members, friends, and lover/spouse are frequently mentioned by Chinese students. Interpersonal goals are most important to subjective well-being, underlined by a desire for solidarity and loyalty so deeply woven in the cultural tradition (Lu, 1998). However, as conceptualized in the Confucian “*wu lun*” (five cardinal relationships), the Chinese person’s social world extends well beyond the immediate family and a small circle of close friends to much wider collectives. There are also one’s relation with the emperor (supervisors being his modern proxy, and covering all work relations), with father, with spouse, with brother (these three covering the entire family or clan), and with friends (including neighbors and community relations). Harmony in all these relationship realms must be achieved to be sure of one’s happiness.

In addition to this different focus on the scope of the social network, the Americans and Chinese are also different in their expectations of the relationships themselves. For the Americans, a good social relationship is one in which each party retains her or his independence while negotiating an accommodation to the other; for the Chinese, a good social relationship is one in which two persons merge with each other to achieve interdependence (Kitayama and Markus, 2000). Therefore, the focal point for the American relationships is the constituting parties whereas that for the Chinese is the relationship itself. It is thus understandable that “being oneself within a relationship” is vital for the quality of a loving relationship contributing to SWB for our American participants, whereas self-restrain and consideration for the other’s welfare are vital for achieving a harmonious Chinese relationship.

Happiness as the Ultimate Value in Life

Many of our American participants held up happiness to be the highest possible value in life. For some, happiness is the *supreme*

goal in life. “Happiness is absolutely great and one of the most important states of being a person or a living thing could ever pursue. The pursuit of happiness is one of my supreme goals in life”. Or: “Happiness is what makes life have meaning...a motive to live and make goals for yourself”. One respondent put it very simply and strongly: “Happiness is life!”

Such strong statements of the value of happiness and its pursuit were totally absent from the Chinese students’ writings. Further, these heavily emotionally charged positive evaluations of happiness were all made in absolute terms, and assumed implicitly to apply to the whole human race. Nonetheless, such statements are testimony to the Western culturally mandated mission for happiness and its internalization and integration into the individual’s lived world, as we posited in our theoretical approach.

OVERALL REFLECTIONS: THE AMERICAN VS. THE CHINESE CONCEPTIONS OF HAPPINESS

Throughout the above presentation of empirical evidence, direct comparisons were made between the American and Chinese conceptions of happiness on each theme. We can see both similarities and differences, especially subtle distinctions in terms of both the substances of, and approaches to, SWB, as mandated by cultural traditions in the East and the West.

Several more general points should be noted. First, For the Chinese, happiness was prominently conceptualized as a harmonious homeostasis within the individual as well as between the individual and his surroundings. However, words such as “harmony”, “balance” and “fit” were nowhere to be found in the Americans’ accounts. While the American accounts were emotionally charged, upbeat, and unmistakably positive, the Chinese ones were solemn, reserved, and balanced. The Chinese concept of harmonious homeostasis seems to capture the core implication of happiness being a dynamic process of achieving and maintaining a good fit from within to outward. One Chinese student’s view was rather representative: “Happiness is the inner well-being and contentment, as well as the feeling of harmony with the external world. It is also trust, safety and stability”.

Although some Western psychologists have developed dynamic equilibrium models in SWB (Headey and Wearing, 1989), their key interest was to synthesize the top-down theories (e.g. personality effects) and the bottom-up theories (e.g. life events influences) to explain individual differences. Hence, mechanisms of fluctuation or stability of SWB were their focal concern, rather than the nature of happiness. The Chinese concept of homeostasis, however, has a philosophical depth. According to the ancient *Yin–Yang* theory, homeostasis is the ideal state for the entire universe, a state of harmony with the great natural principles (Hong, 1944). The *Yin–Yang* theory posits that the universe consists of two basic principles of nature, *Yin–Yang*; through the change of relationships between these two opposing forces, all creatures were born and are still constantly changing, hence keeping a state of homeostasis in nature, societies and human beings. Happiness is but one particular domain responsive to the influences of *Yin–Yang*. The above Chinese view of happiness corresponds nicely to this *Yin–Yang* philosophy, stressing a state of homeostasis in the human mind and body, in the individual and his social, spiritual and natural environment. This holistic view of happiness thus surpasses the Western view of equilibrium as a process mechanism. Harmony between Heaven, Earth and People is also the ultimate happiness aspired by Taoism. In short, conceptualizing happiness as a harmonious homeostasis seems a distinctly Chinese view, deeply embedded in the cultural milieu, and sharply contrasting with a Western view of linearly pursuing positivity to reach happiness.

Secondly, perhaps related to the first point, the Chinese conception of happiness clearly emphasized spiritual enrichment over hedonistic satisfaction, whereas the spiritual element of happiness was only mentioned by two American students in the context of religion. While the Americans generally emphasized concrete achievement, self-autonomy, and positive evaluations of the self, the Chinese generally emphasized mind work, self-cultivation, and positive evaluations of the self by others. The Chinese emphasis on spiritual enrichment underlines the view that happiness is not a mere reflection of the objective world. It is of course not likely that happiness can develop in a material vacuum for most ordinary people; but striking demonstrations of mind

power as a passport to eternal happiness are prevalent in both Buddhism and Taoism. Confucian philosophy too stresses mind work to suppress selfish desires and irrational demands in order to be virtuous and serve the collective. All these Chinese traditional teachings place great emphasis on spiritual enrichment, and play down, even deny, the role of material gratification, physical comfort, and hedonic pleasures in the experience of happiness. One Chinese student expressed this solemn view of happiness: "Only when the spirit is rich, the mind is peaceful and steady, happiness is then possible. Happiness is an inner feeling, not resides in the external material world". Although this conceptualization of happiness as an individual mental state and spiritually focused is not limited to the Chinese cultural tradition, it has not been stressed in the West in recent times. In the West, rather, the focus has been more on a conception of happiness in terms of striving for material gratification and personal achievement.

Third, the Chinese conceptions of happiness clearly reflect a dialectical view, whereas the relationship between happiness and unhappiness was only lightly touched on by a very few of the American students. For the Chinese, happiness and unhappiness are ever-present as the background to each other, whereas for the Americans, their relationship only comes to notice when one is currently unhappy. As briefly discussed earlier, the *Yin–Yang* philosophy takes a clear dialectical view of the happiness–unhappiness relationship. The cosmological view that everything from the cosmos to human life is a never-ending, cyclic process of change, between good and bad, happiness and misery, well-being and ill-being, is best expressed in a Chinese proverb: "Happiness is dependent on unhappiness, while unhappiness is hidden in happiness" (Lu, 1998). It seems that the dialectical view of happiness is a distinctive feature of Eastern conceptions of SWB, as our research on Chinese culture shows, and as can be seen elsewhere – for example, in the Japanese "habit of hesitation" towards happiness.

Overall, our empirical evidence pertaining to both the Chinese and American conceptions of happiness supports our theoretical stance that culture molds meaning and concepts of psychological significance such as SWB. Both similarities and differences we observed in the data provide testimony to the cultural psycho-

logical claim of “one mind, many mentalities” (Shweder et al., 1998, p. 87). In the current case of SWB, the empirical evidence generally supports our cultural theory which posits distinct characteristics of the conception of happiness prevalent in Asian and Euro-American cultures. For the Asians, socially oriented SWB emphasizes role obligations and dialectical balance; for the Euro-Americans, individually oriented SWB emphasizes personal accountability and explicit pursuit. Corroborating evidence has been found concerning the mechanisms of achieving happiness for both Easterners and Westerners (Lu et al., 2001b, 2002). It seems, then, that a cultural psychological approach towards the study of SWB promises new horizons and new depth. Constructing a more culturally balanced measurement for the conception of SWB is the next important step forward, and more concerted and fruitful research efforts can then follow.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was supported by a grant from the Department of Education, Taiwan, ROC, 89-H-FA01-2-4-2.

REFERENCES

- Bauer, W.: 1976, *China and the Search for Happiness: Recurring Themes in Four Thousand Years of Chinese Cultural History* (The Seabury Press, New York).
- Bruner, J.: 1990, *Acts of Meaning* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA).
- Chiang, C.M.: 1996, *The Philosophy of Happiness: A History of Chinese Life Philosophy (In Chinese)* (Hong Yie Publication Co., Taipei).
- Diener, E. and M. Diener: 1995, ‘Cross-cultural correlates of life satisfaction and self-esteem’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 68, pp. 653–663.
- Diener, E., M. Suh, H. Smith and L. Shao: 1995, ‘National and cultural differences in reported subjective well-being: Why do they occur?’, *Social Indicators Research* 31, pp. 103–157.
- Diener, E., E. Suh, S. Oishi and Shao L.: 1996, ‘Norms for affect: National comparisons’, in *Ninth Conference of International Society for Research on Emotions*, Toronto, Canada.
- Feather, N.T.: 1986, ‘Value systems across cultures: Australia and China’, *International Journal of Psychology* 21, pp. 697–715.

- Geertz, C.: 1975, 'On the nature of anthropological understanding', *American Scientist* 63, pp. 47–53.
- Headey, B. and A. Wearing: 1989, 'Personality, life events, and subjective well-being: Toward a dynamic equilibrium Model', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57, pp. 731–739.
- Heine, S.J., D.R. Lehman, H.R. Markus and S. Kitayama: 1999, 'Culture and the need for positive self-regard', *Psychological Review* 106, pp. 766–794.
- Hofstede, G.: 1980, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-related Values* (Sage, Newbury Park, CA).
- Hong, Y.L.: 1944, *History of Chinese Philosophy, 'Yin-Yang'*. (San-Wu Books, Beijing).
- Hsu, F.L.K.: 1971, 'Psycho-social homeostasis and Jen: Conceptual tools for advancing psychological anthropology', *American Anthropologist* 73, pp. 23–44.
- Hwang, K.K.: in press, 'Morality: East and West', in N.J. Smelser and P.B. Baltes (eds), *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Pergamon, Amsterdam).
- Kim, U., H.C. Triandis, C. Kagitcibasi, S.C. Choi and G. Yoon (eds): 1994, *Individualism and Collectivism: Theory, Method, and Application* (Sage, London).
- King, A.Y. and C.K. Napa: 1998, 'What makes a good life?', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75, pp. 156–165.
- Kitayama, S. and H.R. Markus: 2000, 'The pursuit of happiness and the realization of sympathy: Cultural patterns of self, social relations, and well-being', in E. Diener and E.M. Sul (eds), *Culture and Subjective Well-being* (The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA), pp. 113–162.
- Kwan, V.S.Y., M.H. Bond and T.M. Singelis: 1997, 'Pancultural explanations for life satisfaction: Adding relationship harmony to self-esteem', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73, pp. 1038–1051.
- Lu, L.: 1995, 'The relationship between subjective well-being and psychosocial variables in Taiwan', *The Journal of Social Psychology* 135, pp. 351–357.
- Lu, L.: 1998, 'The meaning, measure, and correlates of happiness among Chinese people', *Proceedings of the National Science Council: Part C* 8, pp. 115–137.
- Lu, L.: 2001, 'Understanding happiness: A look into the Chinese folk psychology', *Journal of Happiness Studies* 2, pp. 407–432.
- Lu, L. and J.B. Shih: 1997, 'Sources of happiness: A qualitative approach', *Journal of Social Psychology* 137, pp. 181–187.
- Lu, L., R. Gilmour and S.F. Kao: 2001a, 'Culture values and happiness: An East–West dialogue', *Journal of Social Psychology* 141, pp. 477–493.
- Lu, L., R. Gilmour, S.F. Kao, T.H. Eng, C.H. Hu, J.G. Chern, S.W. Huang and J.B. Shih: 2001b, 'Two ways to achieve happiness: When the East meets the West', *Personality and Individual Differences* 30, pp. 1161–1174.
- Lu, L., & Gilmour, R. (2004). Culture, self and ways to achieve SWB: A cross-cultural analysis. *Journal of Psychology in Chinese Societies*, 5, 51–79.

- Markus, H.R. and S. Kitayama: 1991, 'Culture and the self: Implication for cognition, emotion, and motivation', *Psychological Review* 98, pp. 224–253.
- Markus, H.R. and S. Kitayama: 1998, 'The cultural psychology of personality', *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 29, pp. 63–87.
- Minami, H.: 1971, *Psychology of the Japanese People* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Canada).
- Ratzlaff, C., D. Matsumoto, N. Kouznetsova, J. Raroque and Ray R.: 2000, 'Individual psychological culture and subjective well-being', in E. Diener and E.M. Sul (eds), *Culture and Subjective Well-being* (The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA), pp. 37–60.
- Shweder, R.A.: 1991, *Thinking Through Cultures: Expeditions in Cultural Psychology* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA).
- Shweder, R.A.: 1998, *Welcome to Middle Age! (and Other Cultural Fiction)* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago).
- Shweder, R.A., J. Goodnow, G. Hatano, R. LeVine, H. Markus and P. Miller: 1998, 'The cultural psychology of development: One mind, many mentalities', in W. Damon (ed.), *Handbook of Child Psychology: Theoretical Models of Human Development* (Vol. 1) (Wiley, New York).
- Suh, E.M.: 2000, 'Self, the hyphen between culture and subjective well-being', in E. Diener and E.M. Sul (eds), *Culture and Subjective Well-being* (The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA), pp. 63–86.
- Triandis, H.C.: 1994, *Culture and Social Behavior* (McGraw-Hill, New York).
- Yang, K.S.: 1995, 'Chinese social orientation: An integrative analysis', in T.Y. Lin, W.S. Tseng and E.K. Yeh (eds), *Chinese Societies and Mental Health* (Oxford University Press, Hong Kong), pp. 19–39.
- Yu, A. B., and Yang, K. S.: 1994, 'The nature of achievement motivation in collectivist societies,' in U. Kim, H. C. Triandis, C. Kagitçibasi, S. C. Choi and G. Yoon (eds), *Individualism and Collectivism: Theory, Method, and Application*, (Sage, London), pp. 239–250.

Address for Correspondence:

LUO LU

Department of Psychology

Fu-Jen Catholic University

510 Chong-Cheng Road

Hsing-Chuang 242

Taipei Hsien, Taiwan

ROC

E-mail: luolu@mails.fju.edu.tw