

CULTURE, SELF, AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING: CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL CHANGE PERSPECTIVES

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Culture serves as a major force shaping the way people conceptualize the self, think about happiness, and cope with difficulties and upheavals in life. The present paper starts with a conceptual analysis of traditional Chinese and modern Western views of the self, to contrast the social-oriented versus individual-oriented nature of the self embedded in the two cultural traditions. These culture-specific modes of self construction can then shed light on the diverse meanings people hold for happiness and well-being in different societies. Building on the social-oriented view of the self, which emphasizes relatedness, fluidity, morality, self-constraint, harmony, and sensitivity to others, subjective well-being for the Chinese is construed around fulfilling one's obligations and maintaining homeostasis (dialectical balance). In contrast, emanating from an individual-oriented view of the self, which emphasizes independence, self-determination, consistency, and personal striving, happiness is a prize to be fought over, and entirely one's responsibility to accomplish this ultimate goal of life. Similarly, culture-specific preferences in individual-society and/or interpersonal alignment mirror the two contrasting views of the self, and link up with the collaborative project of pursuing happiness.

Key words: culture, self, subjective well-being

What is happiness? This is a simple question. We all know the answer, or do we? As soon as we hear people talk about happiness, we will be stunned how diverse each one's ideas about happiness are! The differences are even more substantial in the ways people from the East Asia and the North America think about happiness (Lu, 2001; Lu & Gilmour, 2004a). Regarded as a "basic building block, a value in terms of which other values are justified" (Braithwaite & Law, 1985, p. 261), the experiences of subjective well-being (SWB, herein used as interchangeable with "happiness") may be universal, but its meaning remains complex and culture-bond.

I argue that the impact of *culture* on SWB is fundamental, since culture not only provides a specific set of conceptions of SWB, but also constructs particular pathways for its achievement. *Cultural* thus forms a critical aspect of SWB, which have largely been neglected thus far by Western psychologists. Borrowing Suh's (2000, p. 63) metaphor of "self as the hyphen between culture and subjective well-being", the construction of self,

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

In this paper, I will first systematically delineate core elements of the traditional Chinese and modern Western views of the self. These culture-specific modes of self construction can then shed light on the diverse meanings people hold for SWB and habitual ways of striving for happiness in different societies. Similarly, culture-specific preferences in individual-society and/or interpersonal alignment are expected to mirror the two contrasting views of the self, and link up with the collaborative project of pursuing happiness.

It is to be noted that despite its intuitive simplicity, well-being is in fact a complex construct, whose exact meaning is still heatedly debated by scholars working from different research paradigms. According to Ryan and Deci (2001), there are two principal approaches to defining well-being: hedonic and eudaimonic. Many psychologists have adopted the hedonic approach to conduct empirical research on well-being, typically inquiring into the individual experiences of subjective well-being (SWB, or termed happiness), and consequently have accumulated a rich and growing literature on human experiences of pleasure versus displeasure, also broadly construed to include all judgments about the good and bad elements of life (Diener, 1984). In contrast, scholars adopting the eudaimonic approach argue that living well involves a striving for perfection that represents the realization of one's true potentials (Ryff, 1989). Specifically, such eudaimonic living consists of six distinct facets: autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, life purpose, mastery, and positive relating, which is termed *psychological well-being* to be contrasted with subjective well-being (Ryff, 1989). In the present paper, I adopt the hedonic approach and focus on delineating cultural imprints on personal conceptualization and experiences of happiness or SWB, mainly because I believe that how people feel and think about their own lives is essential to understanding well-being in any society that grants importance to all people in society, not just to the opinions of experts.

CULTURE AND SELF TRADITIONAL CHINESE VS. MODERN WESTERN

The essence of the traditional Chinese self is its social-oriented nature which emphasizes roles, statuses, positions, commitments, and responsibilities. The Chinese culture has been depicted as a family-style collectivism which advocates priority of collective, especially family welfare and rewards self-control, diligent role performance, and rigorous self-cultivation. The conceptualization of the self in the Confucian tradition is characterized by two interrelated assumptions: (a) the self as a center of relationships and (b) the self as a dynamic process of spiritual development (Tu, 1985). A person in the Confucian tradition is seen primarily as a relational being defined in specific dyadic relationships, such as being a son, a brother, a husband, or a father, the *relational* way of being is thus the core of the traditional Chinese self.

My conceptualization of the traditional Chinese self corroborates well with C. F.

Yang's (1991) revelation of distinct features of the self in Confucian tradition. The following are particularly illuminating points: (a) the Confucian self is not only the original source of the individual's behavior, but also a tool for realizing an ideal society, thus the Confucian style self-autonomy is manifested in the gradual formation of a moral self through the internalization of prevailing moral codes and social norms; (b) the ultimate aim of the Confucian self is to achieve the unity between the self and the society, via self-cultivation, self-control, and self-transcendence; (c) the Confucian self is fundamentally seen as a moral being, which has to strive for continuous moral improvement to overtake itself; (d) the boundary of the Confucian self is constantly extended to include more and more others as a result of the self-cultivation process. All the above characteristics of the Confucian or traditional Chinese self are tremendously different from those of the Western self.

I maintain that the traditional Chinese 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 & Kitayama, 1991). An interdependent view of self derives from a belief in the individual's connectedness and interdependence to others. This characterization of the self locates crucial self-representations not within unique individual attributes, but within his or her social *relationships*. However, I go further to broaden the scope of the interdependent self to encompass not only social relationships but also self-cultivation, moral duty, and societal obligations in the conceptualization of the self, as these are indispensable to the completeness of the Chinese way of being. I termed such a traditional Chinese self the *social-orientated self* (Lu, 2007, 2008), to distinguish from the interdependent self which centers on the self-other relation.

In sharp contrast to the traditional Chinese self, the essence of the Western self is its individual-oriented nature which emphasizes personal talents, potentialities, needs, strivings and rights. As emphasized by Bakan (1966) from an individual developmental point of view, Westerners tend to develop in the direction of enhancing the agency side of human nature that stresses the attainment of self-assertion, self-expansion, mastery, power, distinction, and separation from others, while at the same time repressing the communion side of human nature that accents striving for contact, cooperation, union, and association with others. In a similar vein, Josselson (1988) stated that "psychoanalytic developmental theory takes as its premise that the central thrust of human development is movement from a state of dependence and merger to a state of independent, differentiated selfhood" (p. 93). This statement also implies that Western people transform toward the agency aspect of human nature rather than the communal one in their life-long developmental journey.

My conceptualization of the Western self also corroborates Geertz's (1975) vivid description of a person from a Western point of view. Such a person is "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" (p. 48). Markus and Kitayama (1991) concurred and termed such a view of the person as

a bounded, coherent, stable, autonomous, free entity as the independent self. An independent view of self derives from a belief in the wholeness and separateness of each individual's configuration of internal attributes, which locates crucial self-representations *within the individual*. To contrast the social-oriented Chinese self, I termed the Western conceptualization of the self *individual-oriented self* (Lu, 2007, 2008).

It is worth noting that I (Lu & Yang, 2006; Lu, 2007, 2008) recently proposed a theory of "bicultural self" for the contemporary Chinese people. Within such an integrated bicultural system, the social-oriented self represents the essence of traditional Chinese self, especially in the Confucian heritage; in contrast, the individual-oriented self represents the increasing influence of the Western culture in the profound process of societal modernization. Thus differences between the more or less traditional (or modern) Chinese on SWB should mirror East-West cross-cultural patterns. Furthermore, effects of individual-oriented and social-oriented self on SWB can be examined in cross-cultural research as well as study designs involving only the Chinese.

CULTURE, SELF AND SWB: INDIVIDUAL- VS. SOCIAL-ORIENTED CONCEPTUALIZATION

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. 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 ours and other researchers' studies (Chiasson et al., 1996; Diener & Diener, 1995; Furnham & Cheng, 2000; Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1997; Lu & Shih, 1997; Lu, 2001; Lu, Gilmour, & Kao, 2001; Lu et al., 2001; Lu & Gilmour, 2004a, 2004b; Suh, 2000). Thus it seems that assuming SWB has the same meaning across the world is problematic, albeit it seems to be assumed by the previous cross-cultural research on SWB (e.g., Diener & Suh, 1999; Micholas, 1991; Veenhoven, 1993).

Specifically, we (Lu, 2001; Lu & Gilmour, 2004a) started by asking Chinese and American university students to write free-format essays under the title of "what is happiness?" What we found was that 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 the 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. Informed by these qualitative empirical data, I will further contrast at the conceptual level two cultural systems of SWB: East Asian social-oriented and Euro-American individual-oriented cultural conceptions of SWB.

Euro-American Individual-Oriented Cultural Conceptions of SWB

The study of SWB has mostly developed within a European American framework, and it incorporates a web of tacit understandings and implicit assumptions that are shared by both researchers and participants (Markus & Kitayama, 1998). As I stated earlier, the cultural construction of self, 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.

Euro-American theories of SWB are firmly based on a highly individualistic self conception. As I have delineated earlier, such an individual-oriented self view emphasizes independence, autonomous, free will, internal consistency and stability. In the Euro-American culture of individualism (Hofstede, 1980; Kim, Triandis, Kagitçibasi, Choi, & Yoon, 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 & Kitayama, 1998). In particular, the American culture strongly advocates relentless pursuit of individual interests and generously rewards personal successes.

Embedded in such a historical and cultural milieu, one distinct characteristic of the Euro-American cultural conceptions of SWB is *personal accountability*, which essentially claims that happiness is everyone's natural and inalienable right; furthermore, one should be responsible for one's own happiness. Being happy is seen as a personal accomplishment, and the American culture is obsessed with achieving personal happiness. Happiness thus has many positive associations. For example, happiness is closely related to self-esteem, health and life satisfaction (Diener & Diener, 1995; Diener, Emmons, Larson, & Griffin, 1985; Lu, 1995). On the other hand, failing to be happy implies that one is shirking one's responsibility and failing to realize the American cultural mandate. The robustly found prevalence of "illusory optimism" in North America (Heine & Lehman, 1995; Taylor & Brown, 1988) may suggest a prevailing tendency of self-enhancement to protect oneself from vulnerable feelings of failure and unhappiness.

Another distinct characteristic of the Euro-American cultural conceptions of SWB is *explicit pursuit*, which essentially claims that people should actively strive for happiness, and the pursuit of happiness should not be jeopardized in any way. 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. Active striving for happiness, never backing down, taking necessary risks and bearing costs are themes frequent the popular psychological literature, media discourses and the daily expressions of Americans. On the other hand, with an infrastructure of democracy and social equality, a constitution that upholds individual rights, social customs that encourage personal striving and reward achievement, the

opportunities and freedom to pursue happiness in Euro-America are abundant.

To sum, a free individual unceasingly pursuing happiness with the blessings of the society best portrays the Euro-American cultural conceptions the individual-oriented SWB, composed of two distinct characteristics: *personal accountability* and *explicit pursuit*.

East Asian Social-Oriented Cultural Conceptions of SWB

The East Asian view of the self, in sharp contrast to the Euro-American view, is of a connected, fluid, flexible, committed being that is bound to others. This social-oriented self view emphasizes interdependence, role obligation, moderation and harmony. Such a prototypical East Asian characterization of the self locates crucial self-representations not within unique individual attributes, but within one's social *relationships*.

In the East Asian culture of collectivism, social customs, institutions and the media all conspire to foster the *relational* way of being, emphasizing roles, statuses and in-group membership (Markus & Kitayama, 1998). Thus, many Asian cultures advocate priority of collective welfare over personal interests, and reward self-control, diligent role performance, and rigorous self-cultivation.

Within this particular historical and cultural milieu, East Asian cultural conceptions of SWB has a distinct characteristic of *role obligations*, which states that happiness should be based upon the fulfillment of social role obligations, and accomplished through self-cultivation. In so doing, group welfare and social harmony can be ensured. In contrast to the prevalence of self-enhancement among North Americans, East Asians (Japanese for instance) frequently exhibit a tendency of self-criticism and self-effacement (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Kitayama & Markus, 2000). The constant focus on one's weaknesses and possibilities for improvement helps to cultivate a modest self which is considerate to other's needs and sensitive to social mandates, thus better capable of fitting in. In large part, it may be a function of the need to pay more attention to the other than to the self. It is also because the pursuit of socially desirable and culturally mandated achievement rather than striving for personal accomplishment is the more characteristic mode of the participating social-oriented self (Lu & Yang, 2005; Yang & Lu, 2005). Consequently, in the East Asian social-oriented cultural conceptions of SWB, 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), even at a cost to one's personal welfare, are the core issues. Such a view of SWB is consonant with a Confucian obligation-based moral discourse, in contrast to a Euro-American right-based one (Hwang, 2001).

Another defining characteristic of East Asian social-oriented cultural conceptions of SWB is a view of *dialectical balance*. "Happiness" and "unhappiness" are viewed as two sides of a coin. People should not pursue happiness in excess, rather they should search for deeper internal homeostasis and external fusion. As a member of the East Asian Confucian Circle, Japanese culture exhibits a "habit of hesitation" towards happiness (Minami, 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).

In addition to the deep roots of Confucian heritage, Buddhism also asserts profound influences on the Chinese mentality. Since *Tang* Dynasty, Buddhism has incorporated many of the Confucian thoughts and Chinese folk traditions to establish its firm position in the Chinese societies. Buddhism asserts that there is no such thing as absolute, lasting happiness in life, all existence on earth was poisoned by unhappiness from the very start, and only "nirvana" can offer salvation (Chiang, 1976). Happiness in Buddhism can only be found in the "Paradise of the west" after nirvana, which promises eternal bliss beyond everyday misery of this world. In essence, Buddhism also advocates a dialectical balance between happiness and suffering.

To sum, happiness is constructed very differently in the East Asian cultures. The North American vision of personal happiness is no longer a dominant concern for most East Asians. Instead, a self-cultivated person diligently carrying out his/her moral duties to pursue happiness for the society with the cooperation of others thus best captures the essence of the East Asian cultural conceptions of SWB. I termed this view the social-oriented cultural conceptions of SWB, composed of two distinct characteristics: *role obligations* and *dialectical balance*.

SWB is thus construed a major realm for the manifestation of the Chinese bicultural self, albeit this is not a traditional topic for the study of the self. In a nut shell, I argue 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 throughout the world. Striving for personal happiness and the recognition of such striving (*personal accountability* and *explicit pursuit*) are the defining features of individual-oriented cultural conceptions of SWB, whereas role obligations and dialectical reservation (*role obligations* and *dialectical balance*) are the defining features of social-oriented cultural conceptions of SWB. Subsequent research (Lu & Gilmour, 2006) verified that Chinese both in Taiwan and mainland China endorsed individual-oriented and social-oriented cultural conceptions of SWB with nearly equal strengths. However, Chinese still endorsed stronger social-oriented SWB than Americans, while Americans endorsed stronger individual-oriented SWB than Chinese. More importantly, across three groups (Taiwan Chinese, mainland Chinese, Americans), individual-oriented SWB was found to be associated with independent self-construal, whereas social-oriented SWB conception with interdependent self-construal. Thus, the self as hyphen between culture and SWB is not merely a metaphor, but a psychological reality.

To recap, the central thesis of this generic cultural theory of SWB 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 conceptions of SWB (i.e. individual-oriented vs. social-oriented), and thus prescribes different sources and

conditions of SWB for its members (Chiasson, Dube, & Blondin, 1996; Furnham & Cheng, 2000; Lu & Shih, 1997). 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., individual-oriented vs. social-oriented self, or independent 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 (Diener & Diener, 1995; Kwan et al., 1997; Lu & Gilmour, 2004b). Such mechanisms also determine how people think, feel and behave in the pursuit of SWB (Suh, 2000). Below I will summarize our empirical findings pertaining to psychological mechanisms or pathways to achieve happiness adopting an individual differences approach. Informed by the above outlined generic cultural theory, our recent studies have a clear focus on cultural, in contrast to the prevailing focus on personality and attributional correlates in the mainstream Western SWB research.

CULTURAL CORRELATES OF HAPPINESS

One approach guided by the cultural theory of SWB is to look at various ways of achieving SWB for people living in individualistic and in collectivist societies. At first, culture selects, activates, elaborates, maintains and strengthens one distinct view of the self over another. The independent and interdependent self then represent culture at the individual level. They shape and direct the individual's behaviors to reflect the core underlying cultural concerns. In the interpersonal realm, people with independent self tend to believe in active, primary control, whereas people with interdependent self are more inclined to emphasize secondary control and relationship harmony. Extending Weisz, Rothbaum, and Blackburn's (1984) conceptualization of primary vs. secondary control, people with primary control beliefs will typically strive to enhance their rewards by *influencing* existing social realities such as increasing efforts to work on relationships, whereas people with secondary control beliefs will typically seek to enhance their rewards by *accommodating* to existing social realities such as taking the view that "if a relationship fails, it is better to persuade oneself that it is not important at all". These self-regulatory mechanisms then guide peoples' everyday social behaviors, and the resultant feelings about these interactions will contribute to their overall SWB.

This pan-cultural multiple-way SWB model was tested and generally supported in two cross-cultural studies involving Chinese and British as respondents (Lu & Gilmour, 2004b; Lu et al., 2001). Thus, it was shown that these various ways of achieving SWB were independent and pervasive across the two markedly contrasting cultural groups. The two self views were co-determinants of SWB, acting through the mediating variables of belief systems and social relationships.

Another bi-cultural individual level analysis also showed that values closely related to the core of cultural collectivism, such as "social integration" and "human-heartedness" led to greater happiness for the Chinese but not the British (Lu, Gilmour & Kao, 2001).

All the evidence suggests that culture impacts on SWB through multiple mediators and complex mechanisms that influence and/or reflect the self as an individually-oriented or a socially-oriented entity.

CULTURE, ALIGNMENT AND SWB

Yet another possible cultural mediator for SWB may be effective alignment and successful conflict resolution when the individual strives to maintain a certain degree of congruence between his/her psychological culture (e.g., self views, control beliefs) and the larger societal environment within which he/she lives. This “cultural fit” is crucial for SWB (Lu, 2006). I reasoned that if the larger cultural tradition is individualistic, people with consonant independent self and active control beliefs may find it easier to achieve SWB; if, in contrast, the larger cultural tradition is collectivistic, people with consonant interdependent self and harmony beliefs may find it easier to achieve SWB. This proposition was tested with 3 diverse Chinese samples from Taiwan and Mainland China. I again found that independent and interdependent self, active control and harmony beliefs as individual-level culture were consistently related to SWB. Furthermore, while I found that people in accord with their societal culture were generally better off in SWB than those in discord, “getting ahead” was more advantageous than “lagging behind”. Specifically, as operationalized in the studies that are reviewed herein, “getting ahead” referred to the Chinese people who endorsed higher modern (Western) values, beliefs, or individual-oriented self, than they thought “people in the society” would; “lagging behind” referred to the Chinese people who endorsed higher traditional (Chinese) values, beliefs, or social-oriented self, than they thought “people in the society” would. In other words, in the Chinese cultural context, “getting ahead” depicts a modernist who incorporates Western originated values and beliefs, while “lagging behind” depicts a traditionalist who holds on to traditional Chinese cultural values and beliefs.

I argued that what constitutes “getting ahead” or “lagging behind” and their differential effects on SWB needed to be understood in the larger cultural milieu of the contemporary Chinese world. Numerous evidence have suggested that the Chinese people are leveling with or even surpassing their Western counterparts in individualistic values and attitudes such as the independent self and active control beliefs (Lu, 2003a; Lu & Gilmour, 2004b; Lu & Yang, 2006; Yang, 1988, 1996). The same trend was noted in a recent meta-analysis for the Japanese, who scored *higher* on individualism than Americans (Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002). This “psychological modernizing” trend is particularly salient for the young, educated and urban residents in the developing world (Lu & Kao, 2002). It thus seems that the current social milieu of cultural fusion and societal modernization may have provided the Chinese people with a stronger impetus to develop more assertive self-expression and active control over the surrounding environment. It is reasonable to infer that moving with rather than against this historical and societal tide of modernity would promote personal well-being. In the aforementioned study, “moving ahead” as manifested in endorsing higher independent self

than the average person in the society held a clear advantage over “lagging behind” as manifested in the opposite pattern (Lu, 2006).

In a more fine grained examination of the sub-cultural differences between Taiwanese and mainland Chinese on their constructs of the self, we noted that while the two groups were not different in social-oriented self, mainland Chinese endorsed more strongly on individual-oriented self than Taiwanese (Lu, Kao, Chang, Wu, & Zhang, 2008). There is a growing body of literature suggesting that Mainland Chinese are perhaps the most “modern” of the Chinese groups around (Leung & Bond, 2004; Lu & Gilmour, 2004), and are catching up fast with their newly encountered Western influence. Whether this trend will be further enhanced as the new generation under the “one child” policy grows up still needs concerted research efforts, anecdotal accounts are abundant suggesting that this new pampered generation is more individualistic and ego-centered compared to their elders in the society.

In another series of studies, the “cultural fit” proposition was more closely examined in significant dyadic relationships, perhaps more precisely termed “interpersonal fit”, though relationship context is undoubtedly an important social reality for the Chinese (Hwang, 1987). For the parent-child dyad, we (Lu, Kao, & Chen, 2006) found that the children’s SWB was predicted by their own level of filial piety (a core traditional Chinese value) and their parents’ expectations of their filial piety, whereas parents’ SWB was predicted solely by their children’s commitment to filial piety. These results can be interpreted as demonstrating the beneficial effects of dyadic value fit and mutually satisfying the other parties’ needs. For the husband-wife dyad, we (Kao & Lu, 2006) found that conjugal congruence on individual traditionality and modernity is related to marital adjustment: the greater the fit within the couple, the lower levels of marital conflict and the higher levels of marital happiness. Finally, for the advisor-student relationship, we (Lu & Ung, 2007) found that the fit on psychological modernity had an effect on students’ perceived relationship quality: the pairing of high modernity advisor with high modernity student came out to be the best match.

So far, the “cultural fit” proposition was largely supported at the broader individual-society interface and in the more intimate dyadic interactions. Thus, both the larger social milieus and the more refined relationship contexts should be taken into account to better understand people’s striving for fit and congruence as well as efforts in coping with conflicts and incompatibilities while examining the relationship between culture and SWB.

POSTLUDE:

THE COEXISTENCE AND INTEGRATION OF CONTRASTING CULTURAL RUDIMENTS

One thing keeps popping out in our cultural psychological studies of SWB is that the seemingly contrasting cultural systems have now actually coexisted at the individual level for the Chinese. As mentioned earlier, I (Lu, 2007, 2008; Lu & Yang, 2006) used a broad term of “bicultural self” to describe and explain this form of cultural coexistence and even

possible cultural integration. More specifically, Lu (2003) proposed a construct of “composite self” to characterize an evolving self-system among contemporary Chinese people. This system of “composite self” intricately integrates the traditional Chinese construct of “self-in-relation” (interdependence) with the Western construct of “independent and autonomous self” (independence). For the contemporary Chinese, the neglected even suppressed independent self may be nurtured, developed, elaborated and even emphasized in certain domains of life, such as work. An attitude favoring the coexistence and integration of independent and interdependent self to help deal with the apparent conflicts between strong traditionality and requisite modernity, might well be the most favorable outcome for people in contemporary Chinese societies, and possibly other Asian societies. Such a composite self with equally strong convictions of independence and interdependence can then be seen as a way of expressing two basic human needs: uniqueness and relatedness.

In the case of SWB, we have not only consistently found a significant coexistence of the independent and interdependent self in cross-cultural analyses (Lu et al., 2001; Lu & Gilmour, 2004b), but also noticed that independent self rather than interdependent self better predicted happiness sometimes (Lu et al., 2001). For both the Chinese people and American students, the individual-oriented and social-oriented cultural conceptions of SWB also coexisted (Lu, 2003a; Lu & Gilmour, 2004b). Although cross-cultural analysis still revealed a main effect of culture: the Chinese avowed stronger social-oriented SWB than the Americans, while the Americans avowed stronger individual-oriented SWB than the Chinese, mono-cultural analysis showed that the Chinese actually had equally strong conviction of individual-oriented and social-oriented SWB conceptions. This hybrid of “bicultural SWB” is very likely emanated from the Chinese composite or bicultural self. Nonetheless, more systematic and fine grained analysis is needed to look at the exact process and dynamism of such cultural integration as well as its functional values. In view of social change and psychological transformation, as the Chinese people are becoming increasingly individual-oriented in general (Lu & Yang, 2006; Lu et al., 2008), we may expect that individual-oriented cultural conceptions of SWB will have an increasingly stronger hold on the Chinese mind, and individual-oriented ways to achieve happiness will more evidently manifest in the Chinese behaviors.

As a final note, I am convinced that both the cultural psychological approach and the social change perspective are called for if we are to better understand the mentality of contemporary Chinese people. The cultural psychological viewpoint helps to highlight the cultural roots of our happiness conception and habitual ways of pursuing happiness in life, whereas the social change perspective injects momentum into a static system to highlight the complex dynamism of any human encounter with the social environment. Specific hypotheses can be derived incorporating these two theoretical perspectives and tested within the realm of a scientific psychology. As a Chinese psychologist, I firmly believe that we have a moral obligation as well as academic interests to understand how the contemporary Chinese people strive to coordinate, regulate, compromise, synthesize, and integrate the contrasting cultural rudiments, in the pursuit of a more balanced, effective, and happy life. The request has now begun and will continue to the end.

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