Culture and Subjective Well-Being: A Dynamic Constructivist View

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Abstract

Adopting the dynamic constructivist approach, the present research tested the hypothesis that bicultural people's subjective well-being (SWB) is more contingent on satisfaction with relationship-related domains and less contingent on satisfaction with self-related domains when Chinese cultural ideas are activated than when American ideas are activated. Two studies on Hong Kong undergraduates with different activation procedures (exposure to cultural icons in Study 1 and questionnaire language in Study 2) and different SWB measures (life satisfaction in Study 1 and subjective happiness in Study 2) provided convergent support to this hypothesis. The present research contributes to the existing understanding of culture and SWB by (a) examining the processes underlying the SWB judgment of bicultural individuals, (b) highlighting cross-situational variations of cultural influence on SWB judgment, and (c) allowing for testing causality of such influence.

Keywords

culture, language, subjective well-being, bicultural, dynamic constructivist approach

Cultures vary in what causes or correlates with subjective well-being (SWB; Tov & Diener, 2007). One recurring finding in past studies is that cultures differ in the importance of satisfaction towards the self and satisfaction towards social relationships in predicting SWB. This finding has often been explicated in terms of cultural variations in self-construal (Suh, Diener, & Updegraff, 2008) or values (Oishi, Diener, Lucas, & Suh, 1999).

Compared to collectivistic ones, individualistic cultures place more emphasis on self-esteem. Although self-esteem correlates with SWB in most countries, the strength of this association varies systematically with the level of individualism of a country. For instance, Diener and Diener (1995) reported that in 29 out of 31 countries examined, self-esteem was significantly correlated with global life satisfaction. Furthermore, this correlation was stronger among individualistic countries than among collectivistic ones. Similarly, Oishi et al. (1999) in a study of 39 nations found that satisfaction with self-esteem needs (satisfaction with one's self and with one's freedom) was a stronger predictor of global life satisfaction in individualistic countries than in collectivistic

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ones. Similar findings were also reported in some two-country comparisons (e.g., Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1997).

In collectivistic cultures, social relationships are often included in the self-concept. This renders satisfaction with social relationships more important in predicting SWB in these cultures. For example, Kwan et al. (1997) found that social relationship harmony (relative to self-esteem) was more strongly related to global life satisfaction in Hong Kong Chinese than in Americans. Similarly, Kang, Shaver, Sue, Min, and Jing (2003) reported that enjoying quality social relationships contributed to global life satisfaction among Chinese and Koreans but not among European Americans.

The Present Research

The reviewed studies typically examined culture and SWB by comparing various national groups. Two assumptions underlie this research approach. First, culture is generally homogeneous in a national population and bounded by national boundaries. Second, behavior reflects some rather static elements of a culture (e.g., values, self-construal), implying that cultural influence on people's SWB judgment is relatively consistent across situations.

Individuals differ in the extent to which they internalize cultural ideas (Chirkov, Ryan, & Willness, 2005). With globalization, cultural boundaries become less clear-cut. Transmission of cultural ideas is no longer limited by national boundaries (Hermans & Kempen, 1998). Consequently, biculturals or even multiculturals emerge (Arnett, 2002). Within these individuals' minds, ideas from multiple cultures, some of which may even conflict, coexist. Therefore, there is a need to examine how culture dynamically exerts its influence on these individuals' psychology (e.g., Hermans & Kempen, 1998; Kitayama, 2002; Oyserman & Lee, 2008). The present research aimed at examining the SWB judgment processes of the emerging bicultural populations as well as capturing the dynamicity of cultural influence on SWB judgment. To achieve these aims, the present research adopted the dynamic constructivist approach (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000), which argues that behaviors should be guided by the domain-specific cultural theory that is salient or activated in a particular situation.

The central argument in the present research is that bicultural people's SWB judgment is dynamically constructed: Within the same individuals, what predicts SWB depends on the salient cultural SWB theory (see also Tov & Diener, 2007). Earlier studies have revealed that Chinese hold a more socially oriented theory of SWB, while Americans' theory is more individual-oriented (e.g., Lu & Gilmour, 2006). It was therefore hypothesized that when Chinese ideas are activated, people's SWB judgment is more contingent on their satisfaction with relationship-related life domains, and less on satisfaction with self-related domains, compared to when American ideas are activated. Two studies with different cultural idea activation procedures and SWB measures were conducted to test this hypothesis.

It is believed that the present research contributes to the existing understanding of culture and SWB in three ways. First, the present research reveals how SWB judgment varies across cultural conditions within a group of individuals with exposure to more than one culture. Second, the present research documents the dynamicity of cultural influence on SWB judgment by examining how SWB judgment varies systematically along situational salience of cultural ideas. Third, as Tov and Diener (2007) highlighted, it is critical for researchers to control for the confounding effects of such problems as response styles and national economic conditions in cross-national comparisons of SWB judgment. By manipulating salience of cultural ideas experimentally, the present research allows for random assignment of participants to cultural conditions, thus constituting an internally valid test of the causal effect of culture on SWB judgment (Hong et al., 2000).

Study 1

Study 1 examined whether exposure to cultural icons affects how SWB judgment is constructed. Using cultural icon exposure to activate cultural ideas has been proven effective in previous studies (e.g., Hong et al., 2000; Wong & Hong, 2005). It was hypothesized that SWB of bicultural participants who have been exposed to Chinese icons (as opposed to American icons) is more contingent on their satisfaction on relationship-related life domains and less on their satisfaction on self-related life domains.

Method

There were 81 participants (29 males, 52 females, mean age = 20.36 years). All of them were college students in Hong Kong who were born in either Hong Kong or mainland China and had resided in Hong Kong for at least 10 years. Hong Kong is an international city with a large population of foreign expatriates. American culture in the forms of films or TV channels, for instance, is prevalent there. Furthermore, most Hong Kong Chinese college students began learning English in kindergarten, and English is the primary medium of instruction in most schools and universities. Hong Kong Chinese undergraduates thus have received much American cultural influence. As in previous studies (e.g., Hong et al., 2000; Wong & Hong, 2005), they are considered bicultural.

Participants firstly reported their satisfaction with four specific life domains (family, friendships, self-image, and freedom) on a 7-point scale (1 = *extremely dissatisfied*, 7 = *extremely satisfied*). Family and friendship were selected because they were commonly considered in past studies to be relationship-related life domains (Diener & Diener, 1995; Oishi et al., 1999; Park & Huebner, 2005). Self-image and freedom were selected because they were adopted in past studies to represent self-related domains (Oishi et al., 1999). This selection of life domains is also in line with the findings from research on cultural SWB theory (e.g., Lu & Gilmour, 2006). After reporting their domain satisfactions, participants reported their SWB with the 5-item Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) (e.g., "The conditions of my life are excellent.") on a 7-point scale. The internal reliability of the SWLS scale was high (alpha = .89).

In between the domain satisfaction measures and the SWLS, participants were exposed to seven pictures of either Chinese cultural icons (e.g., a Chinese dragon, Chinese calligraphy) or American cultural icons (e.g., the American flag, American football game). During the picture presentation, participants were asked questions related to the pictures (e.g., "What is the object in the picture?", "What are the ideas represented by the object in the picture?"). Participants were randomly assigned to the Chinese condition ($N = 43$) or the American condition ($N = 38$). All materials were in the Chinese language.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of life domain satisfactions and SWLS in the two experimental conditions. Data were subjected to a general linear model, with experimental condition and the four domain satisfactions as the independent variables and the SWLS as the dependent variable. Four two-way interactions between experimental condition and each domain satisfaction were also added into the model.

The model revealed a significant main effect of family satisfaction, $F(1, 71) = 18.96$, $p < .001$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .21$, and that of self-image satisfaction, $F(1, 71) = 14.01$, $p < .001$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .17$. The remaining main effects were not significant. More important, all interactions were significant or marginally significant, $F(1, 71) = 4.04$, $p < .05$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .05$, for family satisfaction, $F(1, 71) = 3.01$, $p = .08$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .04$, for friendship satisfaction, $F(1, 71) = 3.27$, $p = .07$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .04$, for self-image satisfaction, and $F(1, 71) = 4.84$, $p < .05$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .06$, for freedom satisfaction.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Life Domain Satisfactions and Subjective Well-Being in Study 1 and Study 2

| | Study 1 | | | | Study 2 | | | |
| | Chinese Icons | | American Icons | | Chinese Language | | English Language | |
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Family	5.28	1.37	5.00	1.56	5.40	1.27	5.28	1.38
Friendship	5.44	1.16	5.47	0.92	5.33	1.04	5.38	0.95
Self-image	4.58	1.07	4.89	1.13	4.60	1.05	4.48	1.02
Freedom	5.37	1.29	5.32	1.14	5.04	1.40	4.98	1.17
SWLS/SHS	4.29	1.10	4.23	1.11	4.32	1.19	4.32	1.13

Note. SWLS = Satisfaction With Life Scale; SHS = Subjective Happiness Scale.

To explicate these significant interactions, the simple slope between each domain satisfaction and the SWLS was estimated for each experimental condition. Figure 1 plots these estimates. First, family satisfaction was significantly positively associated with the SWLS in both the Chinese condition (β = .58, p < .001) and the American condition (β = .24, p < .05), but such association was stronger in the former than the latter. Second, friendship satisfaction was positively, though nonsignificantly, associated with the SWLS in the Chinese condition (β = .17, p = .15), but such association was nonsignificantly negative in the American condition (β = -.15, p = .26). Third, self-image satisfaction was significantly positively associated with the SWLS in the American condition (β = .55, p < .001), but such association was not significant in the Chinese condition (β = .18, p = .21). Last, freedom satisfaction was significantly positively associated with the SWLS in the American condition (β = .31, p < .05), but such association was nonsignificantly negative in the Chinese condition (β = -.07, p = .61).

These findings support the hypothesis. When Chinese ideas (as opposed to American ideas) were salient, participants' SWB judgment was more contingent on their satisfaction with relationship-related life domains and less on their satisfaction with self-related ones.

Study 2

Study 2 was a conceptual replication of Study 1. To check the robustness of the findings, two changes were made. The first change concerned the SWB measure. SWB comprises both a cognitive component (satisfaction with life) and an affective component (pleasantness of one's mood) (Diener, 1994). Most existing measures of SWB assess either component only. For instance, the SWLS used in Study 1 measures the cognitive component only. Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999) argued that there is a need for a broader, more molar measure of SWB. They thus developed the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS), which captures "a global, subjective assessment of whether one is a happy or an unhappy person" rather than only a single component of SWB (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999, p. 139; see also Swami et al., 2009). Accordingly, the SHS was adopted as an alternative operationalization of SWB in Study 2. The second change in Study 2 concerned the cultural idea activation procedures. Questionnaire language was used as the activation agent. Participants completed all measures in either the Chinese or English language. It was assumed that English language activates American ideas, whereas Chinese language activates Chinese ideas (Hong et al., 2000). Past studies (e.g., Ross, Xun, & Wilson, 2002) have evidenced the validity of this procedure.
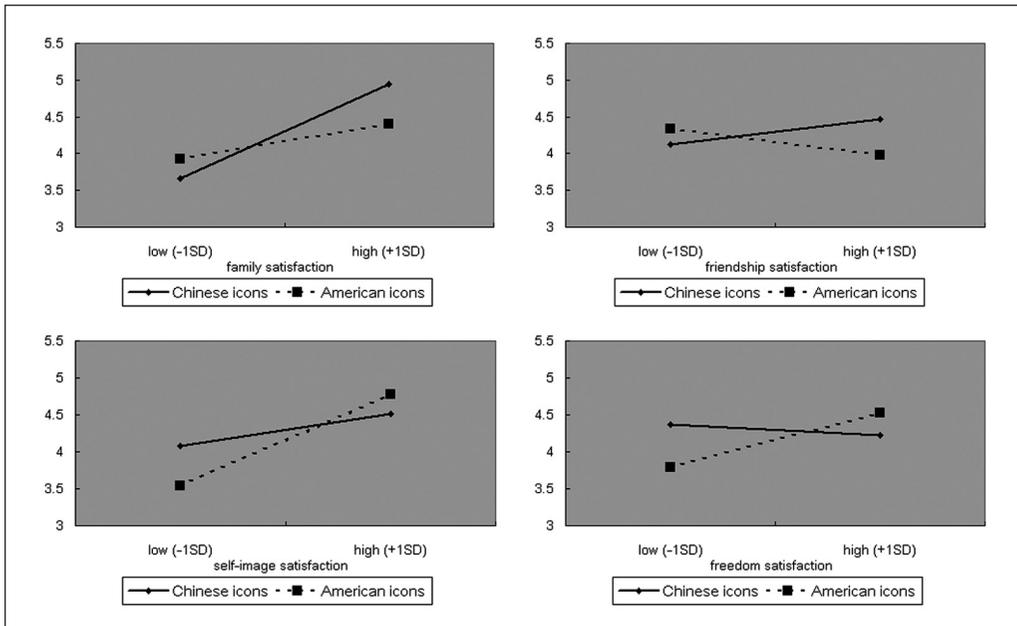
Figure 1. Interactions Between Experimental Condition and Life Domain Satisfaction (Family, Friendship, Self-Image, and Freedom) in Study 1

There is also a theoretical reason why language was used as the activation agent. Past studies have examined if language affects mean levels of SWB. For example, Belgians, Swiss, and Canadians speaking different languages reported similar mean levels of SWB when completing the same measure in different languages (Blishen & Atkinson, 1980; Inglehart, 1977; cf., Diener, 1994). This research, however, has missed out on the possibility that language can prime certain cultural ideas and thus affects the correlates of SWB (instead of mean levels of SWB). Study 2 was therefore an opportunity to examine this possibility. It also echoes the call for comparison of relationships instead of means across cultures (Matsumoto & Yoo, 2006).

Method

There were 98 participants (64 males, 34 females, mean age = 20.26 years). As in Study 1, all of them were college students in Hong Kong, born in Hong Kong or mainland China, and had resided in Hong Kong for at least 10 years.

Participants were randomly assigned to the Chinese condition ($N = 45$), completing all measures in Chinese, or the American condition ($N = 52$), completing them in English. Participants first completed the domain satisfaction measures used in Study 1. They then completed the 4-item SHS (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) (e.g., "Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself less happy/more happy."). All materials were subjected to the standard translation and back-translation procedures. The first author translated the English materials into Chinese. An independent person who was bilingual and proficient in both Chinese and English back-translated the Chinese version into English. Linguistic equivalence of translation was examined and assured. The internal reliability of the SHS was comparably high in both languages (alpha = .85 in Chinese and .89 in English).
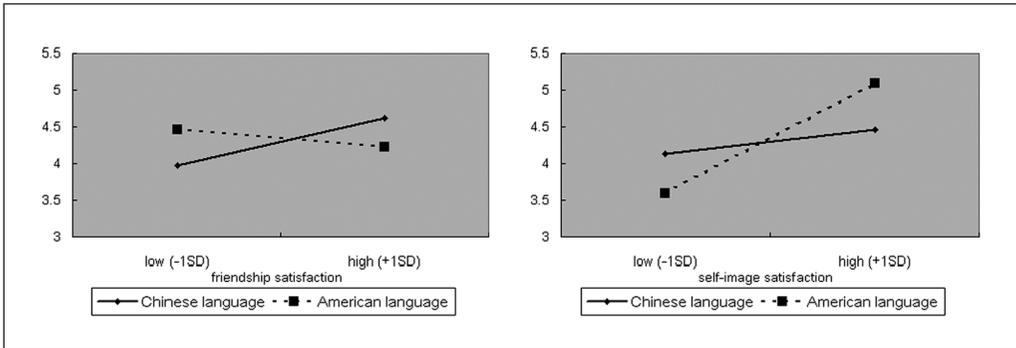
Figure 2. Interactions Between Experimental Condition and Life Domain Satisfaction
(Friendship, Self-Image) in Study 2

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of life domain satisfactions and SHS in the two experimental conditions. Data were subjected to a general linear model, with experimental condition and the four domain satisfactions as the independent variables and the SHS as the dependent variable. Four two-way interactions between experimental condition and each domain satisfaction were also added into the model.

The model revealed a significant main effect of self-image satisfaction, $F(1, 87) = 13.36$, $p < .001$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .13$. The remaining main effects were not significant. More important, two of the four interactions were significant, $F(1, 87) = 3.66$, $p = .05$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .04$, for friendship satisfaction, and $F(1, 87) = 5.48$, $p < .05$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .06$, for self-image satisfaction.

To explicate these significant interactions, the simple slope between each domain satisfaction and the SHS was estimated for each experimental condition. Figure 2 plots these estimates. First, friendship satisfaction was significantly positively associated with the SHS in the Chinese condition ($\beta = .29$, $p < .05$), but such association was nonsignificantly negative in the American condition ($\beta = -.10$, $p = .47$). Second, self-image satisfaction was significantly positively associated with the SHS in the American condition ($\beta = .65$, $p < .001$), but such association was not significant in the Chinese condition ($\beta = .14$, $p = .36$).

The findings provide some support to the hypothesis. Two out of the four predicted interaction effects were significant. However, the hypothesized effect was seemingly weaker in Study 2 than in Study 1: The interactions concerning family satisfaction and freedom satisfaction were not significant. There are a few post hoc explanations for this. First, it is possible that generally language is a weaker cultural idea activation agent, as evidenced in a meta-analysis by Oyserman and Lee (2008). Second, because domain satisfactions are in themselves cognitive (Diener, 1994), it is conceivable that they are more closely related to the SWLS (which measures a cognitive component of SWB) than to the SHS (which is a global assessment of SWB). Third, the domain satisfaction measures and the SWLS share a similar evaluation target; both concern one's life or a specific aspect of it. On the contrary, the evaluation target in the SHS is the self as a person. These possibilities may have rendered Study 2 a less powerful test of the hypothesis.

General Discussion

Results from the two studies reported provide support to the dynamic constructivist view of culture and SWB: Biculturals construct their SWB judgment based on the situationally salient

cultural theory. When Chinese ideas (as opposed to American ideas) are salient, biculturals' SWB judgment is more contingent on their satisfaction with relationship-related domains and less on their satisfaction with self-related domains.

As discussed, the present research contributes to the existing understanding of culture and SWB in three ways. First, because culture is no longer geographically bounded, there are increasingly more bicultural or multicultural individuals. The present research systematically examines the SWB judgment processes of these individuals. Second, the present research captures the dynamicity of cultural influence on people's SWB judgment. In particular, it highlights that cultural influence on SWB judgment can vary along situational salience of cultural ideas. Third, the experimental nature of the present research provides an internally valid test of the causal effect of culture on SWB judgment.

Implications

Past research has identified the bottom-up and the top-down views of SWB judgment (Diener, 1984). The former suggests that people judge their SWB based on their aggregate evaluation of various life domains, whereas the latter argues that people have a global positive propensity to experience things, which colors their evaluation of specific life domains. The experimental results here imply that people judge their SWB with reference to their evaluation of various specific life domains, the relative importance of which shifts across situations. This is more in line with the bottom-up view.

The results reported here also suggest that subtle contextual cues such as the presence of culture-laden symbols may affect how respondents construct their SWB judgment. SWB researchers should therefore be cautious of their research procedures, particularly when their respondents are bicultural or multicultural.

Past studies concerning language effect on SWB mainly focused on comparing mean levels of SWB across questionnaire languages. These studies have revealed a null effect of language (Diener, 1994). A similar finding was found in Study 2 here. As reported, mean levels of subjective happiness did not differ across the two questionnaire languages. Also, additional analyses revealed that mean levels of domain satisfactions did not differ across the languages. However, as identified earlier, the effect of language on correlates of SWB have largely been overlooked in these past studies. Study 2 in the present research thus fills this void by revealing that language does affect the correlates of SWB and the construction of SWB judgment. This study alerts SWB researchers to the subtle and intricate effect of questionnaire language on SWB judgment. It also echoes the call for comparisons of relationships among variables across cultures (Matsumoto & Yoo, 2006).

Limitations

In the present studies, it is argued that cultural icons or language activates domain-specific cultural theories of SWB (e.g., Lu & Gilmour, 2006), which in turn affect people's SWB judgment. However, it is possible that the experimental procedures actually activated domain-general value orientation or self-construal. Future studies should disentangle these possibilities by including measures of cultural SWB theory, value orientation, and self-construal and directly examining their mediating roles.

As an extension, researchers may examine whether directly activating cultural theories of SWB, value orientation, or self-construal affects SWB judgment. A recent study provided initial evidence. Suh et al. (2008) found that transient salience of self-construal affects the extent to which SWB is based on emotion experience and social appraisal. Studies like this can add to our understanding that people's SWB judgment is dynamically constructed along salience of cultural ideas.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Bios

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