

Comparing the Level of Positive Tendency in a Life Satisfaction Evaluation between Chinese and Western People

Shih-jung Lee · Chia-huei Wu

Accepted: 27 November 2007 / Published online: 21 December 2007
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2007

Abstract We demonstrate that people from Chinese cultural backgrounds have a smaller positive tendency in life evaluation compared to people in typical Western cultures. Participants first described their imagined best and worst life and then rated their current life on scale anchored by those imaginings (Mellor et al. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology Theory and Practice*, 2, 263–278, 1999), with scores above 50 indicating the strength of positive tendency. We compare responses from 82 Taiwanese students to data from the 22 Australian students in Mellor et al.'s (*International Journal of Social Research Methodology Theory and Practice*, 2, 263–278, 1999) study. Results of independent t tests support the hypothesis that culturally Chinese subjects have a lower positive tendency (65.32%SM) than Australian participants (76.12%SM) in life satisfaction evaluation.

Keywords Positive tendency · Culture · Subjective well-being

1 Introduction

Cultural differences in subjective well-being (SWB) are well-documented in the scientific literature. Chinese people often have lower SWB scores than people from Western cultures, no matter what measures of SWB are used (e.g., Diener and Diener 1995; Diener et al. 1995; Lee and Seligman 1997).

Shih-jung Lee and Chia-huei Wu have made equal contributions to this study.

S.-j. Lee
Department of Psychology, National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan, ROC

C.-h. Wu (✉)
Institute of Business and Management, National Chiao Tung University, 4F, No.147, Sec. 1, Xinguang Rd., Wenshan District, Taipei city, 116, Taiwan, ROC
e-mail: b88207071@ntu.edu.tw

Similar findings are also evident on the %SM (percent of scale maximum) indicator proposed by Cummins (1995). The %SM is the proportion of a score to the maximum value on its scale, which allows for the conversion of any Likert-scale score into a common metric from 0 to 100%. The equation for calculating %SM is $(\text{observed scale value} - 1) \times 100 / (\text{maximum scale value} - 1)$. For example, 3 points on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 to 5 would have a corresponding 50%SM. Cummins (1995) found a $75 \pm 2.5\%$ SM population mean life satisfaction score for the Western nations of Australia, Canada, Britain, Norway, and the USA. Later, Cummins (1998) estimated that the mean international level of life satisfaction for 45 different nations was 70.0%SM. However, when we calculated the %SM statistic for global life satisfaction (single item) from the Taiwan Social Change Survey data, collected in 1985 (Yang and Chiu 1993) and 2001 (Chang and Fu 2002), the population standard was below 50%SM: 44.8%SM in 1985 ($n = 4,200$) and 44.7%SM in 2001 ($n = 2,042$). The %SM statistics for life satisfaction in 10 domains on this survey were much lower than the Western and international standard found by Cummins (1985, 1993), ranging from 44.8 to 75.0%SM (mean = 62.27%SM; the 10 domains were health, parent-child relationship, marital relationship, finance, work, education, house condition, relations with neighbors, leisure, and relations with relatives). These findings suggest that the Chinese have lower SWB scores than Westerners.

Why might this be? One explanation may be due to the dialectical thinking style common in Chinese culture. According to Peng and Nisbett (1999), dialectical thinking has three important tenets: (1) that reality is a dynamic and flexible process (principle of change, *Bian Yi Lu*); (2) that reality is full of contradictions (principle of contradiction, *Mao Dun Lu*); and (3) that nothing is isolated and independent, but everything is connected (principle of relationship or holism, *Zheng He Lu*). Compared to Americans, Chinese people prefer dialectical proverbs that contain contradictions and dialectical resolutions to social conflicts; they are also more likely to moderately accept two apparently contradictory propositions (Peng and Nisbett 1999). This thinking style is fundamentally different from the formal logic more often utilized by European-Americans, which polarizes contradictory perspectives in an effort to determine which fact or position is correct.

Chinese people also think dialectically when defining SWB. For example, a Chinese proverb states that "Happiness is dependent on unhappiness, while unhappiness is hidden in happiness" (Lu 1998). This mindset is rooted in the ancient Yin-Yang philosophy, which views everything as a dynamic process of change between good and bad, happiness and misery, well-being and ill-being (Lu and Gilmour 2004). Unsatisfied or negative feelings therefore affect not only one's present, superficial state of ill-being, but can also reflect a positive state of well-being from another perspective. This way of thinking is illustrated by the following well-known story from "Huai Nan Zi" (Book of the Prince of Huai Nan, 淮南子)

There was an old man named Sai Wong who lived with his only son. One day, a servant reported to the old man, "A horse is missing! It must have gone into the neighboring state." His friends felt sorry for him and hoped he would not be too upset about the news, but the old man said, "Who knows! The loss may bring us good fortune!" Several months later, the missing horse returned with a fine horse from the neighboring state. All friends congratulated the old man. But the old man said, "Who knows! This may bring us ill fortune!" One day, when the old man's son was riding the fine horse, he accidentally fell off the horse and broke his leg. Many friends came to comfort the old man, but the old man said, "Who knows! This may bring us good

fortune after all!” A year later, when the neighboring state began a large-scale invasion, all the young men were drafted to fight the invaders. But, most of them got killed on the battlefield. Yet Sai Wong’s son survived the war because he did not have to join the army due to his broken leg.

This story aims to tell people not to be sad when bad things occur and not to be happy when good things happen, because both blessings and misfortunes can be their opposite in disguise. Not only is this an ancient story in Chinese literature, but the idiom derived from this story (塞翁失馬, 焉知非福) is commonly used in Chinese daily life: It contributes to a fundamental way of assessing SWB in Chinese culture. This dialectical view of SWB implies that a state of unsatisfied feeling or negative affect doesn’t necessarily represent ill-being in Chinese culture.

Moreover, the characteristic of self-cultivation in the Confucian tradition also emphasize the power of negative states in Chinese culture. A typical statement can be found in the book of Mencius (孟子).

Mencius said, “When Heaven is about to confer a great office on any man, it first exercises his mind with suffering, and his sinews and bones with toil. It exposes his body to hunger, and subjects him to extreme poverty. It confounds his undertakings, by all these methods it stimulates his mind, hardens his nature, and supplies his incompetencies.

Men for the most part err, and are afterward able to reform. They are distressed in mind and perplexed in their thoughts, and then they arise to vigorous reformation. When things have been evidenced in men’s looks, and set forth in their words, then they understand them. If a prince have not about his court families attached to the laws and worthy counselors, and if abroad there are not hostile states or other external calamities, his kingdom will generally come to ruin. From these things we see how life springs from sorrow and calamity, and death from ease and pleasure (translated by Legge 1970).

In this view, positive states can be the root of misfortune and negative states can be an opportunity for self-cultivation: the state of unsatisfied feelings or negative affect does not necessarily represent ill-being. Although this statement is in the book of Mencius, a classical book in Chinese philosophy, it is not unfamiliar to Chinese people, especially for Taiwan people who read it in junior high school textbooks.

Spencer-Rodgers et al. (2004) recently proposed that Chinese people have lower reported SWB than Westerners because of this dialectical thinking style. They found that for Euro-American, Asian-American, and Mainland Chinese subjects, naive dialecticism is negatively correlated with self-esteem and life satisfaction, and is positively correlated with depression, anxiety and indicators for self evaluative ambivalence. They revealed that naive dialecticism does lead to a lower SWB and an ambivalent attitude toward the self. Their results confirmed the cultural differences in dialecticism and SWB: Mainland Chinese have lower scores on self-esteem and life satisfaction, as well as higher scores on naive dialecticism, depression, anxiety and indicators for self evaluative ambivalence than do Euro-American subjects. A mediation analysis further revealed that the lower self-esteem in Chinese people results from their higher naive dialecticism. In an additional study, they used a dialectical prime to induce naive dialecticism for Euro-American and Mainland Chinese. Compared to the control group, Chinese in the dialectical-prime condition had higher scores on dialecticism and self-evaluative ambivalence and lower scores

on self-esteem and life satisfaction. Although the priming effects were in the same direction, they were not significant among European Americans. These studies indicate that naive dialecticism is an important factor contributing to lower SWB scores for Chinese people.

Although Spencer-Rodgers et al. (2004) found a negative relationship between dialecticism and SWB, they did not directly examine the characteristics that underlie the effects of dialecticism. It may be that Chinese people may not have an outlook that is as strongly positive as that of Westerners, since Chinese culture emphasizes that positive events can also have negative aspects. The lower Chinese SWB scores may therefore result from a tendency to be more realistic than Western people. For example, Lee and Seligman (1997) found that Mainland Chinese were less optimistic than Chinese Americans, who were less optimistic than White Americans. Chinese participants value low-arousal positive affect (e.g., calm) more than do European American participants, who value high-arousal positive affect (e.g., excitement) more (Tsai et al. 2006). Chinese people also tend to moderate their positive emotions with negative emotions (e.g., citing both happiness and fear of being too happy), whereas European Americans tend to report positive emotions to the exclusion of negative emotions (Mesquita and Leu 2007). These findings suggest that Westerners tend to maximize positive feelings and minimize negative feelings—resulting in a style of optimism or positivity—while Chinese people tend to moderate both positive and negative emotions, resulting in a style of dialecticism. This reasoning predicts a smaller positive tendency in life evaluation for Chinese people when compared to Westerners.

The purpose of our study is to examine whether Chinese people really do have smaller positive tendency in life evaluation. We test this hypothesis using Mellor et al.'s (1999) research method and results. Mellor et al. (1999) asked participants to imagine both a worst life and a best life for themselves; they were then asked to imagine a thermometer between the two poles (worst and best life) they had created and to report their current life satisfaction on the thermometer. Because participants were asked to imagine their best and worst possible lives just before their evaluations for their current life, accordingly, scores above 50 indicate the strength of positive tendency because 50 is the middle point and scores above 50 represented that participants think their current lives are closer to their imagined best life. In Mellor et al.'s (1999) study, the mean score for 22 university students in Australia was 76%SM—close to the Western standard of 75%SM and higher than the international standard of 70.0%SM found by Cummins (1995, 1998). In this study we hypothesize that because of their dialectical thinking style, Chinese people should have a significantly lower %SM compared to the Australian subjects. We recruited university students in Taiwan to evaluate their current lives with respect to their imagined best and worst life outcomes, and then compared their answers to those of the 22 Australian university students in Mellor et al.'s (1999) study.

2 Method

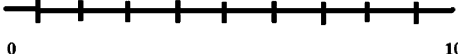
2.1 Participants

Participants were 82 students enrolled in introductory psychology courses at National Taiwan University (NTU). They received school credit for participating, and ranged in age from 18 to 22 years old (mean age = 19.88, SD = 1.07); 33 (40%) were male.

Fig. 1 Format of the answer sheet from imagination task to evaluation task

(1) Please write down your best and worst life in the following columns.

The worst life	The best life



(2) Please indicate your current life on the scale with a score between 0 (the worst life) to 100 (the best life) _____.

2.2 Procedure

Participants were given a booklet. In the first section, they were instructed to imagine their best possible and worst possible lives from the set of realistic possibilities, and asked to describe each in writing. Then the participants saw a visible thermometer with temperatures ranging from 0 to 100, where 0 represented their imagined worst life and 100 represented their imagined best life. They were asked to rate their satisfaction with current life on this thermometer. Figure 1 presents the format of the answer sheet from imagination task and the evaluation task. Participants also completed several questionnaires (unrelated to this study), and returned all questionnaires to the researchers within 30 min.

3 Results

Participants' mean rating for their current life was 65.32 (range = 5–99; SD = 17.37) on a 0–100 scale. An independent *t*-test reveals a significant difference in this measure between our sample and the Australian students from Mellor et al. (1999), suggesting that culturally Chinese people have a weaker positive tendency in life evaluation (see Table 1).

4 Discussion

Many studies have observed a difference in SWB between people from Chinese and Western cultural backgrounds. We demonstrate that the lower SWB in culturally Chinese people is related to their smaller degree of positive tendency, which is associated with their naïve dialectical thinking style. People from a Chinese cultural background tend to always consider both the positive and negative sides of the world, believing that happiness always comes with possible unhappiness and vice versa (Peng and Nisbett 1999). Because of this tendency, they tend not to maximize positive feeling; this results in a lower positive tendency than Westerners, who have an optimistic style that maximizes positive feelings and minimizes negative feelings.

The main purpose of this study is to demonstrate that people from a Chinese cultural background (Taiwanese) have a smaller positive tendency compared to people from a Western cultural background (Australians). We adopted Mellor et al.'s (1999) research method, in which participants' imagined best and worst lives anchor the ends of a scale on

Table 1 Independent *t*-test between two samples on the current life evaluation

Source	Nation	<i>N</i>	Mean	SD	<i>t</i> (<i>df</i> = 102)	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Mellor et al. (1999)	Australia	22	76.12	14.19	2.68, <i>p</i> < .01	0.53
The current study	Taiwan	82	65.32	17.37		

Note: Variances were equal for these two samples

which they then rate their current life. Our findings support our hypothesis: Taiwanese subjects did report a lower positive tendency (65.32%SM) than the Australian participants (76.12%SM) in Mellor et al.'s (1999) experiment. In order to cross-validate and establish the generalizability of these results, further investigations are necessary with larger samples, as well as people from different areas within Western culture and Chinese culture (e.g., Americans versus Mainland Chinese).

But, it can be found that the range of the mean scores for Chinese is quite large, from 5 to 99. It would be suggested that Chinese people might also both maximize negative and positive feelings (but positive side is stronger than negative side) and then it turned out a lower mean score than Western's. However, this explanation cannot be supported. First, there are individual differences within a culture. In other words, it is possible for an individual with a score of 5 or 99 in Chinese culture. Observing those people with extreme score is not sufficient to suggest that Chinese might also both maximize negative and positive feelings. In addition, the comparison here is at culture level; hence, the mean difference between groups is the major concern in this study. That is, although there are some extreme individual differences (5 vs. 99) for Chinese people, the mean performance is the core concern here. And because the distribution of the current life score is unimodal, mean score is appropriate to represent a group characteristic. Finally and most importantly, the explanation that Chinese people might also both maximize negative and positive feelings is not consistent with previous findings on cultural differences in emotions reported by Tsai et al. (2006) and Mesquita and Leu (2007). Their results both showed that Chinese people moderate both positive and negative emotions, not maximize both of them. Therefore, the explanation that Chinese people might also both maximize negative and positive feelings cannot be supported.

The ideas and results in this study suggest future research topics on well-being in the Chinese. According to the dialectical view of SWB, people with a Chinese cultural background focus their attention on both positive and negative emotions, which may lead them to favor a peaceful life with low fluctuation between positives and negatives (Mesquita and Leu 2007; Tsai et al. 2006). This tendency may result in a more stable response for measures of subjective feelings and life evaluation. Researchers studying the SWB in people with Chinese cultural backgrounds should therefore (1) take both positive and negative emotions into account; (2) consider the stability of indicators of SWB; and (3) figure out the meaning and experiences contributing to a peaceful life. The role of positive and negative affect has been investigated (e.g., Mesquita and Leu 2007; Tsai et al. 2006), but the stability of SWB and the meaning of a peaceful life in Chinese cultural tradition are rarely studied. It is unclear whether the Chinese tend to have a more stable SWB and a higher preference for a peaceful life than Westerners. This is worth investigating not only to increase our understanding of SWB in the Chinese, but also for extending SWB research in an alternate direction. The dialectical view of SWB in people from a Chinese cultural background may indicate another way of pursuing SWB, distinct from the Western method of seeking positive states and feelings. In addition, Chinese sometimes showed slightly

negative tendency in life evaluation, such as the results obtained from Taiwan Social Change Survey data in 1985 (44.8%SM; Yang and Chiu 1993) and 2001 (44.7%SM; Chang and Fu 2002). In the future, this negative tendency can also be investigated to see when and how the negative tendency presents, which may also facilitate us to explain the lower positive tendency of Chinese people.

References

- Chang, Y. H., & Fu, Y. C. (2002). *Report of Taiwan social change survey IV-II (in Chinese)*. Taiwan: Academia Sinica.
- Cummins, R. A. (1995). On the trail of the gold standard for subjective well-being. *Social Indicators Research*, 35, 179–200.
- Cummins, R. A. (1998). The second approximation to an international standard for life satisfaction. *Social Indicators Research*, 43, 307–334.
- Diener, E., & Diener, M. (1995). Cross-cultural correlates of life satisfaction and self-esteem. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68, 653–663.
- Diener, E., Suh, E., Smith, H., & Shao, L. (1995). National differences in reported subjective well-being: Why do they occur? *Social Indicators Research*, 34, 7–32.
- Lee, Y., & Seligman, M. E. (1997). Are Americans more optimistic than the Chinese? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 23, 32–40.
- Legge, J. (1970). *The works of Mencius* (trans.) New York: Dover Publications.
- Lu, L. (1998). The meaning, measure, and correlates of happiness among Chinese people. *Proceedings of the National Science Council: Part C*, 8, 115–137.
- Lu, L., & Gilmour R. (2004). Culture and conceptions of happiness: Individual oriented and social oriented SWB. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 5, 269–291.
- Mellor D., Cummins R. A., Loquet C. (1999). The gold standard for life satisfaction: Confirmation and elaboration using an imaginary scale and qualitative interview. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology Theory and Practice*, 2, 263–278.
- Mesquita, B., & Leu, J. (2007). The cultural psychology of emotions. In S. Kitayama & D. Cohen (Eds.), *Handbook of cultural psychology* (pp. 734–759). New York: Guilford Press.
- Peng, K., & Nisbett, R. E. (1999). Culture, dialectics, and reasoning about contradiction. *American Psychologist*, 54, 741–754.
- Spencer-Rodgers, J., Peng, K., Wang, L., & Hou, Y. (2004). Dialectical self-esteem and East–West differences in psychological well-being. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30, 1416–1432.
- Tsai, J. L., Knutson B., & Fung H. H. (2006). Cultural variation in affect valuation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90, 288–307.
- Yang, K. S., & Chiu, H. Y. (1993). *Report of Taiwan social change survey I (in Chinese)*. Academia Sinica: Taiwan.