

# FROM CULTURE TO PRIMING CONDITIONS

## Self-Construal Influences on Life Satisfaction Judgments

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Existing cross-cultural research often assumes that the independent versus interdependent self-construal process leads to different cultural behaviors, although few studies directly test this link. Extending from prior cross-cultural findings, two studies were conducted to explicitly test whether self-construal is linked with the differential use of emotions versus social information in judgments of life satisfaction. Study 1 confirmed the prediction that even among Americans, those who view themselves in interdependent terms (allocentrics) evaluate their life satisfaction in a more collectivistic manner (strong reliance on social appraisal) than those who view themselves in independent terms (idiocentrics). Study 2 replicated these findings in two cultural settings (United States and Korea) by using experimental primes of independent versus relational self-construal. Results strongly suggest that differences in self-construal processes underlie cross-cultural differences in life satisfaction judgments.

**Keywords:** self-construal; culture; priming; life satisfaction; well-being

**Psychological research** during the past two decades has revealed cultural differences across a wide range of domains. Due to this research effort, most psychologists are now keenly aware that the way people in different cultures think, feel, and act are, in varying degrees, different. Nevertheless, there are still very few research fields, if any, that can point out with precision the exact cause of the cultural difference observed in their research. This difficulty has to do with the fact that many of the existing studies have not clearly identified the precise cultural mechanism producing the outcomes, or when theoretically conceived, failed to directly measure the cultural variable in question (Matsumoto, 1999; Matsumoto & Yoo, 2006; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002).

In this article, we examine in more depth an interesting cross-cultural phenomenon that falls under such a category—cross-cultural differences in the bases of life satisfaction (Schimmack, Radhakrishnan, Oishi, Dzokoto, & Ahadi, 2002; Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998)—and provide tests of an empirically supported explanation for the differences. When people construct judgments about their overall life satisfaction, different cultural members place relative emphasis on different types of information. Whereas inner emotional experience (relative frequency of positive versus negative affect) is strongly predictive of overall life satisfaction in highly individualistic cultures (e.g., United States,

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Sweden), life satisfaction is better predicted by social norms (i.e., whether being personally satisfied is perceived as socially acceptable) in collectivistic societies, such as China or India. Such cultural difference emerged from two large sets of international data involving, in total, more than 60,000 respondents from 61 nations (Suh et al., 1998). Schimmack et al. (2002) drew an essentially identical conclusion from another set of international data.

Taking the findings from these three large independent data sets together, the conclusion that life satisfaction judgments are based more heavily on inner emotional experience in individualistic rather than in collectivistic culture is quite robust. However, the precise explanation for this cultural difference has not been documented. Although it was theorized that several defining characteristics of individualism and collectivism (e.g., emphasis on private experience versus relational concerns) played key roles in eliciting the cultural difference, the specific cultural variables were not explicitly measured in these studies.

In terms of Matsumoto and Yoo's (2006) recent distinction of types of cross-cultural research, the Suh et al. (1998) and Schimmack et al. (2002) studies exemplify the Phase III-level research wherein a potential mediator of cultural difference is conceptually identified but not directly measured. The next advancement, suggested by Matsumoto and Yoo, is to conduct a linkage study that attempts to empirically link the observed cultural phenomenon with a specific cultural element that is believed to produce the cultural difference. More specifically, two possible empirical approaches have been suggested. One route is to "unpack" the influence of culture by replacing culture as an unspecified variable by a more specific individual-level context variable (cf. Matsumoto & Kupperbusch, 2001) and examine whether this measure (e.g., social axioms; Leung et al., 2002) relates with the cultural phenomenon in the predicted direction. Another powerful strategy for demonstrating the linkage between variable X and cultural phenomenon Y is to conduct a priming study, wherein the mind-sets of cultural members are experimentally manipulated in accord with the researcher's theory (e.g., Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991). In line with these suggestions, in this study, we reexamine the life satisfaction judgment pattern observed between cultures at two different levels—at the individual difference level (Study 1) and also through an experimental manipulation (Study 2).

Among the various elements of culture (e.g., beliefs, values, cultural practices), we believe that the way the person defines himself or herself (self-construal) plays a crucial role in influencing the relative use of inner emotional versus more socially nuanced information in judgments of life satisfaction. The most heavily discussed self-construal dimension in reference to culture is the independent versus interdependent self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Although important insights have accrued from this framework, the present research is built on the assumption that multiple modes of self-construal exist among all individuals in all cultures (e.g., Brewer & Chen, 2007). Regardless of one's cultural background, all individuals are aware of the unique, personal, and highly independent aspects of self-identity as well as the self-aspects that acquire meaning in relation to others. Although cultures may "sample" (Triandis, 1989) the different aspects of the self to a different degree, all individuals think of themselves in individual, relational, and collective terms. Furthermore, salient contextual cues can temporarily modify self-construal styles, illustrating that the self-system is inherently multiple, flexible, and dynamic rather than singular, fixed, or static (e.g., Gardner et al., 1999; Hong, Benet-Martinez, Chiu, & Morris, 2003; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000).

In the present research, we seek direct empirical evidence for the claim that variation in self-construal is the proximal reason for why life satisfaction judgments are framed differently between cultures (Suh et al., 1998). Although all individuals construe themselves

in multiple ways, we are particularly interested in the case when either the individual or the relational self-aspect is relatively more salient than the other. We expect that when the fundamental separateness of the self from others is more accessible than the relational dimension, the person's attention will be directed to the private experiences that affirm his or her uniqueness and individuality (such as emotions). Hence, the "individualistic" life satisfaction judgment pattern—strong reliance on emotions—is expected to emerge in such a self-construal condition. On the other hand, when the relational aspects of the self are at the forefront of attention, we expected that people would go beyond their inner emotions and give considerable weight to social cues in evaluating their overall lives.

In sum, it is believed that the relative salience of the relational versus independent self is a major driving force behind the divergent life satisfaction judgment styles found cross-culturally by Suh et al. (1998) and Schimmack et al. (2002). If this is a valid idea, a parallel style of judgment pattern is expected to occur within a culture, at a chronic individual difference level (Study 1) and also at an experimental level, when either the independent or the relational self-aspects are primed (Study 2). The current predictions, if obtained, will lend strong empirical support for the claim that the self-construal process is strongly linked with the relative weight assigned to affect versus social information in life satisfaction judgments.

### STUDY 1: IDIOCENTRIC VERSUS ALLOCENTRIC INDIVIDUALS

Within a culture, individuals vary in the degree to which they define themselves as being separate from or connected with others (Kashima & Hardie, 2000; Matsumoto, Weissman, Preston, Brown, & Kupperbusch, 1997; Sato & McCann, 1998; Singelis, 1994). Triandis, Leung, Villareal, and Clack (1985) proposed the terms *idiocentrism* and *allocentrism* to refer to this individual difference dimension that roughly corresponds with the individualism/collectivism dimension at the cultural level. Triandis, Chan, Bhawuk, Iwao, & Sinha (1995) found that attributes such as dependence on others and sociability characterize allocentrics, whereas separation from groups, independence, and personal competence reflect the core tendencies of idiocentrics. Hence, research suggests that the relational aspects of self-view are salient to allocentric individuals, whereas the unique, independent dimensions of the self are salient to idiocentric individuals.

In this study, we measured how frequently the participants experienced various emotions (affect) as well as their beliefs about how much significant others might approve of their current life (social appraisal). We predicted that idiocentrics would base their life satisfaction prominently on their emotional feelings. Allocentrics, on the other hand, were expected to take a more divergent perspective, consider not only their emotions but also whether significant others approve of their lives.

#### PARTICIPANTS

To ensure a more clear interpretation of the results (to focus on the variation in self-view), we controlled the ethnic background of the participants (cf. Matsumoto & Kupperbusch, 2001). All 101 participants (81 women) in this study were European American college students. They were enrolled in an advanced course on personality and well-being and received course credit for participation. The majority of the students (96%) were 18 to 25 years old.

## MEASURES

*Allocentrism and idiocentrism.* To measure dispositional differences in allocentric and idiocentric tendencies, participants were asked to complete Singelis's (1994) Independent and Interdependent Self-Construal Scale. The independent subscale consists of 12 items that measure thoughts, feelings, and actions reflective of the separateness and uniqueness of the self (e.g., "I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects"). The interdependent subscale consists of 12 items that tap into the connectedness of the self with others (e.g., "I often have the feeling that my relationships with others are more important than my own accomplishments").

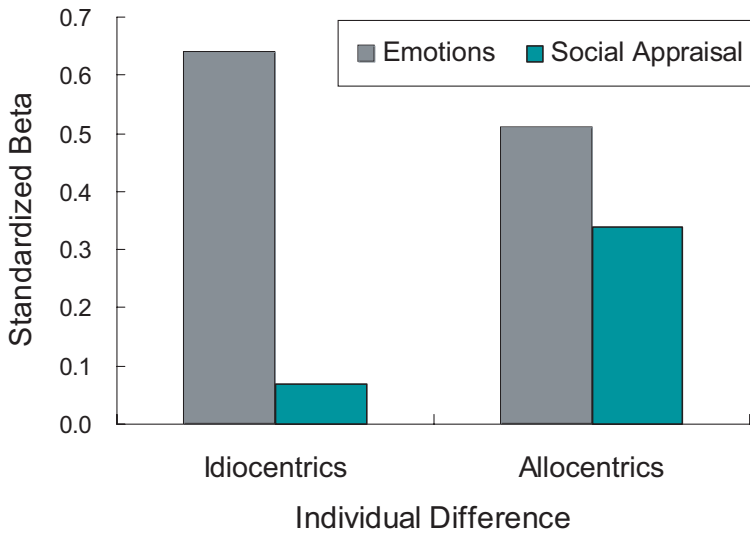
Although the idiocentric/allocentric tendencies were analyzed as a continuous individual difference variable, we also split the sample into two subgroups. A person was classified as an idiocentric ( $n = 59$ ) if his or her Independent score was higher than the Interdependent score. Conversely, participants who had higher Interdependent than Independent self-construal scores were classified as allocentrics ( $n = 42$ ). Five respondents who had identical scores on both subscales were dropped from the analyses. The reason for splitting the sample into two subgroups was simply to ease the comparison between the current outcomes with the previous cross-cultural findings (Schimmack et al., 2002; Suh et al., 1998).

*Life satisfaction.* Global life satisfaction was measured by the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), which is a five-item measure that asks respondents to rate their satisfaction with life. The response scale ranges from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7), yielding a possible total score ranging from 5 to 35. The alpha coefficient of the scale was .91 in the present sample. Further details about this measure are available in Pavot and Diener (1993).

*Emotional experience.* The emotional experience of the participants was assessed by asking how frequently they felt 8 pleasant emotions that represent two positive higher order affect categories (i.e., joy, love), as well as 16 unpleasant emotions belonging to four negative affect categories (i.e., fear, anger, sadness, and shame–guilt). Diener, Smith, and Fujita (1995) provide a detailed discussion of the theoretical background and the factor structure of these emotion categories.

Participants indicated how frequently they experienced each of the discrete emotions during the previous month on a 7-point scale ranging from *never* (1) to *always* (7). The scores of the eight emotions of the joy and love categories were averaged and used as a measure of pleasant affect. Similarly, scores of the fear, anger, sadness, and shame–guilt categories were averaged to yield an unpleasant affect score. The mean alpha of the two pleasant emotion categories was .83, and the mean alpha of the four unpleasant emotion categories was .88. A more concise measure of emotional experience was created by subtracting the unpleasant affect score from the pleasant affect score (i.e., affect balance). This affect balance score was used as the emotion score in the regression analyses.

*Social appraisal.* In an exploratory study, we asked college students to list the most significant persons in their lives. Virtually everyone mentioned his or her parents. Based on this finding, participants were asked to rate on a 7-point scale (*terrible* to *delighted*) how their father and mother would evaluate their lives. The two ratings (father, mother) were averaged to obtain a single social appraisal score.



**Figure 1: Relative Weight of Emotions and Social Appraisal in Predicting Life Satisfaction: Individual Difference**

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Within each subgroup, regression analysis was conducted to examine the relative weight of affect versus social appraisal in predicting life satisfaction. The standardized beta values of affect ( $\beta = .51$ ) and social appraisal ( $\beta = .34$ ) were both significant ( $p < .01$ ) in predicting the life satisfaction of allocentric participants ( $R^2 = .47$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In contrast, the life satisfaction of idiocentrics was predicted ( $R^2 = .43$ ,  $p < .001$ ) significantly by affect ( $\beta = .64$ ,  $p < .001$ ) but not by social appraisal ( $\beta = .07$ , *ns*). Figure 1 offers a visual summary of the standardized beta weights of the two predictors within each group. The current individual difference findings are strikingly similar to the patterns reported by Suh et al. (1998) at the cross-cultural level, between collectivistic and individualistic groups.

We further examined the data at a continuous individual difference level, conducting a regression analysis on the entire sample. For each individual, we obtained a single self-construal score by subtracting the person's Independent from his or her Interdependent self-construal score. We obtained a combined self-construal score for two reasons. First, conceptually, our focal interest was on the relative salience between the independent and the interdependent self-views within each individual, rather than on the absolute strength of each self-construal. Also important, the combined score preserved statistical power in the analyses of the individual difference result. In short, a higher score on this measure indicated greater salience of the Interdependent rather than the Independent self.

When the main effects were controlled for, the Self-Construal  $\times$  Social Appraisal interaction was significant ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $p = .01$ ), but the Self-Construal  $\times$  Affect interaction was not ( $\beta = -.09$ , *ns*). In other words, those who viewed themselves in highly relational terms were more likely to use social appraisal information in evaluating their lives. The use of affective cues, on the other hand, did not systematically vary across individuals. The result indicates that individual difference in self-construal predicted the degree to which social

(rather than affective) information is used in the life satisfaction judgments. This is an interesting finding that could not have been detected at a cultural level of analysis.

Overall, the current results are congruent with the prediction that the life satisfaction patterns at the individual difference level would resemble the findings at the cultural level (Suh et al., 1998). Also, in an unpublished study, we have replicated this phenomenon at an ethnic-group level between Asian Americans and European Americans (Suh & Diener, 2003). Collectively, these findings lend further credence to the idea that self-construal plays a pivotal role in weighing the affective versus social information in evaluating one's life. When the person's independence from others is central, how others view one's life seems to be of marginal concern. Attention in this case is directed primarily inward to the affective experiences. When the relational aspects of the self are salient, however, life satisfaction judgments are formed on a more balanced ground—on emotions as well as on social appraisal information. Whether the perceived social appraisal rating actually corresponds with the thoughts of others is an interesting question in itself (cf. Felson, 1993). The focal interest of this study, however, is more in the degree of attention people devote to the social appraisal than in accuracy of this information. What is found in this study is a positive association between the salience of the relational self and the degree of attention people pay to social appraisal in evaluating their lives.

The strongly converging pattern of results found across different conceptual levels (between cultures, between ethnic groups, individual difference) is very encouraging. Yet we conducted another study to overcome two limitations. First, thus far, all of the findings on this phenomenon are based on correlational data. The inherent limits of correlational data (e.g., third-variable problem, ambiguous causal direction) apply to these findings. In Study 2, we tested the causal link from self-construal to the use of emotion/social cues in a controlled laboratory setting. Another issue concerns the content of the self-construal scale used in this study. We believe that the degree to which the self is conceived as an independent, separate being or as a common, relational being leads to the present difference in life satisfaction judgment patterns. Recently, however, several articles (e.g., Brewer & Chen, 2007; Hardin, Leong, & Bhagwat, 2004; Levine et al., 2003) have indicated that besides the independent/relational self-representation dimension, the Singelis (1994) scale also includes factors (e.g., esteem for group, behavioral consistency, orientation toward groups) that may confound our current interpretation. Given this multidimensional nature of the Singelis scale, we explicitly manipulated independent versus interdependent self-construal using a priming paradigm in Study 2.

## STUDY 2: PRIMING EFFECTS

Despite relatively stable individual differences in the self-concept, the relational and the independent aspects of identity coexist in all individuals (e.g., Reid & Deaux, 1996; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). Furthermore, recent studies have demonstrated that situational cues can lead to "frame switching" between the different self-construal modes (Hong et al., 2000; Trafimow et al., 1991). Given the situational malleability of self-construal, would the findings of Study 1 replicate if the relational or the independent aspects were primed rather than simply measured? Would the consequences of the use of emotion/social information mirror those shaped by relatively stable factors, such as culture or personality?

In Study 2, we experimentally primed either the relational or the unique aspects of the self and examined its consequences on life satisfaction judgments. If self-construal indeed

holds the key in causing the divergent life satisfaction judgment patterns, logically, the previous satisfaction judgmental patterns should emerge once again. In addition to providing a conceptual replication of the earlier findings, the current study will provide data that can speak more directly about the causal direction between self-construal and information use. To verify the robustness of the priming effect, we conducted the experiment in two cultural settings—in the United States and also in Korea.

## PARTICIPANTS

The U.S. sample consisted of 77 students (37 women) enrolled in an introductory psychology course. The mean age of this American sample was 18.9, and the sample was predominantly White. In Korea, 137 college students (59 women) participated in this study for course credit. The mean age of this culturally homogeneous Korean sample was 20.5.

## MEASURES

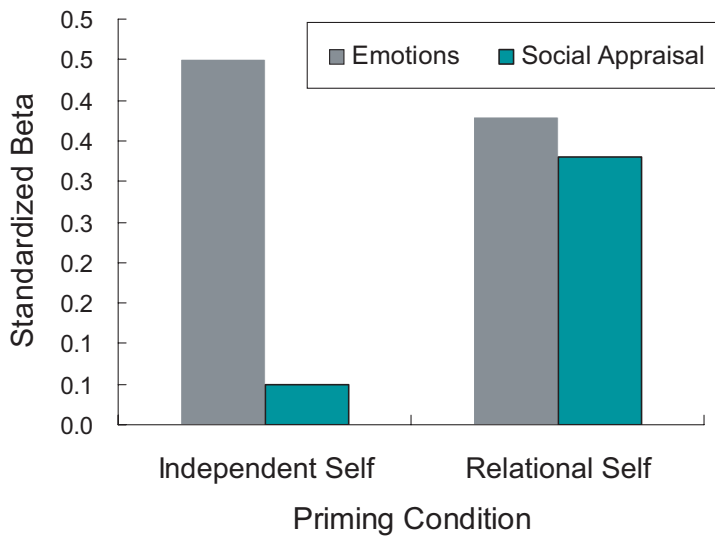
*Priming procedure.* Participants were randomly assigned to either the independent-self or the relational-self prime conditions developed by Trafimow et al. (1991) and validated in later studies (Trafimow & Finlay, 1996; Ybarra & Trafimow, 1998). Two forms of questionnaires were randomly distributed to the participants in both cultures. Those who received the independent-self form were asked, on the cover sheet, to “think of what makes you different from your family and friends” for 3 minutes. Those who received the relational-self form, on the other hand, were instructed to “think of what you have in common with your family and friends.” Except for this difference, the questionnaire was identical across the two conditions. In the United States, 37 participants received the independent-self prime questionnaire, and 40 students completed the relational-self prime form. In Korea, 69 and 68 participants were assigned, respectively, to the independent- and the relational-self conditions.

*Scales.* Measures of life satisfaction and affect balance were identical to those described in Study 1. In the United States, the alpha coefficient was .86 for the life satisfaction measure and .75 for positive affect as well as for negative affect. In Korea, the alphas were .76 for life satisfaction, .91 for positive affect, and .82 for negative affect. As in Study 1, an affect balance score was calculated by subtracting the negative affect mean from the positive affect mean. More information about the cross-cultural validity of the current well-being measures is available in Diener, Suh, Smith, & Shao (1995), Shao (1993), and Suh (1994).

To obtain a social appraisal measure, participants were first asked to list the three most important persons in their lives (see also Suh, 2002). Next, using a 7-point scale ranging from *terrible* (1) to *delighted* (7), the participants indicated how they think their overall life is evaluated by each of the three significant others they listed. The mean of these three ratings was used as the social appraisal score. Overall, the Americans ( $M = 5.84$ ,  $SD = .70$ ) believed that their lives were viewed more positively ( $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .051$ ) by significant others than did the Korean sample ( $M = 5.38$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A regression analysis was conducted separately for each cultural group. Among the U.S. participants, a striking difference was found between the priming conditions in the



**Figure 2: Relative Weight of Emotions and Social Appraisal in Predicting Life Satisfaction: Priming Effects Among Americans**

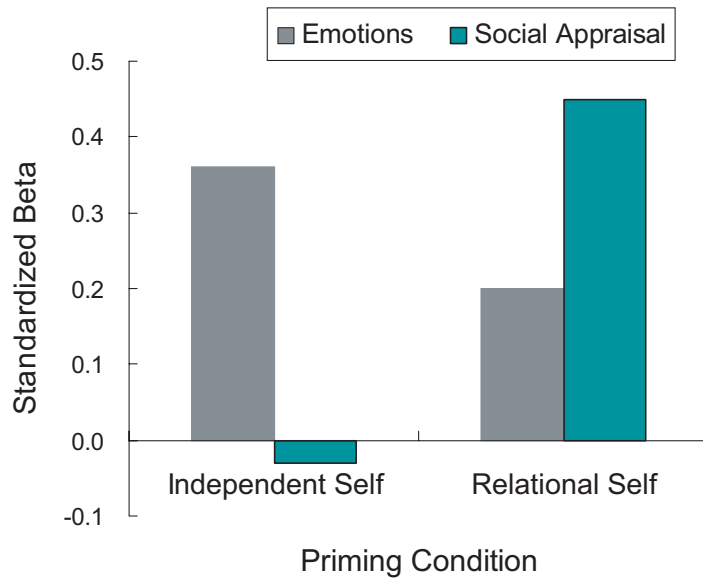
relative weight placed on emotions and social appraisal in the judgment of life satisfaction (see Figure 2). When the unique individuality of the self was primed (left graphs), life satisfaction was predicted primarily by emotions. The beta weight of emotions was significant ( $\beta = .51, p < .01$ ), but social appraisal ( $\beta = .05, ns$ ) was not. On the other hand, in the relational-self prime condition, both emotions ( $\beta = .38$ ) and social appraisal ( $\beta = .33$ ) accounted for a significant amount ( $p < .05$ ) of the predicted life satisfaction variance. These outcomes closely mirror the differences found between idiocentric and allocentric individuals in Study 1.

The priming effects among the Koreans also appeared in the direction consistent with our prediction. As illustrated in Figure 3, in the unique-self prime condition, only affect ( $\beta = .36, p < .05$ ) significantly contributed to the prediction of life satisfaction (cf. social appraisal  $\beta = -.03, ns$ ). Conversely, when the relational aspects of the self were primed, only social appraisal significantly predicted life satisfaction ( $\beta = .45, p < .001$ ). In contrast to the U.S. sample, the beta weight of affect was only marginally significant ( $\beta = .19, p = .08$ ).

These priming results offer the first powerful empirical evidence supporting the argument that the salience of the relational versus the independent self creates different cognitive approaches in life satisfaction judgments. It is important to note that these experimental findings support the causal direction proposed throughout this research. Among collectivistic (Korean) as well as individualistic (American) cultural members, changes in self-perspective led to predicted patterns of information use. Also, the effects of the priming manipulations suggest that self-representations about unique, independent versus relational aspects of identity (rather than other dimensions tapped in existing self-measures) play a key role in producing this self-judgmental pattern.

In retrospect, it would have been interesting if we had included a control condition (no priming) in this research. Without a control condition to compare against, it is difficult to know precisely how atypical the relational-prime and the unique-prime outcomes are from





**Figure 3: Relative Weight of Emotions and Social Appraisal in Predicting Life Satisfaction: Priming Effects Among Koreans**

the culture's typical state of affairs. For example, even though the relational-prime induces greater reliance of social appraisal in both cultures, the effect seems to be more extreme in Korea than in the United States. We hope these interesting issues (e.g., teasing apart the chronic cultural tendency versus priming effects) are addressed more systematically in future research.

Perhaps one of the more provocative implications of this study is that it seems to take relatively little (e.g., priming) to override the chronic information-processing habits shaped by stable factors, such as culture or personality. The American participants, contrary to the culturally ingrained cognitive habits, evaluated themselves significantly on social terms when the relational aspects of the self were primed. Similarly, Korean participants relied exclusively on emotional cues when the unique individuality of the self was highly accessible. Does this imply that cultural behaviors are more fragile and malleable than most have assumed? Our short answer is "not necessarily." This is an important theoretical issue that we address in the next section.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

On what types of information are evaluations of one's life based? According to the current research, the answer depends on how the person conceptualizes herself or himself. At times, people draw a sharp boundary between the self and others, whereas at other times, they try to absorb the thoughts and experiences of others into the self-construal process. The present findings collectively demonstrate that this self-construal process, regardless of the specific cause (personality, priming effect), predicts the type of information used in global self-evaluations. When the distinct separateness of the self is salient, overall life is appraised

prominently on the basis of internal emotions. When the self is viewed largely in relation to others, other people's appraisals, in addition to emotions, seem to become important in evaluating one's life.

Particularly notable is the fact that this pattern of results is found across various construct levels. This self-judgmental pattern, previously observed between cultures (Schimmack et al., 2002; Suh et al., 1998) and between ethnic groups (Suh & Diener, 2003) was replicated between personality types (Study 1) and in two separate priming studies (Study 2). The only common denominator across these studies was the difference in self-view; other factors, such as the study methods and the reasons underlying the self-view difference, varied considerably. Hence, the converging results lend strong support to the idea that the self plays a crucial role in the selection of internal/social information. Especially, the experimental data in Study 2 offered critical support for this interpretation. In sum, we believe that a solid empirical link exists between self-construal and the use of information in life satisfaction judgments.

Our findings have significant implications for subjective well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999) researchers. Researchers in the field have recognized that global life satisfaction judgments are seldom outcomes of exhaustive cognitive calculations but more often a swift evaluation derived from a heuristic cue (Schwarz & Strack, 1999). What heuristic cue offers a reasonable summary of one's overall life? "Affect" has been a popular answer in the field (Schwarz & Clore, 1983). Present findings partly support this idea. In all but one case (the relational-self prime condition in Korea), participants consulted their emotions when evaluating their lives. However, when it comes to the question of whether emotion information alone is sufficient for making the satisfaction judgment, the answer seems to vary as a function of the dominant self-construal mode.

Another important issue prompted by this research concerns the malleability versus the stability of cultural behavior. Both in Korea and in the United States, priming manipulations had clearly visible effects on the self-judgment process. It illustrates that psychological dispositions shaped by cultures are still very flexible and sensitive to external input. However, we should not overstate the malleability of cultural behavior on the basis of the current priming findings. The priming effects experimentally induced in Study 2 are qualitatively different from the impact culture has on psychological behavior in several respects. Obviously, the priming effects are transient and momentary, whereas the cultural influences are enduring. Another important difference is the scope of the two effects. The self-construal that was manipulated in this study is only one specific slice of the infinite psychological tendencies molded by cultural forces. When we say that a person has become completely acculturated (if this is possible), for instance, we mean much more than whether the person defines himself or herself primarily in independent or relational terms.

The final, but perhaps the most crucial, distinction between priming versus cultural influence concerns the naturalness of the effect. Culture affects human behavior in such a thorough and inconspicuous manner that people usually need to be reminded of its influence. As we know, Durkheim used the metaphor of invisible air to illustrate this subtle but omnipresent power of culture. This idea is important for putting the current priming studies in proper perspective. In a sense, the relational-self prime is the type of situation that seems to occur naturally and on a constant basis in more collectivistic societies. The independent-self prime conditions, on the other hand, are the ones that are more likely to be created on a regular basis in individualistic cultures. Although priming is a powerful method for testing the conceptual links of a theory of cultural influence, we should not lose sight of the fact that the priming manipulations lack a critical feature of cultural influence—its regularity and naturalness.

In closing, we propose several future research possibilities that stem from the current findings. Besides life satisfaction, what other types of judgments or decisions are influenced by the differential use of affective and social information? For instance, as a function of the self-view, are other types of evaluations, such as judgments of morality, major life decisions, or impressions of other people, constructed more on either affective or on social cues? For instance, in one of our ongoing studies, Americans reported that the “essence” of a person is mostly hidden beneath the visible layer of the self, whereas East Asians emphasized the relatively visible, overt features of the self, such as appearance, gestures, and mannerisms (Suh, Park, & Park, 2006). Such different lay beliefs about the defining qualities of the person may have developed from cultural differences in the chronic amount of attention paid to the inner, private versus the overt, social dimensions of the self. There might be many other intriguing cultural and individual differences in judgments about the self, others, or the world that stem from the differential attention to these covert/social aspects of the self.

One final question this research triggers is whether relying more on affective or social cues makes a difference in the mean level of life satisfaction. Cultures that rely more on affective information tend to report higher mean levels of life satisfaction (Diener & Suh, 1999). Quite interesting, a similar phenomenon is also observed at the individual difference level. Among individuals, those who are particularly happy and enjoy high self-esteem are more likely than others to rely on internal, subjective cues than on external, social standards in their self-evaluation (e.g., Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997; Wayment & Taylor, 1995). One possible explanation is that internal cues are more ambiguous and thus easier to reinterpret in a self-serving manner than are external, social cues (Updegraff & Suh, 2007). It seems worth examining, at the cross-cultural level, whether the type of information used in life satisfaction is also systematically related with mean cultural differences in subjective well-being (Suh, 2007).

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