A HOLISTIC VIEW OF HAPPINESS:
BELIEF IN THE NEGATIVE SIDE OF HAPPINESS IS MORE
PREVALENT IN JAPAN THAN IN THE UNITED STATES

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Two studies tested the hypothesis that while Americans believe that happiness is an enduring positive state to be pursued by each individual, Japanese believe that it is a positive, but transitory interpersonal moment fraught with negative consequences such as others’ envy and a reduced ability to attend to one’s surroundings. Study 1 used a standard questionnaire method to show that people in Japanese cultural contexts have a more holistic concept of happiness than do people in European-American cultural contexts. Study 2 showed that this Japanese holistic view of happiness is associated with a holistic worldview rather than personal subjective well-being. This suggests that the holistic view of happiness is related to a dialectic thinking style prevalent in Japanese culture and unrelated to individual levels of subjective well-being.

Key words: happiness, culture, self, holism

One Japanese woman was in a favorable situation. She was recently married, had a new job, and was living in a new and beautiful city. One day, however, she was injured. As a result, she was unable to walk for a month and had a difficult time completing the daily tasks many people take for granted, such as shopping and commuting to work. When she called her mother to tell her about that accident, her mother answered, “You think it is unfortunate, but from my perspective, you are lucky. Actually, I was really worried about you because you have been experiencing so many positive things lately. With so much happiness you feel, something bad was bound to happen. I even worried that you would have a serious car accident or something. All things considered, you should feel fortunate that this accident was so minor.”

Such “lay theories” of happiness are quite prevalent in Japanese culture because people in that cultural context frequently believe that having too many positive outcomes is a sign of “negative things to come.” In addition, they worry about negative consequences of feeling happiness, including the jealousy of others or a loss of motivation. For example, many Japanese think that if they feel happy, they will no longer put forth their greatest effort, thus diminishing their capacity for self-improvement.

Notably, however, this kind of lay theory, called the holistic view of happiness, would be less likely to be accepted by European-American cultures than Japanese culture.

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Indeed, people in European-American cultural contexts are likely to assume that happiness will lead to more happiness (e.g., Ji, Nisbett, & Su, 2001).

Recent empirical studies have shown that the experience of happiness itself is embedded in specific socio-cultural contexts and highly contingent on these cultural contexts (e.g., Diener & Diener, 1995; Diener & Suh, 2000; Kitayama & Markus, 2000; Kitayama, Mesquita, & Karasawa, 2006; Uchida, Norasakkunkit, & Kitayama, 2004). The purpose of the current work is to investigate cross-cultural variation in lay theories of happiness, particularly the acceptance of the possible negative sides of happiness, called the “holistic view of happiness.”

The Positive View of Happiness versus the Holistic View of Happiness

Empirical evidence to date suggests some important differences between the East Asian view of happiness and the European-American view. In East Asian cultural contexts, happiness is likely to be defined in a holistic world order where everything is assumed to be connected with everything else. For example, what is good in personal domains is often assumed to lead to certain social problems (Kitayama & Markus, 1999; Suh, 2002). Furthermore, it has been suggested that while European-American cultures often see positivity and negativity as contradictory, East Asian cultures see them as complementary and connected in a holistic way. Ji et al. (2001), for example, presented Chinese and American participants with graphs representing either a linear or nonlinear trend and asked them to indicate which graph might best represent the change of happiness over the lifespan. Whereas Chinese respondents were likely to choose a nonlinear graph, Americans were likely to choose a linear one. In addition, participants were shown several points of a trend within a graph (e.g., economic performance in January and February) and then asked to predict what would happen next. The results showed that Chinese participants predicted more deviations from the initially presented trend than the Americans did. This style of cognition, called “dialectic thinking,” has been found to be more prevalent in Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese relative to Americans in several studies of cultural variation in dialecticism (Ji et al., 2001; Norenzayan, Choi, & Peng, 2007; Peng & Nisbett, 1999).

Another line of studies has shown that Americans experience positive and negative emotions as polar opposites, while East Asians appear to experience these emotions simultaneously and in a connected fashion. Bagozzi, Wong, and Yi (1999), for instance, specifically found that whereas positive and negative emotions were negatively correlated in the U.S., they were positively correlated in China and Korea. In addition, Miyamoto, Uchida, and Ellsworth (2010) suggested that Japanese reported more mixed (positive and negative) emotions than Americans in predominantly pleasant situations.

Recently, Uchida, and Kitayama (2009) suggested that cultures vary considerably in their dominant views or models of happiness. More specifically, drawing broad comparisons between independent, North American cultural contexts and interdependent, East Asian cultural contexts, Americans believe happiness is a relatively enduring positive state that is to be personally pursued. In contrast, East Asians are likely to believe that happiness is a relatively transitory interpersonal moment that is positive and, yet, also
fraught with numerous negative consequences.

In the first part of their study, both American and Japanese participants were asked to describe five features, effects, or consequences of happiness (either positive or negative). After the generation task, the participants were asked to rate each characteristic in terms of general desirability. The results showed that over 98% of Americans’ descriptions were reported as positive, whereas approximately 67% of Japanese descriptions were reported as positive.

In the second part of their study, a large number of features collected in the first part of the study were printed on separate index cards. A stack of cards was then presented to a new group of participants from each culture. These participants were asked to sort the cards according to perceived similarities of the descriptions. On the basis of this data, the likelihood of each pair of descriptions being classified into the same pile was calculated. This likelihood (an index of perceived similarities among the features of happiness) was used to compute a multidimensional scaling solution. In both cultures, three types of descriptions were commonly found: general hedonic states (e.g., joy, excitement, and positive attitude), personal achievement (e.g., getting a good grade, getting a job) and interpersonal harmony (e.g., getting along with others, having a party for a friend). In addition to these cultural similarities, however, they also obtained other two clusters of negative features of happiness from the Japanese group. One such negative feature was transcendental reappraisal, which includes avoidance (e.g., letting people avoid reality), nihilism (e.g., not lasting long), and transcendental realization (e.g., elusive, difficult to identify). The other cluster was social disruption, which includes negative social consequences (e.g., envy and jealousy) and inattention (e.g., failing to pay enough attention to one’s surroundings). These negative clusters was largely absent in the American sample.

Current Research

Overall, the existent literature suggests that whereas Americans regard happiness almost exclusively in terms of positive hedonic experiences, Japanese believe in a more holistic conception of happiness, incorporating both negative as well as positive components. It is notable that American participants in Uchida and Kitayama’s study (2009) rarely reported any features that were either non-positive or negative. It was assumed that Americans did not produce negative or non-positive features of happiness because they regarded them as invalid descriptions of happiness. It is also possible, however, that while Americans do not automatically access non-positive or negative features of happiness, they can accept them as a part of happiness once they have been exposed to them. Study 1 examines this issue, predicting that compared with Japanese, Americans are less likely think of the negative features as valid aspects of happiness when they see the meaning of those features.

Study 2 examines why Japanese conceptions of happiness are more likely to include negative or non-positive features. Happiness is much more ambivalent in Japan than in the U.S., consistent with the idea that people in East Asian cultures use a more holistic reasoning style than those in European-American cultures. For example, dialecticism,
which emphasizes the operation of opposing forces of yin and yang, is very pervasive and strongly upheld in East Asian cultures (Ji et al., 2001; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). More generally, worldviews are more holistic in Asia than in North America (Choi, Koo, & Choi, 2007; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). If the holistic view of happiness in Japan, in which people accept both positive and negative features as a part of happiness, is reflective of their holistic worldviews, people with such world views should be more likely to agree that negative features, such as transcendental reappraisal, are part of the meaning of happiness.

In addition, Study 2 also examines the relationship between the holistic concept of happiness and one’s own subjective well-being. This is a critical issue because one alternative interpretation for the holistic view of happiness among Japanese is that they are simply less happy individually when compared to Americans (Diener, Suh, Smith, & Shao, 1995). Less happy individuals may not experience happiness as often and may also experience negative consequences when they experience happiness. If this explanation is correct, however, the observed degree of holistic view of happiness should be higher for those who are higher subjective well-being than those who are lower subjective well-being. Study 2 empirically assesses this alternative interpretation in Japan. In line with the culturally bound, holistic reasoning style, it is predicted that the holistic view of happiness does not differ between happy people and less happy people. Thus, even those people who have positive states of subjective well-being should accept the negative aspects of happiness.

**STUDY 1: THE HOLISTIC CONCEPTION OF HAPPINESS IN JAPAN AND THE US**

In Study 1, American and Japanese participants were presented with five classes of happiness features obtained from Uchida and Kitayama (2009): positive hedonic experience, personal achievement, social harmony, transcendental reappraisal, and social disruption. The participants were asked to indicate whether and to what extent they would regard each feature as a valid description of happiness. It is predicted that in both cultures, happiness would be recognized as basically positive. If so, positive features should be regarded as more valid than non-positive or negative features in both countries. At the same time, however, Japanese are more likely think of the negative features as valid aspects of happiness than Americans.

**METHOD**

*Participants and Procedure*

Forty-three American undergraduates (17 males, 22 females, and 4 unknown) and 51 Japanese undergraduates (28 males and 23 females), ranging from 18 to 28 years of age (mean age = 19.21 and 18.61 for Americans and Japanese, respectively) voluntarily participated in Study 1. They were tested individually. Upon arrival in the lab, participants were handed a questionnaire and asked to fill it out. On the
questionnaire, they were presented with a number of statements about happiness and asked to indicate the extent to which they would agree or disagree with each statement (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Twenty-six statements were collected from Uchida and Kitayama (2009) so that equal numbers of stimulus statements covered the 5 categories of happiness, namely, positive hedonic experience, personal achievement, social harmony, transcendental reappraisal, and social disruption, originally generated in the US and Japan (see Appendix).

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Beliefs for Happiness**

The mean agreement score for each of the five categories was computed; it is reported in Table 1.

The means were submitted to a with 2 (gender) × 2 (culture) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). This analysis showed a significant multivariate main effect of culture, $F(5, 85) = 7.60, p < .0001$. The multivariate main effect of gender was negligible ($F < 1.2, n.s.$), as was the interaction between culture and gender, $F < 2.1, n.s.$ The main effects of culture were significant for personal achievement ($F(1, 89) = 12.23, p < .0001$), social harmony ($F(1, 89) = 15.10, p < .0001$), social disruption ($F(1, 89) = 3.80, p < .05$), and transcendental reappraisal ($F(1, 89) = 9.11, p < .003$). As can be seen in Table 1, Americans endorsed personal achievement and social harmony more strongly than Japanese did. In contrast, social disruption and transcendental reappraisal were more strongly endorsed by Japanese than by Americans. Thus, relative to Japanese, Americans regarded non-positive or negative features as less valid descriptors of happiness\(^1\).

In addition, three positive features of happiness and two negative features of happiness were combined and submitted to a 2 (culture) × 2 (valence) mixed analysis of

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\(^{1}\)Two univariate interactions between culture and gender were observed, with American females endorsing social disruption more strongly than American males ($M_s = 4.34$ vs. 3.94). This pattern was reversed in Japan ($M_s = 4.46$ vs. 5.05), $F(1, 89) = 5.42, p < .02$. An analogous pattern was found for transcendental reappraisal: American females endorsed transcendental reappraisal more strongly than American males did ($M_s = 4.40$ vs. 4.01), but the pattern was again reversed in Japan ($M_s = 4.37$ vs. 4.85), $F(1, 89) = 4.06, p < .02$. 

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### Table 1. Mean Score of Americans and Japanese on The Extent to Which They Regard Each as A Feature of Happiness (Study 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>Japan</th>
<th>$t$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Features</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive hedonic experience</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>5.02</td>
<td>-0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal achievement</td>
<td>5.54</td>
<td>4.99</td>
<td>3.53***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social harmony</td>
<td>5.87</td>
<td>5.19</td>
<td>3.93***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-positive Features</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendental reappraisal</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>-2.04*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social disruption</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>4.78</td>
<td>-2.91**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
First, the main effect of valence was obtained ($F(1, 92) = 48.39$, $p < .0001$), that is, positive features of happiness was regarded as more valid in both cultures. However, this main effect was qualified by a interaction with culture ($F(1, 92) = 13.66$, $p < .001$), showing that Japanese were more likely than Americans to accept negative features of happiness (Figure 1).

It is noteworthy that all means were greater than the midpoint of the scale (=4), indicating that in both cultures, people regarded all descriptions as reasonably valid descriptions of happiness. The results from Uchida and Kitayama (2009), which showed that Americans generated 98% positive features for happiness, suggest that Americans would not automatically access the negative features of happiness, but they could accept these negative aspects as valid in some way when they fully consider the descriptions.

**Study 2:**  
**The Holistic Worldview and Holistic Conceptions of Happiness in Japan**

Study 1 suggested that Japanese conceptions of happiness are more likely to include negative or non-positive features such as transcendental reappraisal and social disruption than American conceptions of happiness. Although interesting, these findings leave open the question of why these beliefs exist. Study 2 examines the relationship between holistic concepts of happiness, holistic worldview, and subjective well-being in Japan. If the ambivalent responses to happiness observed among Japanese reflect their holistic worldviews, such responses should be most pronounced among Japanese who strongly endorse such worldviews rather than their levels of happiness. In addition, Study 2 examines the relationship between the holistic view of happiness and subjective well-being.
METHOD

Participants and Procedure
Seventy-six Japanese undergraduates (26 males, 49 females, and 1 unknown) voluntarily participated in this study and filled out a questionnaire. Their ages ranged from 19 to 27 ($M = 20.36$). The holistic worldview was measured with the 24-item Analysis-Holism Scale (AHS, Choi et al., 2007). This scale assesses the analytic versus holistic thinking styles, focusing on the locus of attention (parts vs. whole) such as “It is more important to pay attention to the whole context rather than the details,” causal theory (linear vs. cyclical) such as “Everything in the world is intertwined in a causal relationship,” attitude toward contradictions (formal logic vs. naïve dialecticism) such as “We should avoid going to extremes,” and perception of change (stability vs. change) such as “Current situations can change at any time.” Participants were asked to judge the extent to which they would agree or disagree with each statement on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). One item (“Choosing a middle ground in an argument should be avoided”), which has the lowest inter-item correlation with other items ($r < .06$), was excluded. In this current sample, the Cronbach’s $\alpha$ was .72 for the remaining 23 items. Higher scores indicate more holistic worldviews.

In order to measure the belief in the negative side of happiness, a modified version of the seven items was used in Study 1 that shows the negative meanings of happiness. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they would agree or disagree with each statement (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The scale included the items that showed transcendental reappraisal and the items of social disruption. In the current samples, the Cronbach’s $\alpha$s were .75 and all seven items loaded into one factor (factor scores were above .39 and the total percentage of variance was 40.01). Thus, all the items were averaged to and combined into one single score of “belief in the negative sides of happiness.”

They were also asked to complete questions on life satisfaction using the five-item scale devised by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985). Participants reported the degree to which each statement applied to themselves (1 = not at all, 5 = applies very well). Cronbach’s $\alpha$ was .76 in the current sample.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As shown in Table 2, the correlation between belief in the negative side of happiness and the holistic worldview was marginally significant ($r = .22$, $p < .06$). For the correlations with each subscale, causal theory ($r = .23$, $p < .05$) and contradictions ($r = .30$, $p < .01$) positively correlated with belief in a negative side of happiness. This means that people who believe in cyclical rather than linear causal theory are more likely to believe in a negative side of happiness. Similarly, people who accept the dialectical contradictions are also more likely to believe in a negative side of happiness. Interestingly, locus of attention and perception of change were not correlated with belief in a negative side of happiness. These results suggest that the holistic view of happiness is related to the notion that positive and negative sides of happiness are connected and reciprocally causal.

Next, both people who have high levels of subjective well-being (top 10% of the score of life satisfaction scale: $M = 3.89$) and people who have low levels of subjective well-being (bottom 10% of the score of life satisfaction scale: $M = 1.11$) were identified and compared on their mean levels of belief in the negative side of happiness. The result showed no significant difference between happy people and unhappy people ($M = 2.82$ vs. $3.32$, $t(12) = 1.14$, $p = .27$). This indicates that the influence of cultural perspectives on happiness is not substantially qualified by personal levels of happiness.
In sum, the European-American cultural model regards happiness as more positive and pleasant. The Asian model, on the other hand, recognizes both negative as well as positive components in happiness. Relative to Americans, Japanese regarded non-positive or negative features as more valid features of happiness. This view of happiness is related to the holistic thinking style, particularly the belief in contradictions and cyclic causality. In addition, this holistic view of happiness accepted by Japanese is not tied to one’s own subjective well-being. That is, belief in the negative side of happiness is not simply derived from a cognitive bias arising from people who are not happy.

Another line of evidence, however, offers an alternative explanation of Japanese holistic view of happiness. Research on regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1998) suggests that when people are promotionally focused, they are motivated by growth and developmental needs. Thus, in seeking to attain their goals, promotion-focused people often pay too much attention to positive outcomes. In contrast, prevention-focused people seek to avoid punishment and loss and are therefore responsive to protection and security needs. This leads them to pay too much attention to negative outcomes. Lockwood, Marshall, and Sadler (2005) suggested that people in European-American cultures are more promotion oriented whereas people in East Asian cultures are more prevention oriented. From this perspective then, people in Japan may feel negative and ambivalent emotions even when they are happy because they are prevention oriented and thus feel fearful and anxious about losing their current happiness. A focus on prevention and the holistic view of happiness could be related to each other. Future research should examine the relationship between regulatory focus theory and the holistic view of happiness.

An additional question is whether this holistic view of happiness in Japan can also be applied to other emotions, such as unhappiness. Uchida and Kitayama (2009) explored lay conceptions of unhappiness in North American and Japanese cultures and found that Japanese models of unhappiness were more likely than their American counterparts to include some seemingly positive elements, forming a general yin-yang pattern analogous

### General Discussion

Table 2. *Means, SDs, and Correlations of Belief in Negative Aspects of Happiness with Holistic Worldview (Study 2)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Correlation with Negative Aspects of Happiness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belief in Negative Side of Happiness</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holistic Worldview (overall scale)</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td><strong>.22</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>p</em> &lt; .06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locus of Attention (whole over parts)</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td><strong>.14</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>n.s.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causal Theory (cyclical over linear)</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td><strong>.23</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>p</em> &lt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contradictions (dialecticism over logic)</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td><strong>.30</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>p</em> &lt; .01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of Change (change over stability)</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td><strong>.08</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td><em>n.s.</em></td>
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to the one observed for happiness. On the other hand, Miyamoto et al. (2010) suggested that Japanese reported more mixed emotions (both positive and negative) than Americans in predominantly pleasant situations (e.g., personal success), whereas no cultural differences were obtained in predominantly unpleasant situations, (e.g., personal failure). In unpleasant situations, both Americans and Japanese frequently try to think positively as a coping strategy. Therefore, Americans might be more likely to accept the opposite side of unhappiness than the opposite side of happiness. This should also be examined in future research.

In conclusion, recent empirical work has provided evidence that the concept of happiness differs substantially across cultures. Although there are also universal underpinnings of happiness, culturally dependent viewpoints should be taken into account when considering how to properly motivate and produce happiness.

REFERENCES


HOLISTIC VIEW OF HAPPINESS


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APPENDIX

Items in Study 1

Positive features of happiness

*Positive hedonic experience*
- When people are happy, they usually smile.
- Happiness is a calm and peaceful emotional state.
- Happiness leads to excitement.
- Happiness makes people feel like jumping up and down.

*Personal achievement*
- When people are happy, they feel good about themselves or their situation.
- When people feel happy, everything seems good to them.
- If people feel that everything in life is going well, they will be happy.
- People are happy when they have a strong sense of self.
- People are happy when they are absorbed in situations or activities they like.
- Happiness makes people more productive.

*Social harmony*
- People want to share their happiness with others who are close to them.
- When people are happy, they act kindly towards others.
- A happy situation is one involving family, friends, or a romantic partner.
- When people are happy, they are more able to feel or express thanks to others around them.
- A person’s happiness affects those around that person positively.
- People are happy when they feel acceptance from others.

Non-positive features of happiness

*Transcendental reappraisal*
- Happiness can be a mask that hides true feelings.
- When people are happy, they can forget negative things.
- People can’t feel happy all the time.
- Definitions of happiness vary from person to person.
- If happiness lasts for a long time, people may feel anxious.
- Happiness goes away quickly.
- People are not aware of happiness when they have it; they notice it once it goes away.
- Feeling happy makes people fear losing that happiness.

*Social disruption*
- Others may be jealous of one’s happiness.
- When people are happy, they can’t think about the emotions or situations of others.