Downsides of an *Overly* Context-Sensitive Self: Implications From the Culture and Subjective Well-Being Research

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ABSTRACT The self becomes context sensitive in service of the need to belong. When it comes to achieving personal happiness, an identity system that derives its worth and meaning excessively from its social context puts itself in a significantly disadvantageous position. This article integrates empirical findings and ideas from the self, subjective well-being, and cross-cultural literature and tries to offer insights to why East Asian cultural members report surprisingly low levels of happiness. The various cognitive, motivational, behavioral, and affective characteristics of the overly relation-oriented self are discussed as potential explanations. Implications for the study of self and culture are offered.

The notion that the self reacts differently in different interpersonal situations is hardly new (Goffman, 1959; James, 1950/1890). Still, social psychologists have taken notice of the highly "context-sensitive" nature of the self recently documented among East Asian cultural members. In the East, the degree of self-modification across settings occurs quite considerably, and, somewhat to the surprise of social psychologists, such change in self-concept seems to leave faint traces of dissonance within the person.

Cousins (1989) and Kanagawa, Cross, and Markus (2001), for instance, found that the content of self-description changed more drastically across social contexts and roles among Japanese than Americans. More recently, Suh (2002) examined the extent to which the personality ratings of Koreans and Americans changed across interacting partners (e.g., friend, professor, stranger). The Koreans' self-views varied more than those of the Americans, and yet the

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Journal of Personality 75:6, December 2007

DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-6494.2007.00477.x

degree of identity consistency was less predictive of the psychological well-being of Koreans than of the Americans. These empirical findings seem congruent with the lay beliefs held by East Asians. The "true" and natural self in Japan, for instance, is believed to be the self-in-context, rather than the transcendental and decontextualized self (Kashima et al., 2004), and greater moral emphasis is placed on the contextual adjustment of behavior in East Asia than in the West (Tafarodi, Lo, Yamaguchi, Lee, & Katsura, 2004).

The East Asian cultural region fascinates not only self researchers, but also psychologists who study happiness—a field of research formally referred as subjective well-being (SWB; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). One question that continues to perplex SWB researchers is why the happiness levels of East Asian nations are so low, compared to their "objective" life conditions (e.g., income level). Japan, for example, boasts one of the highest economic life standards in the world, and yet scores far below the average in international happiness surveys. Japan was ranked 42nd among 49 nations in a recent happiness survey, despite having the world's second largest economy (Voigt, 2004). Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan also follow the trend—in light of their objective conditions, their happiness scores seem unusually low (Diener & Suh, 1999, 2000).

In short, mounting evidence suggests that the East Asian cultural members possess a highly context-sensitive self and that they are also surprisingly down when it comes to personal happiness. Are these two phenomena related? More directly, is there an important psychological price paid by a highly context-sensitive self? If so, how does this actually happen, and what larger implications does this process have for furthering our understandings of self, culture, and SWB?

Although these are complex questions, there seem to be many empirical findings and theories dispersed across the fields of self, culture, and SWB that seem relevant to this issue. In order to take advantage of the existing work, first, the scattered materials need to be brought together and integrated. The present article makes this adventurous attempt. Theoretical speculations are inevitably involved in this process because empirical gaps exist between the various lines of research. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the present article's integrative effort will generate insights and constructive research questions for personality and social psychologists.

The central thesis of this article is that an overly contextualized self confronts a wide variety of psychological hurdles—motivational, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral—in the pursuit of personal happiness. This idea might seem rather counterintuitive at first glance. After all, it seems crucial for a fully functioning self to attend to the thoughts and feelings of interacting partners, and if necessary, to tailor the self to come in line with others' expectations. This is certainly true. However, the focus of this article is on various factors that may compromise a person's happiness when his/her context-sensitive need is chronically excessive. Before venturing further, it seems appropriate to consider for a moment a basic but crucial question—Why does the self become context sensitive?

WHY DOES THE SELF BECOME CONTEXT SENSITIVE?

Many psychologists have chuckled when reading James's famous illustration of a young fellow whose angelic demeanor in front of his parents only changes to one that "swears and swaggers like a pirate" in front of his peers (1950/1890, p. 294). James was trying to make the point that the self is inherently context sensitive and manifests itself differently in different social situations. A great deal of contemporary research supports this idea (e.g., Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993; Roberts & Donahue, 1994; Suh, 2002). But why does the self do that? For what ultimate reason does the self try to deliver a convincing imitation of an angel in one social setting, and then of a pirate in another?

People are sensitive to the social context because of one principal reason: to become part of a larger social unit (e.g., dyadic relation, group) and to make sure that the valued social ties remain intact. In fact, it becomes extremely difficult to make sense of the wide variety of context-sensitive behaviors of the self (e.g., shifts in self-view, various self-presentational strategies engaged across situations) if people have no interest whatsoever in forming and maintaining a meaningful social bond with other human beings. Hence, a context-sensitive self is quintessentially an interpersonal self that seeks social acceptance from valued others.

The interpersonal dimension of the self is once again drawing a great deal of attention in social psychology (e.g., Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006; Cross, Bacon, &

Morris, 2000; Neisser, 1993; Tice & Baumeister, 2001). Although the interpersonal mechanisms of the self were considered to play pivotal roles in the development and workings of the self by early theorists (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934), they were somewhat eclipsed by the more "inner," private, and cognitive aspects in contemporary self research.

The resurgant interest in the interpersonal sphere of the self has been sparked by a number of research lines. One is the explosion of cross-cultural research on self. The various cognitive, motivational, and affective experiences of the highly other-oriented, interdependent self suggest that in various non-European cultures, other people are not merely vehicles for self-understanding and expression but are the very part and parcel of self-experience (Heine, 2001; Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997). Coming from another perspective, Baumeister and Leary (1995) have also argued that the need to belong is possibly the most pervasive and powerful of all human desires. They argue that maintaining social links with others is so critical that self-esteem might merely serve as a device for signaling the individual of her latest standing in the social interaction arena. Finally, evolutionary psychologists also assert that our basic psychological mechanisms are designed and tuned over time and experience to gain maximal rewards from the interactions with opposite-sex members (Buss, 1994).

It seems difficult to overstate the importance of establishing and maintaining ties with others. In order to navigate successfully through the complexities of social life, however, we need to be equipped with several psychological abilities. Most fundamental is the ability to picture ourselves from the perspective of others. The ability to see oneself via the "looking glass" of significant other's view (Cooley, 1902) and, more generally, via the terms of the expectations of the "generalized other" (Mead, 1934) is absolutely necessary for the successful functioning of the interpersonal self. Inability to do so (e.g., egocentrism, misreading others' intentions), in the long run, will guarantee some form of social penalty. Baumeister (2005) recently argued that the ability to see ourselves as others see us, and to care about what they think, is "utterly unavoidable, indispensable" (p. 6) if we are to function properly as a cultural being.

The self has a keen interest in connecting itself with others, and in order to do so, it needs to be vigilant of the various psychological cues emitted by others. It follows from this reasoning that when the

need to belong becomes particularly strong or salient, the self will become increasingly sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of others. A number of studies support this idea. For instance, Pickett, Gardner, and Knowles (2004) manipulated the need to belong by making participants believe that they had to perform an experimental task alone because none of the other participants desired to work with them. Compared to those who did not receive such a belongingness threat, participants in this condition were more attentive to and accurate in decoding social cues in a subsequent task. Interestingly, this enhanced social sensitivity was specific to social perception skills rather than to cognitive problem solving in general. Merely priming the person of his/her relational ties with others also influences self-judgments. Suh, Diener, and Updegraff (in press) primed Koreans and Americans to think about themselves either in highly individuated or interrelated terms. Regardless of their cultural background, when people viewed themselves in connection to others, perceived social appraisal (how they thought others evaluated their lives) influenced their life satisfaction judgments more strongly than their subjective emotional experiences.

The key idea embedded in the above studies—heightened desire to belong elevates the self's sensitivity to surrounding social cues—is the main conceptual backdrop of this article. The salience of social belongingness, in the above studies, has been experimentally primed. However, at a chronic level, there are also considerable differences between individuals or cultures. Those with a particularly strong communal (Helgeson, 1994) or a relational self (Cross et al., 2000), for instance, have a more prominent desire and interest for fostering meaningful social relationships than do others. Of more direct interest in this article is the strong form of the social belongingness desire found at a cultural level, among the East Asian cultural members (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

East Asians, for hundreds of years, have been influenced by a strongly relation-oriented Confucian worldview that recognizes the self to be meaningful only in relation to other selves. In a sense, each self is a necessary element for the other self in East Asia. In addition to the vast amount of cross-cultural research (Heine, 2001; Markus et al., 1997; Triandis & Suh, 2002), there are many everyday examples in East Asia that illustrate the prominence of this relational aspect of the self. A married woman in Korea, for instance, is more commonly referred to by her relational status (e.g., Haewon's

mother, Mr. Kim's wife) than by her personal name. In fact, there is a strong chance that many of her acquaintances will never have a chance to learn her personal name.

In Western cultures, even where independence and autonomy represents the preeminent tasks of the self, people are extremely sensitive to signs of social exclusion. Not to mention face-to-face ostracism, people show various signs of distress (e.g., lower self-esteem, less sense of meaningful existence) even when the ostracizing other is believed to be a computer program that is strictly obeying a predetermined script (Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004). The cultural ethos in East Asia, unlike the West, reinforces and chronically rewards the primitive human need to belong. This synergy between the strong human desire to belong and the collective cultural reinforcements elevates the importance of this need to an extremely high level. To say that East Asians have very strong relational concerns is putting things quite mildly. For the average East Asian, feeling a sense of devaluation from significant others would top her list of the most petrifying moments in life.

Without doubt, the need to belong has significant survival values (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; MacDonald & Leary, 2005). But are the outcomes of having a strong desire to belong entirely positive? Can the desire to belong become a bit excessive, perhaps as in the case of East Asians, where it starts to compromise other desirable psychological qualities (e.g., happiness, creativity, autonomy, competence)? Considerable amount of research exists at the individual-difference level that unambiguously suggests that an excessive amount of focus on others incurs various mental health problems (e.g., Bakan, 1966; Diehl, Owen, & Youngblade, 2004; Guisinger & Blatt, 1994). For instance, the work on unmitigated communion by Helgeson and her colleagues (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998; Helgeson, 1994; Helgeson & Fritz, 1998) suggests that exclusive focus on and involvement of others is related with negative health outcomes and psychological distress. Although the negatives of being overly involved in relational concerns have been well documented at the individual level, this idea could be expanded to the cross-cultural level to gain insights for why differences in SWB occur between cultures.

Taking the East Asian culture as an example, the following section examines the potential psychological costs of a self that becomes overly invested in the maintenance and fostering of relationships. When relational concerns become the key agenda of the self, as

discussed earlier, the self will become increasingly sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of others. If this happens continuously in everyday life, eventually, less importance could be placed on the inner, private, and experiential aspects of the self (e.g., affective experience, private beliefs). Conversely, the part of the self that is highly visible, public, and easily recognized and evaluated by others (e.g., status, one's relative standing on a certain domain) may take a bigger share in one's overall identity (Park & Suh, 2005). One Korean social psychologist has succinctly captured this point (Yoon, 1994). According to Yoon, the question East Asians most frequently ask themselves is "How am I seen by others?" rather than "How do I see myself?" In other words, the perspective of others very often becomes the default standpoint of an East Asian self (cf. Cohen & Gunz, 2002). When the other's perspective starts to dominate the key experiences of the self, however, various psychological factors that may inhibit a sense of personal happiness may co-occur. Specifically, what are the possible negatives?

PSYCHOLOGICAL DOWNSIDES OF AN EXCESSIVELY CONTEXT-ORIENTED SELF

An enormous amount of research focusing on the psychological conditions of happiness has taken place during the past decade (for reviews see Diener et al., 1999; Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003). Thanks to these research efforts, it is now possible to come up with a number of psychological factors that seem to play key roles in facilitating personal happiness. The focus of this article will be selective on the happiness-promoting factors that may potentially clash with the prominent tendencies of the East Asian self-system. What are the major cognitive, emotional, motivational, and behavioral predictors of SWB, and why are these factors in conflict with the East Asian self that derives its worth and meaning, to a considerable degree, from its relationships with others?

Several points need to be addressed. The majority of the conclusions on predictors of SWB described below are based on research conducted between individuals (mostly Americans). Therefore, the assumed connections to the East Asian self will require more direct empirical validations by future research. Also, given that the bulk of the existing studies are based on Western participants, one might feel

uneasy about applying the findings to the analyses of East Asian's SWB. This would be another valid concern. However, many of the current findings on happiness are believed to describe basic psychological mechanisms that vary across cultures in degree, rather than at a qualitative level. For instance, life satisfaction correlates with self-esteem and affective experiences more strongly in some cultures than in others (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995; Schimmack, Radhakrishnan, Oishi, Dzokoto, & Ahadi, 2002; Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). Yet, in all cultures, life satisfaction is positively related to self-esteem level and the frequency of positive emotional experiences. In short, amid the cultural variations, there seem to be basic, common psychological mechanisms that are shared by human beings in the experience of happiness. A similar comment can be offered for the issue of measurement. The psychometric properties of SWB measures administered in different cultural regions show minor variations, but overall, the structural similarities across cultures are clearly more notable than the variations (e.g., Diener et al., 1995; Scollon, Diener, Oishi, & Biswas-Diener, 2004).

Figure 1 summarizes the key points of this section. Admittedly, it is a rough sketch that outlines the speculated interconnections between the main mechanisms and psychological variables. Although the specific links need to be evaluated with empirical data, this general model serves as a useful conceptual blueprint for upcoming research. It is grounded on the assumption that the self that is highly occupied with relational needs is likely to become highly

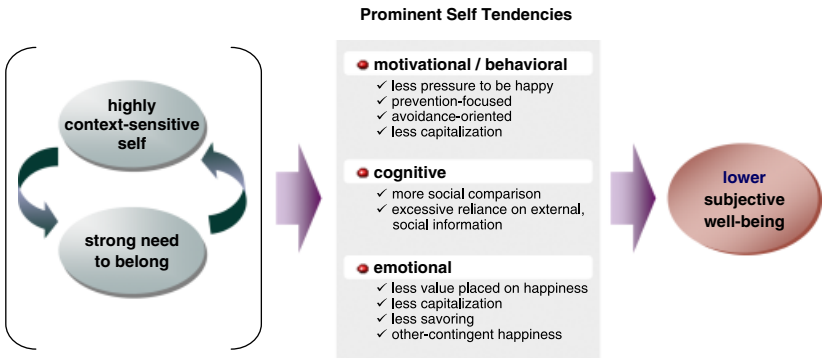

Figure 1
Hypothetical relationships among the need to belong, prominent self-tendencies, and subjective well-being.

context sensitive. The synergetic feedback between the two self characteristics—excessive relational concern and sensitive reactions to the social context—is likely to stabilize various cognitive, affective, motivational, and behavioral tendencies that may have negative impacts on personal happiness.

Cognitive Aspects

What are the major cognitive characteristics of happy people? Besides being optimistic and having a strong sense of control (Diener et al., 1999), one cognitive characteristic of happy people stands out. They tend to evaluate and appraise themselves by standards that are defined in highly subjective and idiosyncratic terms. Less happy individuals, on the other hand, are more likely to be influenced by concrete, tangible forms of social feedback. Numerous lines of research support this idea.

Lyubomirsky and Ross (1997), for instance, found clear evidence that compared to happy individuals, the self-appraisals of less happy people are based significantly more on external social comparison information. Quite ironically, the unhappy people were in a better mood when their performance was poor in an absolute sense but still relatively superior to that of others, compared to an opposite situation (when they performed strongly but were outperformed by others). Many studies converge to suggest that being excessively sensitive to external, social sources of self-evaluation leads to depression and unhappiness (e.g., Butler, Hokanson, & Flynn, 1994; Harter, Stocker, & Robinson, 1996; Kernis & Goldman, 2003).

Conversely, people who have positive opinions about themselves and their lives tend to weigh personal, internal standards heavily in various self-judgmental processes. A certain dose of positive illusions about the self and future, as long as they are not extreme, could be beneficial for happiness. Research suggests that egocentric information-processing tendencies play a crucial role in allowing us to make desired conclusions about ourselves. For instance, people think they are better and more fortunate than others because they make judgments using information pertaining primarily to the self than do others (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Turak, & Vredenburg, 1995; Weinstein & Lachendro, 1982; Kruger, 1999). Simply asking individuals to compare the self to others (self-focused), rather than others to themselves (other focused), increases superiority bias (Hoorens, 1995).

In short, evaluating the self on the basis of subjective, internal standards rather than on external, social information seems to be an important cognitive strategy for maintaining favorable views about the self. A recent study by Josephs, Bosson, and Jacobs (2003) suggests that this very process explains why people with low self-esteem have such a hard time breaking out from the negative state. People with either low or high self-esteem show no differences in accepting positive feedback that was generated from a knowledgeable external source. However, differences between the two groups emerged when the self was the source of the positive feedback. Although people high in self-esteem incorporated the self-generated positive experience into their self-view, those with low self-esteem did not.

What is the big advantage of relying on internal, subjective standards rather than on external, objective standards in the self-evaluation process? Most obviously, subjective standards are chosen by the self, whereas external standards are often imposed by others (therefore, less tailored to fit with one's strengths). Also relevant is the fact that subjective standards tend to be much more abstract and vague than most of the externally imposed standards. For instance, one might arrive at a very different conclusion about someone's intelligence, depending on whether one uses a standard that is highly subjective and abstract (e.g., how well I understand poems) or one that is more objective and concrete (e.g., getting a scholarship from Harvard). According to a recent study (Updegraff & Suh, 2007), simply thinking about one's life in more abstract terms was associated with higher global life satisfaction. This pattern was found both at a chronic individual difference level, and also through experimental manipulations.

Despite the obvious advantages of relying on inner, subjective criteria, East Asians seem to be rather hesitant in evaluating the self in terms of such standards. More generally, East Asians are less likely than Westerners to believe that their inner thoughts and feelings should be the major source of self-insight and identity. An interesting finding comes from Tafarodi et al.'s (2004) recent article. The following question was presented to Canadians and East Asians: "Do you believe that you know yourself more accurately than any other living person in your life knows you?" Eighty-six percent of the Canadian women responded "yes" to this question. In contrast, only 40% and 52% of the women in Japan and China, respectively, said yes.

Such trends continue in judgments of SWB. Compared to Western cultural members, East Asians are less inclined to take their inner emotions into account when they make life-satisfaction judgments (Suh et al., 1998). More socially nuanced cues, such as the perceived appraisals of others, group standards, or social comparison information, on the other hand, are given more weight by the relational self in self-appraisals (e.g., Oishi & Diener, 2001; Suh, Diener, & Updegraff, in press; White & Lehman, 2005).

As far as personal happiness is concerned, relying heavily on external, socially defined standards of self-evaluation has a disadvantage. The more recommended strategy is to appraise the self and one's life by using idiosyncratic standards and inner experiential cues that are more flexible and easier to suit the self (e.g., Dunning & McElwee, 1995; Greve & Wentura, 2003; Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, & Griffin, 2002). However, it is not difficult to see why East Asians would find this prescription rather unnatural. When the social, rather than the subjective image of the self is of central concern, viewing the self primarily through the highly subjective, idiosyncratic lens may not be totally meaningful. Subjective opinions and feelings about the self are not enough; they need to be more officially "validated" by consensually shared social standards (cf. Heine, 2001). Such logic derives from the East Asian's chronic habit of thinking about the self from the perspective of others, which, in turn, stems in large part from the enormous pressure to belong. In conclusion, a self system that is highly tuned in for the task of social belongingness may be ingrained with self-evaluative habits that may not yield the most favorable results in self-evaluations of happiness.

Motivational/Behavioral Aspects

If East Asians feel a certain pressure to belong, Western cultural members might feel some "pressure to be happy" (Suh, 2000). Being unhappy is considered to be rather abnormal, and the self is highly accountable for such a state in Western cultures. Going a step further, research by King and Napa (1998) suggests that Americans might even attach a certain degree of morality to personal happiness. Americans believe that happy people have a significantly higher chance to go to heaven than unhappy people.

Happiness is viewed from a somewhat different angle in East Asia. For instance, extremely positive emotions are less valued (Eid &

Diener, 2001), a more balanced harmony between the positive and negative emotions is sought (Kitayama & Markus, 2000; Uchida, Norasakkunkit, & Kitayama, 2004), and fate is believed to play a somewhat important role in determining happiness (Lee, Kim, & Suh, 2004). East Asians might even find the idea of being exceptionally happy a bit uncomfortable. Suh and Diener (2006) recently compared the stereotypes of a "very happy person" across cultures. Americans think a very happy person is likely to possess more positive (e.g., sincere) than negative (e.g., selfish, shallow, egocentric) personal characteristics. In contrast, Japanese associated more negative than positive traits with a very happy person.

It is interesting that the image of a very happy person prompted negative traits, such as "shallow" and "egocentric" in Japan, a country known for scoring consistently lower SWB than expected from its economic status. This pattern is in line with Heine et al.'s (2001) observation of the strong self-improving orientation among Japanese. In Japan, the emphasis is on improving the self to live up to the standards of one's role or position in a group. Being exceptionally happy, therefore, could be perceived as being overly preoccupied with the self while ignoring the central cultural mandates of self-improvement and adjustments to obligations and relationships. Within such a cultural atmosphere, indulging in and expressing one's personal happiness excessively may draw negative appraisals from a valued group. Hence, it may be possible, in an absolute sense, that East Asians try less to become happy than do Western cultural members.

If public expressions of personal happiness are not met with the biggest applause, such behaviors will be slowly weeded out from the person's habitual repertoires. From a happiness standpoint, this is unfortunate. One behavioral characteristic that distinguishes happy people from others is that they frequently capitalize on positive events. At a behavioral level, one important secret for increasing happiness is to act happily (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006), and whenever possible, to make a rather big deal out of pleasant events in life (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004; Langston, 1994).

Although the idea of acting happy to feel happy might seem a bit awkward, a substantial amount of research illustrates the powerful influence of external behavior on inner thoughts and feelings (cf. Tice & Baumeister, 2001). For instance, even introverts who are asked to briefly act energetic and active in public experience positive

lifts in mood (Fleeson, Malanos, & Achille, 2002). The effect from overt behavior to various inner psychological experiences tends to be most strong when the behavior is performed publicly (Tice, 1992). Hence, the findings suggest that acting out the happiness inside is clearly beneficial for increasing happiness. However, given the reasons discussed above, various forms of behavioral expressions of happiness may be subtly but consistently discouraged in Eastern contexts (except for select occasions, such as a family gatherings). Although direct empirical findings are needed, we can speculate that another behavioral strategy for happiness—public expressions of happiness—could be underutilized in East Asian cultures.

Researchers also find that the type of motives more prevalent in the Eastern cultural context is somewhat different from those more common in the West. Adoption of avoidance (relative to approach) and prevention-focused (relative to promotion-focused) goals are more common in the East than in the West (Elliot, Chirkov, Kim, & Sheldon, 2001; Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000). Interestingly, Elliot et al. found that avoidance-oriented personal goals were negative predictors of SWB in the United States but not in Korea. This suggests that East Asians find avoidant behavior to be psychologically less aversive. However, less aversion does not necessarily mean more enjoyment. In fact, an overwhelming amount of evidence suggests that it is the approach, rather than the avoidance system, that is directly linked with positive emotional feelings, such as joy and pleasure (e.g., Demaree, Robinson, Erik, & Youngstrom, 2005; Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2000; Elliot & Thrash, 2002; Emmons, 1986; Updegraff, Gable, & Taylor, 2004). Not surprisingly, happy people's personal goals tend to be more approach- than avoidance-oriented (Emmons, 1986).

There is no compelling reason to believe that the motivational system of East Asians are qualitatively different from the one documented by dozens of research. Hence, East Asians may not be that different from Westerners who are more likely to feel elated, happy, and cheerful when they engage in approach rather than avoidant behaviors. Therefore, we need to suspect that the prevalence of avoidant, preventive goals in East Asian cultures comes more from cultural necessity than from personal preference.

If so, why are avoidant goals functionally more important than approach goals in the East Asian context? When the focal concern of the person is to fulfill the expectations of others or of a group, failing

to meet the minimal standards becomes more salient than surpassing expectations (cf. Heine et al., 2001). In other words, in interpersonal settings that consist of various social expectations and obligations, the cost of failure is bigger and more salient than the reward of success. Prevention and avoidant orientations, therefore, may become functionally more important in such cultural settings than approach tendencies. Consistent with this idea, even minimal priming of one's relational link with others shifts people to a prevention-oriented mode (Lee et al., 2000).

In summary, lay beliefs about the meaning and desirability of personal happiness may diverge somewhat between cultures. When relational issues are of foremost concern, public expressions of personal happiness might be discouraged. Also, prevention- and avoidance-focused personal goals may become more urgent and salient than approach-oriented behaviors. Such motivational and behavioral characteristics, although fitting with the central agendas of a highly relation-oriented culture, may have unfavorable consequences on personal happiness.

Emotional Aspects

One line of research that has direct relevance with happiness is the study of emotion norms. The degree to which people value positive emotions and devalue negative emotions vary considerably across cultures (Diener & Suh, 1999; Eid & Diener, 2001). Two clusters of nations are notable when one examines the emotion norm data across cultures. Latin American nations value positive emotions a great deal but think negative emotions should be avoided as much as possible. In comparison, East Asians are relatively lukewarm toward positive emotions and more appreciative of negative emotions. East Asians may take a more cautious attitude on positive emotions, because they disrupt harmony and encourage negligent behaviors. These cultural variations in emotion norms are important because the ideal levels are strongly related with the reported levels of actual emotional experience (Diener & Suh, 1999; Tsai, Knutson, & Fung, 2006).

If a culture is not enthusiastic about the expression or experience of positive emotions, as in the case of East Asian nations, it will bring at least two blows to the pursuit of personal happiness. First, active expressions or emotional displays of happiness are less likely

to occur in such cultures. As we noted earlier, the expression and experience of emotion go hand in hand. For instance, facial feedback hypothesis suggests that overt facial expressions of emotions instigate similar feelings within the person (Strack, Martin, & Stepper, 1988). Also, it is obvious that such cultural members will engage less frequently in capitalizing on positive events when positive emotion is less valued.

Another disadvantage may occur at the experiential level. Happy individuals tend to savor the small positive moments of their lives. According to Bryant (2003), those who derive more pleasure from current and anticipated events report more frequent happiness and higher levels of life satisfaction than others. These two beneficial tips for increasing happiness, at the expression and experiential level, are less likely to be used in East Asian cultures that may view personal happiness somewhat as a nuisance factor in maintaining group harmony and solidarity.

Also, the very feeling of happiness in East Asia might be composed in a somewhat different manner than in the West. Kitayama and Markus (2000) argue that positive feelings, including happiness, are conceptualized as properties of an individual, a subjective state that is bounded "in" the person in Western cultures. In contrast, the good feelings in Japan may be much more interpersonal and communal in nature. Rather than being a feeling owned or possessed by the self, the experience of happiness is more likely to be viewed as an intersubjective state shared with others in East Asian cultures (Uchida et al., 2004).

If happiness is characterized more as a shared moment with others in the East, the partner with whom one shares this experience may become a very important factor. Park, Choi, and Suh (2006) recently found support for this idea. The Korean participants in this study engaged either in a highly boring (counting marbles) or an interesting task (picture completion), either with a close friend or with a stranger. After the task, the participant's mood was measured. The overall results suggested that the experience of fun depended significantly on the person factor (friend vs. stranger) in this Korean sample. In short, in addition to the nature of the activity, it seems that with whom one participated in it also figures in largely in determining the East Asians' experience of happiness and enjoyment.

This may make the happiness of East Asians quite person specific and conditional. It may also have a downside when it comes to the

feasibility issue. If an East Asian's happiness includes a strong intersubjective component that requires a meaningful partner, it means that one additional piece (valued partner) will be required to complete the happiness experience in the East. The more complicated the cultural formula of happiness becomes, the greater the degree of effort, in an absolute sense, will be necessary to attain this desirable experience.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The East Asian self is highly context sensitive. It is more accustomed to adjusting to the context than to changing the context to fit the self (Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2002); it views itself in a quite different manner across social settings (Kanagawa et al., 2001; Suh, 2002; Tafarodi et al., 2004); and it pays a great deal of attention to the emotional state of others (Chua, Leu, & Nisbett, 2005), while less attention is given to one's private emotions (Suh et al., 1998).

This article has tried to point out that the various context-sensitive forms of the self are essentially phenotypic expressions of the self's strong desire to belong. Social exclusion incurs particularly harsh penalties in East Asian cultures. The East Asian self, hence, becomes somewhat hypervigilant to the thoughts, feelings, and expectations of others and of the group. In turn, the self may develop several cognitive, motivational, behavioral, and affective tendencies that may serve well for the goals of social harmony but could have detrimental impacts on an individual's happiness.

Kitayama and Markus (2000) claimed that the sense of well-being is produced by the collaborative efforts between the individual and the culture. Successfully living up to culturally valued norms and expectations is certainly required for psychological adjustment and mental health. However, the possibility needs to be considered that the ultimate destination charted out by the East Asian culture is somewhat different from the West (see Suh & Koo, in press). The various architects of East Asian culture are built around the concept of social harmony, whereas the notions of individual autonomy and freedom are given comparably more weight in the West. One ideal is not necessarily better than the other; they are simply different. However, the different cultural axes may nurture different psychological habits among its members. It seems quite possible that the cognitive,

motivational, and behavioral habits acquired by East Asians are optimized more for reaching the ideals of social harmony than the attainment of personal happiness.

I hope this article serves as a useful conceptual foundation for future research. Even though a considerable amount of SWB research is currently conducted at the cross-cultural/national level (Suh & Koo, in press), so far, this macrolevel approach has imported relatively little from the more traditional findings of social psychology. Recent cross-cultural findings have profoundly influenced how we think about many of the traditional topics in personality and social psychology, such as the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In comparison, far less has been done to understand cultural differences through the application of individual difference level findings. It is hoped that this article illustrates one possible way to synthesize the research products of cultural and individual level findings.

At this point, much needs to be learned through empirical investigations. Above all, the various links proposed between the need to belong and the cognitive, motivational, and affective should be investigated more systematically. For instance, is the frequency and impact of social comparison actually higher in cultures that report lower levels of SWB? Although sporadic findings support this idea (cf. White & Lehman, 2005), it needs to be examined more comprehensively across cultures. Also, importantly, it needs to be seen precisely how cultural difference in relational concerns moderates this link between social comparison frequency and SWB.

Before concluding, it should be added that it was not the intention of this article to paint an overly pessimistic picture of the East Asian self. Rather, it is hoped that the current review offers a more balanced and a more realistic perception of the highly social-conscious East Asian self. Some social psychologists may have a somewhat utopian picture of a highly collectivistic society. More salient might be the potential benefits (e.g., strong social support) of collectivism than the complex obligations each individual owes to others and the disruptive repercussions created by interpersonal conflicts and misunderstandings. Living in a culture closely knit with others means not only that you have many friends to seek solace from, but it also implies that there are more people who are jealous of your achievements, disappointed because you ignore them, or made furious by your inappropriate social conduct (cf. Adams, 2005; Taylor et al., 2004).

Preoccupation with individualistic ideals can produce a wide variety of negative outcomes (e.g., Crocker & Park, 2004). Similarly, the collectivist culture's strong emphasis on social harmony and order may create psychologically negative byproducts. However, to date, very few researchers have tried to elaborate on this latter issue. Accurate insights about self, culture, and happiness will accrue through a balanced understanding of both the bright and dark sides of each culture.

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