

Religion and Subjective Well-Being: Western and Eastern Religious Groups Achieved Subjective Well-Being in Different Ways

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Abstract Culture can moderate which variables most influence subjective well-being (SWB). Because religion can be conceptualized as culture, religious differences can be considered cultural differences. However, there have been few studies comparing how different religious groups evaluate SWB at any given time. This study is among the first to investigate this issue. The present study compared Buddhists, Taoists, Christians, and atheists. In addition to demographic items, 451 Chinese adults completed Chinese version of the Socially Oriented Cultural Conception of SWB Scale. Religious belief was distributed as follows: 10 % Christian, 20 % Buddhist, 25 % Taoist, and 43 % atheists. As predicted, the socially oriented cultural conception of SWB was found to be highest among Buddhists, followed in order by Taoists, atheists, and Christians. It was concluded that the various religious groups achieved SWB in different ways.

Keywords Religion · Subjective well-being · Buddhism · Taoism · Christianity

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Introduction

Psychologists' neglect of religion is especially unfortunate because religion plays a central role in most people's psychological processes, moral decision making, and subjective well-being (SWB) (Sedikides 2010). There also is substantial evidence that some aspects of religiosity are important for health (Park 2007), although there are dissenting views (Sloan et al. 1999). Although it is believed that the central function of religion is to promote SWB (Green and Elliott 2010; Proffitt et al. 2007), few studies have focused on how different religious groups handle SWB. The present study is among the first to investigate how different religious groups evaluate SWB.

SWB is also termed happiness or life satisfaction, referring to how people evaluate their lives (Diener et al. 2003). It is fairly stable over time, and it recovers after major life events (Diener et al. 2003; Ryan and Deci 2001). Culture can moderate which variables most influence SWB (Diener et al. 2003), which means that different cultures might lead people to achieve SWB in different ways (Lu 2008; Lu and Gilmour 2006; Lu et al. 2001). A major criticism of previous cross-cultural research has been the lack of subculture comparisons (Diener et al. 2003). Because religion can be conceptualized as culture (Lam 2006), religious differences can be considered cultural differences (Cohen and Hill 2007). Likewise, different religious groups can be considered different subcultures, thus providing a good opportunity to study how different subcultures define SWB. There have been few studies comparing how different religious groups define SWB at any given time. Furthermore, because most SWB research has been conducted in the West (Diener et al. 2003), there is a need to know how different cultures influence SWB. Because Chinese society hosts many different religious groups, such as Christians, Buddhists, and Taoists (Shiah et al. 2010), it provides a good background for studying how different religious groups influence how their members define SWB. (Note that for ease of expression in this paper, we define "religious groups" as including atheists.)

The two major religions in Chinese society are religious Taoism and Buddhism (Soong and Li 1988). Both can be traced back to ancient times (Overmyer et al. 1995) and with a few exceptions developed in parallel (Mollier 2006). Religious Taoism is mainly a mixture of philosophical Taoism and Buddhism. (From here on, we will refer to religious Taoism simply as "Taoism.")

Taiwan, along with China, is considered a Confucian society that values collectivism over individualism (Caldwell-Harris and Aycicegi 2006; Oyserman et al. 2002). Thus, social relations are important in Chinese society (Hwang 1987). In Confucian societies, ordinary people devote themselves to maintaining harmonious social relations and use self-cultivation to achieve satisfying social relationships and fulfill the corresponding role obligations (Hwang and Chang 2009). Given that culture provides normative beliefs and sanctions particular actions for attaining both individual and collective goals (Lehman et al. 2004), we assume that fulfilling these role obligations makes a large contribution to the definition of SWB. This characterization of SWB differs from the Western focus on its hedonic and eudaimonic aspects (Ryan and Deci 2001), which emphasizes individualism (Caldwell-Harris and Aycicegi 2006; Oyserman et al. 2002). Buddhism and Taoism arose in Chinese societies, which place high value on collectivism, whereas Christianity developed in Western countries, which place a high value on individualism. It thus is logical to assume that there is a mismatch between Christian values in individualistic societies and Confucian values in societies that stress social relationships. Following from the hypothesized relationship between personal values and SWB (Oishi et al. 1999), it has been shown that Asian-Americans and

Japanese who experience positive changes in SWB do so by trying to make others happy (Diener et al. 2003). Social relationships have been a strong predictor of SWB in China and other collectivistic cultures (Kwan et al. 1997).

Lu and Gilmour (2006) developed a culturally balanced and fair tool to measure the collectivist and individualistic aspect of SWB. They labeled the construct as “socially oriented SWB.” This construct embodies the two lower-level constructs of role obligation and dialectical balance. Role obligation means that happiness requires the maintenance of harmonious social relations. These relations are achieved through self-cultivation of the fulfillment of the corresponding social role obligations, the purpose being to assure the common welfare and social harmony. Dialectical balance represents the belief that “happiness” and “unhappiness” are interdependent and that each can be dynamically converted to the other in an endless circle. This circle is expressed through internal homeostasis (which includes physical, psychological, and spiritual being) and external homeostasis (which includes social relationships and nature). Lu and Gilmour (2006) found that Chinese reported achieving SWB mainly through Socially Oriented Cultural Conception of Subjective Well-Being (SSWB), compared Americans.

Thus, we would expect Chinese religions to incorporate socially oriented conceptions of SWB more than Christianity does. Religious involvement in Chinese society has been found to be greatest among Christians, followed in order by Buddhists, Taoists, and atheists (Shiah et al. 2010). Thus, assuming that religion is related to culture, religious involvement should be positively correlated with SSWB for followers of Chinese religions but not Christians, suggesting a specific ordering of SSWB among Chinese religions as can be seen in following hypothesis.

Hypothesis: A socially oriented conception of SWB is strongest among Buddhists, followed in order by Taoists, atheists, and Christians.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of 451 participants (150 males and 300 females, one missing data point for sex) ranging in age from 17 to 73 years $M = 28.9$, $SD = 11.53$ was recruited from the city of Kaohsiung in Taiwan. Religious belief was distributed as follows: 10 % Christian ($N = 45$), 20 % Buddhist ($N = 89$), 25 % Taoist ($N = 113$), and 43 % atheists ($N = 192$). The distribution of Christians was similar to that in a previous study conducted in Chinese society (5.6 %) using stratified random sampling (Soong and Li 1988) and is consistent with the status of Christianity as a minority religion in Chinese culture. The remaining 2 % of the respondents ($N = 12$) did not answer the religious belief question. All test procedures were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Psychology Department of Kaohsiung Medical University.

Measures

Demographic Questionnaire

The items addressed age, gender, religious affiliation, education, and family income.

Socially Oriented Cultural Conception of Subjective Well-Being (SSWB) Scale

Written in Chinese, the SSWB Scale has 26 items assigned to two subscales: Role Obligations (RO) and Dialectical Balance (DB) (Lu and Gilmour 2006). Respondents answer the items using a 6-point scale, ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 6 “strongly agree.” For the SSWB subscales, Cronbach’s alpha was 0.89 and test–retest reliability was satisfactory (0.76). Convergent and discriminant validity, assessed by examining the associations of the instrument with other measures theoretically related to SSWB, is satisfactory (Lu and Gilmour 2006).

Results

Demographic Comparisons

Table 1 presents the demographic data. Only the religious groups significantly differed with respect to age, $F(3,428) = 23.28$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.14$. Post hoc t tests revealed that the mean age of the Buddhists was significantly higher than that of the Christians, $t(127) = 4.25$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.80$; Taoists, $t(195) = 4.81$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.68$; and atheists, $t(272) = 8.38$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.02$. There were no other significant pair-wise differences.

Comparison of Religious Groups on the Social Orientation of Their Conception of SWB

The SSWB scores of the different religious groups are shown in Table 2. The ANOVAs reveal that the groups differed significantly on the SSWB Scale, $F(3,435) = 13.13$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.08$. The significant t tests for the SSWB Scale (see Table 2) are as

Table 1 Demographic data

	Christians ($n = 45$)	Buddhists ($n = 89$)	Taoists ($n = 113$)	Atheists ($n = 192$)	F/χ^2
Gender					5.61
Male	17	22	45	62	
Female	28	67	68	130	
Age					23.28***
M	27.21	37.19	28.89	25.54	
SD	11.34	13.38	10.79	9.13	
95 % CI	23.80, 30.62	34.29, 40.10	26.88, 30.90	24.23, 26.85	
Family income (per month)					0.34
M	98,800.00	97,370.91	138,500.00	124,575.21	
SD	135,909.59	131,875.75	221,940.57	329,075.28	
95 % CI	42,699, 154,900	61,720, 133,021	87,080, 189,919	65,343, 183,806	

The currency for family income is the New Taiwan dollar

*** $p < .001$

Table 2 Means, SDs, 95 % CIs, and *t* tests comparing religious groups on SSWB

Religious groups				Buddhists		Taoists		Atheists	
Measure	<i>M</i>	SD	95 % CI	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>
Christians (<i>N</i> = 45)									
SSWB	114.78	14.25	120.30, 125.42	-4.66***	0.87	-3.30**	0.58	-1.47	0.24
Buddhists (<i>N</i> = 89)									
SSWB	128.17	16.39	124.71, 131.62			2.50*	0.35	5.28***	0.66
Taoists (<i>N</i> = 113)									
SSWB	122.86	13.75	120.30, 125.42					2.85*	0.34
Atheists (<i>N</i> = 192)									
SSWB	118.17	13.95	116.19, 120.16						

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (all two-tailed)

follows: Buddhists scored higher than Taoists, atheists, and Christians. Taoists scored higher than atheists and Christians. There was no significant difference between atheists and Christians. These results generally support the hypothesis that socially oriented SWB is greater among Buddhists than Taoists, atheists, and Christians.

Discussion

This study is among the first to investigate how members of different religions define SWB. The purpose of this study was to compare different religious groups as well as atheists on the extent to which their conception of SWB is socially oriented. To test the hypothesis related to this comparison, 451 Chinese adults completed the Chinese version of the Individual-Oriented and Socially Oriented Cultural Conceptions of Subjective Well-Being (SSWB) Scale. Religious belief was distributed as follows: 10 % Christian, 20 % Buddhist, 25 % Taoist, and 43 % atheists. As predicted, Buddhists has the greatest SSWB, followed by Taoists, atheists, and Christians. Adherents to the Chinese religions (Buddhists and Taoists) embraced the socially oriented conception of SWB more than adherents to the other religions.

One interpretation of this finding is that religious differences are cultural differences with respect to SWB. For example, Buddhism and Taoism were developed in a Chinese society that places a high value on collectivism. An equally plausible explanation is that the religious differences are the result of national differences (Cohen and Hill 2007). Christianity and the two major Chinese religions developed in different countries in different parts of the world. One explanation which comes to mind is based upon the fit between one's religious beliefs and the traditional beliefs of the society in which one resides. Given that our data raise the possibility that Chinese religions emphasize a social orientation to SWB orientation, these results support the conclusion that culture influences psychological processes (Sedikides 2010).

As Christianity values believing in terms of hope-filled, open-armed, alive-and-well faith (Overbeck 2008), and spiritual experience (Shiah et al. 2013), a clue might be that in Taiwan, Christianity seems not to stress the pursuit of social harmony and social role obligations. Spiritual experience refers to experience that can persuade person of the

existence of a supreme being and cause that person to feel close to this supreme being (Shiah et al. 2013). More research is needed to explore this possibility.

It would be desirable in future research to use random sampling rather than the convenience sampling employed in this study. Another limitation of our study was its cross-sectional design; research using longitudinal designs is needed to assess changes over time in the relation between religious involvement and SWB. Differences between religions in the degree of a social versus an individualistic orientation to SWB need detailed explanation. Qualitative data from members of the different groups would be very useful in understanding the influence of religious beliefs on SWB.

The investigation of SWB and religiosity in this context creates new opportunities for understanding how these variables are related to each other. The present research provides a crucial first step toward understanding how Christianity and the Eastern religions reflect different levels of social orientation toward SWB. Future studies are needed to replicate our preliminary results and refine the theoretical propositions addressed in this paper.

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