

Activities for Teaching Positive Psychology



A Guide for Instructors

Edited by

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13

CULTURE AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

CULTURE INFLUENCES THE INGREDIENTS OF A GOOD LIFE AND CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF HAPPINESS

Christie Napa Scollon, Derrick Wirtz, and Xuan-yi Wei

This activity demonstrates how culture influences what people choose to emphasize in the good life by asking students to allocate points to different life priorities and to indicate their preference for activated versus deactivated positive emotions, after being primed with either an "individualistic" or "collectivistic" mind-set.

CONCEPT

You can consider several sources of information in deciding whether you are leading a highly satisfying life. Do you think about the pleasant feelings you experience frequently? Do you think about whether you are leading the kind of life that is approved of by your friends or parents? Whether people choose to rely on inner emotional experiences (e.g., the first question) or social information (e.g., the latter question) depends in part on their culture (Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). Much of the research on culture and subjective well-being has compared people from collectivist societies (e.g., China or Japan, where people usually define themselves in terms of their relationships with others) with people from individualistic societies (e.g., the United States, where people regard themselves as separate and distinct from others; Diener & Suh, 1999). Although there are certainly other ways to slice up the world (e.g., democracy vs. non-democracy, developing vs. developed, tight vs. loose cultures), we focus on comparing individualist versus collectivist cultures in this chapter because we know the most about this comparison, in particular, how to activate each cultural framework. Because in any given classroom setting, all the students are likely to be from the same type of society, it does not make sense to compare collectivists and individualists. However, an analogous concept at the individual level is self-construal. The *independent self-construal* is much like that of an individualist, whereas the *interdependent self-construal* is like that of a collectivist. Although people's self-construals are related to the culture in which they live, importantly, for the purposes of this demonstration, people's self-construals can be temporarily manipulated to be more independent or interdependent. In this classroom demonstration, we prime members of a single culture to be more independent (individualistic) or interdependent (collectivist), and then we observe the differences in their life satisfaction judgments.

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**MATERIALS
NEEDED**

You will need copies of the thought-listing task V1 (independent self-construal prime) for half the class and copies of the thought-listing task V2 (interdependent self-construal prime) for the other half (see Appendices 13.1 and 13.2 for prompts). You will need one copy of the outcome measures (see Appendix 13.3) for each student. You will need a calculator to compute the mean score for each condition.

INSTRUCTIONS

The thought-listing task is a self-construal priming task that was derived from ideas in Ybarra and Trafimow (1998) and Suh, Diener, and Updegraff (2008). Students receiving the independent self-construal prime are asked to write about what makes them different from their friends and family. Students receiving the interdependent self-construal prime are asked to write about what they have in common with their friends and family.

Upon completion of the listing task, all students will complete the outcome measures (see Appendix 13.3). The first outcome measure asks students to design their ideal life by using the "ingredients" listed. Each level of each ingredient costs that amount in "life bucks." The student designs his or her ideal life within a budget of 21 life bucks. The budget paradigm was derived from ideas in Li, Bailey, Kenrick, and Linsenmeier (2002). The idea behind it is that everybody would prefer to have high self-esteem, frequent pleasant emotions, constant social approval, and uninterrupted harmonious social relationships. The budget paradigm allows us to see what aspects people prioritize. Students might find the task difficult in the same way that shopping for an entire wardrobe on a \$100 budget might be difficult.

The second outcome measure asks students to look at two different happy faces and select the one that represents true happiness. This item was derived from ideas in Tsai, Louie, Chen, and Uchida (2007). The closed-eyes, closed-mouth face looks more calm and contented (low arousal but pleasant), while the open-eyes, open-mouth face looks more excited (high arousal but also pleasant).

After the students complete the activity, the instructor should explain the difference between collectivist and individualist societies (Triandis, 1989) and independent and interdependent self-construals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Point out that the class received two different versions of the thought-listing task, and ask the class to guess which version was designed to prime the independent self and which was designed to prime the interdependent self. Ask students why thinking about one's uniqueness would prime the independent self-construal. Why does thinking about how one fits in with one's group prime the interdependent self-construal?

Next, tally responses for the independent and interdependent conditions separately. Compute the mean budget allocated to the feelings item and the mean budget allocated to the social approval item for the two construal groups separately. Table 13.1 illustrates the comparison.

Next, tabulate responses to the faces question separately for the two priming conditions. Table 13.2 illustrates the comparison.

DISCUSSION

Did students in the independent condition give a greater allocation to feelings and a lesser allocation to social approval than did students in the interdependent condition, as expected? Ask students why personal feelings are given greater consideration in judgments of life satisfaction in an individualistic society and why social approval is given greater consideration in judgments of life satisfaction in a collectivist society. (In our experience with this task, no difference is usually found

Table 13.1 *Comparison Table for Life Bucks Allocation Task*

Budget allocation	Independent self-construal	Interdependent self-construal
Mean budget for <i>feelings</i>		
Mean budget for <i>social approval</i>		

Table 13.2 *Comparison Table for Face Selection Task*

Frequency	Independent self-construal	Interdependent self-construal
No. of students selecting Face A (low-arousal, positive affect)		
No. of students selecting Face B (high-arousal, positive affect)		

in budgets allocated to self-esteem, which is consistent with research showing that self-esteem is important to both collectivists and individualists; Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1997. We have also not found differences in budgets allocated to getting along with others, which is consistent with research showing the overwhelming importance of social relationships to personal happiness; Diener & Seligman, 2002.) How might the reliance on different cues (internal vs. social) affect overall levels of happiness? In other words, is it easier to be happy if you judge your happiness solely based on your internal cues? Some evidence from past research suggests that this is the case (Suh et al., 2008).

Did more students in the independent self-construal condition select Face B than Face A? Did more students in the interdependent self-construal condition select Face A than Face B? (If numbers of students in the two priming conditions were not equal, the instructor may need to compute percentages rather than use the raw counts.) Ask students to describe the emotions that are associated with each face. For example, Face A might bring to mind feelings of contentment and relaxation, while Face B might bring to mind feelings of pride and excitement. Ask students to list as many emotions as possible that go with each face and write them on the board in two columns. Students may even want to describe the events that might cause the different expressions. Discuss what the emotions under each face have in common. Which face displays higher arousal? Discuss with the students why people in collectivist societies might conceptualize life satisfaction more in terms of low-arousal positive emotions, while people in individualistic societies conceptualize life satisfaction more in terms of high-arousal positive emotions. Ask students to think of situations in which high-arousal positive states might be adaptive and situations in which low-arousal positive states might be adaptive. According to Tsai et al. (2006), influencing or persuading others involves high-arousal positive states (e.g., excitement), whereas adjusting to other people's needs and desires involves low-arousal positive states (e.g., calm, relaxed).¹

¹To better grasp this topic, instructors and students are encouraged to consult the following sources: Suh, Diener, Oishi, and Triandis (1998); Suh, Diener, and Updegraff (2008); and Tsai, Knutson, and Fung (2006).

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Appendix 13.1

In the spaces below, list the ways in which you are **different** from your family and friends.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____
13. _____
14. _____
15. _____

Wait—do not turn the page yet! Your instructor will let you know when to continue.
Can you think of any more ways in which you are **different** from your family and friends?

Appendix 13.2

In the spaces below, list all the things you have **in common** with your family and friends.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____
13. _____
14. _____
15. _____

Wait—do not turn the page yet! Your instructor will let you know when to continue.
Can you think of any more things you have **in common** with your family and friends?

Appendix 13.3

PART 1

In this task, we'd like you to design your ideal life.

In doing so, you will spend "life bucks" on different options.

For each of the options below, each desired level will cost you life bucks. For example, if you wish to experience high self-esteem 50% of the time, you will need to spend 5 life bucks.

The goal is to create the most satisfying life for you. However, you have to stick to the budget we have given you, and that is 21 life bucks. Make sure all of the numbers you have circled add up to 21.

<i>Choose your ideal combination of the options below, for the ideal life. You have \$21 in "life bucks" to use.</i>	10% of the time	50% of the time	100% of the time
High self-esteem	\$1	2 3 4	5 6 7 8 9 \$10
Feelings such as <i>happiness, calm, excited, pleasant, proud, relaxed</i>	\$1	2 3 4	5 6 7 8 9 \$10
The approval of your friends and family	\$1	2 3 4	5 6 7 8 9 \$10
Getting along well with other people	\$1	2 3 4	5 6 7 8 9 \$10

Does your combination of options for your ideal life add up to 21? (circle one): YES / NO

PART 2

Which picture do you think best represents a person who is truly *happy and feels satisfied* with life?

CHOOSE ONLY ONE (circle your preference).

