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## Good for self or good for others? The well-being benefits of kindness in two cultures depend on how the kindness is framed

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### ABSTRACT

In light of cultural differences in conceptions of happiness, we investigated whether members of independent (vs. interdependent) cultures would benefit from prosocial behavior when self-focus is highlighted (vs. when other-focus is highlighted). In a 1-week randomized controlled intervention, U.S. ( $N = 280$ ) and South Korean ( $N = 261$ ) participants were randomly assigned to read a news article that described kind acts as good for oneself or good for others, or to read a control article. All participants then performed kind acts throughout the week, and completed pre- and post-measures of subjective well-being, connectedness, competence, and autonomy. Consistent with independent self-construals, U.S. participants who read that kindness was good for themselves showed greater increases in positive affect, satisfaction with life, and feelings of connectedness – and greater decreases in negative affect – than those who read the control article. Future research is needed to continue developing culturally-sensitive designs of positive activities.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Well-being; culture; kind acts; framing; need satisfaction


The pursuit of happiness is a global phenomenon, regularly dominating cultural discourse, popular media, and people's closely held goals (Diener, 2000). Not surprisingly, psychological scientists have been exploring specific strategies – or positive activities – that can sustainably improve happiness. Positive activity interventions experimentally test the practice of simple, self-administered cognitive and behavioral strategies that can increase subjective well-being by promoting positive feelings, positive thoughts, and positive behaviors (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014). For example, activities such as counting one's blessings (Chancellor, Layous, & Lyubomirsky, 2015; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005), writing letters of gratitude (Boehm, Lyubomirsky, & Sheldon, 2011; Layous, Lee, Choi, & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Layous et al., 2017; Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011; Seligman et al., 2005), and performing acts of kindness (Chancellor, Margolis, Jacobs Bao, & Lyubomirsky, 2018; Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008; Layous et al., 2013; Nelson et al., 2015; Nelson, Layous, Cole, & Lyubomirsky, 2016; Sheldon, Boehm, & Lyubomirsky, 2012) have been shown to reliably boost well-being. If administered optimally, positive activity interventions can also build positive

psychological resources such as social connections and meaning in life, as well as ameliorate existing maladaptive symptoms such as anxiety and rumination (Layous, Chancellor, & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006; Seligman et al., 2005; Shin & Lyubomirsky, 2016; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009; Taylor, Lyubomirsky, & Stein, 2017).

A notable criticism of current research testing positive activity interventions is that their trials have been conducted on primarily Anglo/European (i.e., Western) samples (Shin & Lyubomirsky, 2017; but see Layous et al., 2013; Titova, Wagstaff, & Parks, 2017, for exceptions). Because Asians comprise 60 percent of the world's population (Population Reference Bureau, 2014) and Asian Americans are the fastest-growing minority group in the U.S., there is a critical need to address these groups' mental health needs (U.S. Census, 2010). For example, South Korea currently has the highest rate of hospitalizations for mental illness and the highest suicide rate for a member country of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (WHO, 2017). Self-administered positive activities may be especially valuable for Asians and Asian Americans because they are relatively less stigmatizing, low-cost, and carry minimal side effects.

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## Subjective well-being in independent versus interdependent cultures

Although the need for research on strategies to improve mental health among Asians and Asian Americans is clear, investigators should be careful not to assume a one-size-fits-all approach, due to cultural differences in Western and Eastern conceptions of well-being. A widely used definition of subjective well-being in Western (independent) cultures is 'a preponderance of positive affect over negative affect' and 'a global satisfaction with one's life' (Diener, 1984). In recent years, however, psychologists have sought to distinguish Eastern notions of well-being from those of Western traditions, defining interdependent subjective well-being as 'the global, subjective assessment of whether one is interpersonally harmonized with other people, being quiescent, and being ordinary, and connected to the collective way of well-being' (Hitokoto & Uchida, 2015, p. 214).

These differences in conceptions of subjective well-being build upon Markus and Kitayama's (1991) work on independent and interdependent self-construals. Markus and Kitayama (1991) define an independent self-construal as a view of the self in which Western individuals see themselves as autonomous entities who assert their rights and act agentically. In contrast, they define the Eastern, interdependent self-construal as a view of oneself as connected, relational, and belonging to a larger social group. These distinct self-views have been found to be associated with socially disengaging and socially engaging behaviors, respectively. Socially disengaging behaviors, such as asserting and protecting one's rights, acting on the basis of one's own judgments, and separating or distinguishing the self from the context, have been associated with independence and interpersonal disengagement of the self in the U.S. (Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000). Applying the concept of independent self-construal to the pursuit of happiness, subjective well-being in Western cultures is generally characterized by an explicit striving for one's individual or personal happiness that may involve mastering one's environment and achieving goals (including social goals) independently (Uchida, Norasakkunkit, & Kitayama, 2004). In other words, with an independent approach to pursuing subjective well-being, the ultimate goal is personal happiness, even if this pursuit may involve other people in the process.

Socially engaging behavior, on the other hand, involves taking one's proper place, perfecting one's

roles, empathizing with others, acting on the bases of others' expectations, and blurring the distinction between self and others. This type of behavior is prevalent in East Asian cultures and has been associated with interdependence and interpersonal engagement of the self (Kitayama et al., 2000). Subjective well-being in Eastern cultures thus emphasizes connectedness, group harmony, and the well-being of the collective group (Hitokoto & Uchida, 2015; Uchida et al., 2004) – that is, the ultimate goal is not one's distinct personal happiness but rather the well-being of the group through harmonious and fulfilling relationships. As a case in point, American students' happiness has been found to be highly correlated with interpersonally disengaged emotions such as pride, whereas the happiness of Japanese counterparts has been found to be more closely linked to interpersonally engaged emotions such as friendly feelings towards others (Kitayama, Mesquita, & Karasawa, 2006).

Given the different approaches to well-being observed in Western and Eastern cultures, in the current study, we aimed to test whether framing a validated positive activity (i.e., doing acts of kindness) as good for the self would be additionally beneficial for increasing subjective well-being in a U.S. sample and whether framing it as good for others would be additionally beneficial in a South Korean sample. In other words, by framing a traditional kindness intervention in two different ways, we sought to test cultural differences in the factors that contribute to well-being.

## Kind acts in independent and interdependent cultures

Behaving prosocially has been reliably shown to increase well-being in individuals from Western, independent cultures (Dunn et al., 2008; Layous et al., 2013; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, Schkade, 2005; Nelson et al., 2015, 2016; Sheldon et al., 2012). Evidence is mounting, however, that remembering and enacting kindness are positive activities that have the potential to be equally successful in Eastern, interdependent cultures due to their positive focus on others (Layous et al., 2013; Nelson et al., 2015; Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, & Fredrickson, 2006). For example, a study in Japan reported that people increased in subjective well-being and became more kind and grateful after counting their own kind acts over the course of 1 week (Otake et al., 2006). In another study, South Koreans showed similar increases in well-being as did Americans when performing acts of kindness (Layous et al., 2013).

Additionally, self-determination theory postulates that humans have three basic needs – including autonomy (control over one's choices), competence (feeling that one is effective and skilled), and relatedness (i.e., connectedness; feeling close and connected to others) – and that the fulfillment of these needs is associated with greater psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Paralleling findings in the U.S., engaging in autonomous prosocial behavior in South Korea led to improvements in participants' subjective well-being, as well as in feelings of autonomy, competence, and connectedness (Nelson et al., 2015). As a whole, these results suggest that practicing prosocial behaviors is indeed beneficial to individuals from Eastern cultures.

Importantly, not all positive activities work equally well across cultures. As a case in point, when U.S. and South Korean participants were randomly assigned to express gratitude or to perform kind acts, U.S. participants benefitted from both activities, whereas South Koreans benefitted only from performing kind acts but not from expressing gratitude (Layous et al., 2013). The researchers surmised that the South Koreans did not derive as much benefit from practicing gratitude because they felt indebted and/or guilty about being the recipient of others' kind acts. This interpretation aligns with the idea that interdependent subjective well-being is concerned with the maintenance of interpersonal harmony, the welfare of the collective group, and the fulfillment of role obligations in relationships.

Consistent with this notion, prosocial behavior may boost East Asians' well-being by contributing to the expected norms of maintaining the well-being of the collective group. By contrast, for Western (i.e., European or North American) individuals, prosocial behavior may serve to boost well-being because it is relatively less expected and/or confirms that one is a good person. Thus, framing prosocial behavior as good for the self may enhance its ability to increase well-being among a Western sample, whereas framing it as good for others may make it more likely to increase well-being among an Eastern sample.

To investigate the idea that members of independent cultures benefit from prosocial behavior when self-focus is highlighted, whereas members of interdependent cultures benefit when other-focus is highlighted, we designed a 1-week randomized controlled intervention. Participants from the U.S. (independent culture) and South Korea (interdependent culture) were randomly assigned to read a news article that described kind acts as good for oneself or good for others, or to read a control article about the benefits of being organized. All participants were then asked to

perform kind acts throughout the week and completed both baseline and post-intervention measures of subjective well-being, connectedness, competence, and autonomy.

## Hypotheses

First, we predicted that, due to their independent orientation, U.S. participants who read that performing kind acts is good for themselves (i.e., with 'good for self' framing) and then perform them would experience greater gains in subjective well-being (namely, increased positive affect, decreased negative affect, and increased life satisfaction), as well as in autonomy, competence, and connectedness, than those who perform kind acts without any framing (i.e., controls; Hypothesis 1).

In contrast, we hypothesized that, due to their interdependent orientation, South Koreans who read that kind acts are good for others (i.e., 'good for others' framing) and perform them would experience larger improvements in subjective well-being and need satisfaction than controls (i.e., no framing; Hypothesis 2).

## Method

### Participants

Two samples of students were recruited for this study. The first group comprised undergraduates ( $n = 309$ ) attending the University of California, Riverside (UCR) – a diverse, large public university in the United States – who completed the study in exchange for course credit. In this group, 29 participants were removed from the sample because they failed to complete the second time point, leaving a total of 280 participants (67% female), ages 18 to 35 ( $M_{\text{age}} = 19.2$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ). Fifty-two percent of participants were Asian/Asian American, 28% Hispanic/Latino(a), 7% White/Caucasian, 3% Black/African American, and 10% Other/More than one (see Discussion on implications of ethnic identification of U.S. participants). A chi-square test of independence revealed that the participants who failed to complete the second time point did not vary by condition from those who did complete it,  $\chi^2(2, N = 309) = 1.83$ ,  $p = .40$ . Drop-out status was examined as a predictor of all of our dependent variables, but no significant differences were found between U.S. participants who remained in the study until the end and those who dropped out after the first timepoint (all  $t_s(307) < |.81|$ ; all  $p_s > .42$ ).

Final sample sizes per condition in the U.S. were as follows: Good for Self ( $n = 112$ ), Good for Others ( $n = 87$ ), and Control ( $n = 81$ ). A statistical power

analysis software program, G\*Power 3.1, revealed that for a small effect size ( $f = .16$ ) and an alpha value of .05, 280 participants in three groups could detect the effect with 79% power (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). Chi-square tests of independence indicated that gender,  $\chi^2(4, N = 279) = 4.37, p = .36$ , and ethnicity,  $\chi^2(12, N = 279) = 11.16, p = .52$ , did not vary by condition for the U.S. participants.

The second group comprised undergraduates ( $n = 340$ ) attending Seoul National University (SNU) – a large public university in South Korea – who also completed the study in exchange for course credit. In this group, 67 participants were removed for not completing the second time point, leaving a total of 273 participants (48% female; 99% Korean, 1% other), ages 18 to 30 ( $M_{age} = 21.4, SD = 2.63$ ). A chi-square test of independence revealed that the participants who dropped out did not vary by condition from the participants who completed,  $\chi^2(2, N = 340) = 2.85, p = .24$ . Drop-out status did not significantly predict any of our dependent variables (all  $ts(338) < |1.09|$ ; all  $ps > .28$ ).

Sample sizes per condition in S. Korea were as follows: Good for Self ( $n = 88$ ), Good for Others ( $n = 91$ ), and Control ( $n = 94$ ). For an alpha value of .05, 273 participants in 3 groups can detect a small effect size ( $f = .16$ ) with 78% power. Finally, neither gender,  $\chi^2(2, N = 273) = 3.31, p = .19$ , nor ethnicity,  $\chi^2(2, N = 273) = 2.01, p = .37$ , varied by condition for South Korean participants.

### Design and procedure

A 3 (Condition: Good for Self, Good for Others, Control)  $\times$  2 (Cultural Background: U.S., South Korea)  $\times$  2 (Time: baseline/pre-intervention, post-intervention) mixed factorial design was used in this study (see Figure 1 for study timeline and measures).

At baseline, all participants completed demographics and several well-being measures (described below). All measures and intervention instructions were administered in English for U.S. participants and in Korean for South Korean participants. To create the Korean measures and intervention instructions, the English measures and instructions were translated into Korean by a bilingual speaker and then back-translated into English in order to confirm that the translations contained the same content as the English measures and instructions.

Participants were then randomly assigned to read news articles – all ostensibly from TIME Magazine for U.S. participants and Naver News for S. Korean participants – about how kindness benefits the self (Good for Self condition), how kindness benefits others (Good for Others condition), or how being organized benefits the self (neutral Control condition).<sup>1</sup> As shown in Appendices A and D, the Good for Self group read about evidence that being kind can increase personal happiness, alleviate depression, and boost work productivity, and that these effects occur universally across many cultures. Participants in the Good for Others group read about how being kind can boost the positive emotions, self-esteem, feelings of connectedness, engagement at work, and health of the recipients of kindness, and that these effects are evident across many different cultures (see Appendices B and E). Finally, the Control group read about how organizational skills can increase efficiency, the management of responsibilities, and the attainment of personal goals (see Appendices C and F).

After reading their assigned article, all participants were asked to perform acts of kindness for others. They could perform as many kind acts as they wanted, to whomever they chose, and with or without the beneficiary's awareness; the only stipulation was that they were to be performed in all in one day. The instructions were as follows:

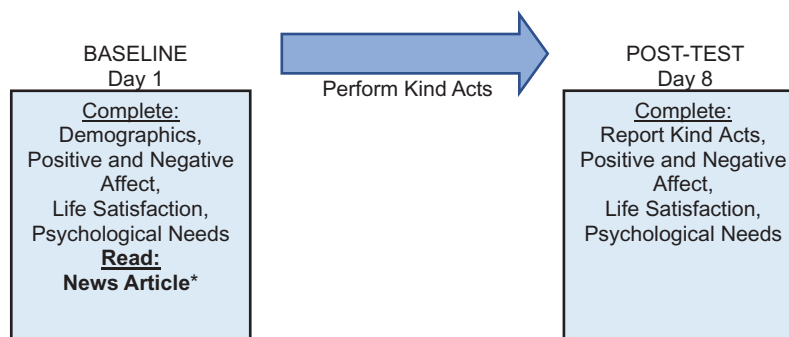


Figure 1. Study timeline and measures.

\*News Article Conditions: 1) Kindness is good for the self, 2) Kindness is good for others, or 3) Organization is good (control group)

In our daily lives, we all perform acts of kindness for others. These acts may be large or small and the person for whom the act is performed may or may not be aware of the act. Examples include helping your parents cook dinner, doing a chore for your sister or brother, helping a friend with homework, visiting an elderly relative, or writing a thank you letter. During one day this week (any day you choose), you are to perform acts of kindness (as many as you want) – all in one day. The acts do not need to be for the same person, the person may or may not be aware of the act, and the act may or may not be similar to the acts listed above. Next week, you will report what acts of kindness you chose to perform. Please do not perform any acts that may place yourself or others in danger.

After 1 week, participants logged back into the survey website, reported the kind acts they had performed that week, and completed post-manipulation measures of all of the constructs assessed at baseline.

## Measures

### Positive and negative affect

Participants' emotions were assessed using the Modified Differential Emotions Scale (mDES; Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003). The mDES requires participants to recall and rate their strongest experience of a variety of positive emotions (e.g., 'I have felt amused, fun-loving, silly') and negative emotions (e.g., 'I have felt angry, irritated, annoyed') during the past week on a 5-point scale (0 = never, 5 = all of the time). The mDES includes a subscale for positive emotions (e.g., amusement, compassion, confidence; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$  at baseline;  $\alpha = .88$  at post-intervention) and a subscale for negative emotions (e.g., anger, sadness, contempt;  $\alpha = .85$  at baseline;  $\alpha = .88$  at post-intervention).

### Life satisfaction

To assess life satisfaction, participants completed the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The SWLS consists of five items (e.g., 'In most ways my life is close to my ideal') rated on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients were .85 at baseline and .85 at post-intervention.

### Psychological need satisfaction

Rooted in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), psychological need satisfaction assesses the degree to which people's core needs are being met (Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001; Sheldon & Hilpert, 2012). The Balanced Measure of Psychological Needs consists of 18 items, with six each representing autonomy (e.g., 'I felt free to do things

my own way'), connectedness (e.g., 'I felt a sense of contact with people who care for me, and whom I care for'), and competence (e.g., 'I felt that I was taking on and mastering hard challenges' (1 = no agreement, 5 = much agreement; Sheldon et al., 2001). Due to relatively low reliability ( $\alpha = .58$  to  $.67$ ) of the three types of need satisfaction, results were analyzed by examining the three positively-worded items only (and excluding the three reverse-scored items).<sup>2</sup> Studies have suggested that reverse-scored items tend to load onto a separate factor than positively-worded items, compromising the scale's validity (Gehlbach, 2015). For positively-worded connectedness items,  $\alpha = .80$  at baseline and  $\alpha = .76$  at post-intervention; for positively-worded competence items,  $\alpha = .81$  at baseline and  $\alpha = .83$  at post-intervention; for positively-worded autonomy items,  $\alpha = .67$  at baseline and  $\alpha = .69$  at post-intervention. Because the reliability of positively-worded autonomy items was still low, autonomy was removed when we analyzed the data.

### Acculturation

To assess level of acculturation, Asian and Asian American participants in the U.S. completed a short version of the Suinn-Lew Asian Self Identity Acculturation scale (SL-ASIA; Suinn, Ahuna, & Khoo, 1992). The SL-ASIA consisted of 11 items (e.g., 'Whom do you now associate with in the community?') rated on a 5-point scale (1 = Almost exclusively Asians, Asian-Americans, Orientals, 5 = Almost exclusively Anglos, Black, Hispanics, or other non-Asian ethnic groups). An average was computed, with higher scores on this measure indicating greater acculturation. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient was .80.

## Results

### Preliminary analyses

We split the data by culture and analyzed participants' baseline levels of all dependent variables for significant differences among conditions. (See Tables 1 and 2 for baseline and posttest means of all dependent variables.) No differences were found. However, when we explored baseline differences by culture, collapsing across conditions, we found that the U.S. participants started with much higher baseline scores in positive affect,  $F(1, 643) = 65.71, p < .001$ , life satisfaction,  $F(1, 643) = 19.83, p < .001$ , connectedness,  $F(1, 643) = 12.66, p < .001$ , and competence,  $F(1, 643) = 12.85, p < .001$ . Because Americans and Koreans seemed to fundamentally differ in their initial subjective well-being and need satisfaction, we decided to analyze our results separately by culture.

**Table 1.** Cell means (Standard Deviations) and results of planned contrast analyses on U.S. Sample.

Dependent variable	Self (+1)		Other (0)		Control (-1)		<i>t</i> ( <i>df</i> )	<i>p</i>
	Time 1 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Time 2 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Time 1 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Time 2 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Time 1 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Time 2 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )		
Well-being								
Positive affect (mDES)	3.33 (0.65)	3.46 (0.62)	3.45 (0.66)	3.44 (0.75)	3.42 (0.64)	3.26 (0.76)	3.25 (277)	0.001**
Negative affect (mDES)	2.24 (0.72)	2.12 (0.79)	2.32 (0.74)	2.22 (0.79)	2.14 (0.65)	2.23 (0.81)	-2.19 (277)	0.03*
Satisfaction With Life	4.46 (1.16)	4.68 (1.22)	4.56 (1.29)	4.49 (1.23)	4.83 (1.20)	4.66 (1.22)	2.80 (277)	0.01*
Need Satisfaction								
Connectedness	3.77 (0.77)	3.82 (0.76)	3.78 (0.83)	3.75 (0.86)	3.88 (0.87)	3.58 (0.85)	2.58 (277)	0.01*
Competence	2.99 (0.86)	3.15 (0.82)	3.05 (0.96)	3.10 (0.88)	3.23 (0.91)	3.28 (0.96)	0.55 (277)	0.58

Note. \* $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Table 2.** Cell Means (Standard Deviations) and results of planned contrast analyses on south korean sample.

Dependent variable	Self (0)		Other (+1)		Control (-1)		<i>t</i> ( <i>df</i> )	<i>p</i>
	Time 1 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Time 2 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Time 1 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Time 2 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Time 1 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Time 2 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )		
Well-being								
Positive affect (mDES)	2.92 (0.67)	3.03 (0.66)	3.02 (0.60)	3.00 (0.59)	3.03 (0.63)	3.09 (0.58)	-0.28 (270)	0.78
Negative affect (mDES)	2.40 (0.73)	2.28 (0.85)	2.26 (0.75)	2.20 (0.72)	2.28 (0.72)	2.30 (0.76)	-1.28 (270)	0.20
Satisfaction With Life	4.11 (1.14)	4.12 (1.10)	4.26 (1.07)	4.24 (1.14)	4.26 (1.08)	4.47 (1.07)	-1.04 (270)	0.30
Need Satisfaction								
Connectedness	3.47 (0.79)	3.55 (0.71)	3.63 (0.72)	3.46 (0.77)	3.58 (0.82)	3.57 (0.84)	-1.35 (270)	0.18
Competence	2.71 (0.91)	2.79 (0.93)	2.85 (0.91)	2.89 (0.88)	2.82 (0.84)	2.78 (0.91)	0.79 (270)	0.43

Note. \* $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

### Manipulation check

To ensure that the framing kindness articles were different in the ways that we intended (e.g. vis-à-vis their implied benefits to self vs. others), we asked independent raters to judge the English and Korean articles for the number of good-for-others benefits and the number of good-for-self benefits. ICCs for the English and Korean raters ranged from .69 to .98 for the 3 articles, which are considered good to excellent reliabilities (Fleiss, 1986). As intended, in both the English and Korean articles, more good-for-self benefits ( $M = 7.00$  and  $M = 6.33$  for English and Korean, respectively) than good-for-others benefits ( $M = 0.67$ ;  $M = 2.00$ ) were counted in the good-for-self article; more good-for-others benefits ( $M = 6.67$ ;  $M = 6.00$ ) than good-for-self benefits ( $M = 1.00$ ;  $M = 4.00$ ) were counted in the good-for-others article; and, finally, more good-for-self benefits ( $M = 6.33$ ;  $M = 10.33$ ) than good-for-others benefits ( $M = 0.00$ ;  $M = 0.00$ ) were counted in the control article.

### Changes in subjective well-being, connectedness, and competence

Using the data set combined from both cultures, we also examined whether any dependent variables differed as a function of time, condition, and culture. The  $F$ -test for the Time X Condition X Culture interaction was significant for life satisfaction,  $F(2, 547) = 4.51$ ,  $p = .01$ , and connectedness  $F(2, 547) = 3.27$ ,  $p = .04$ . However, in view of our

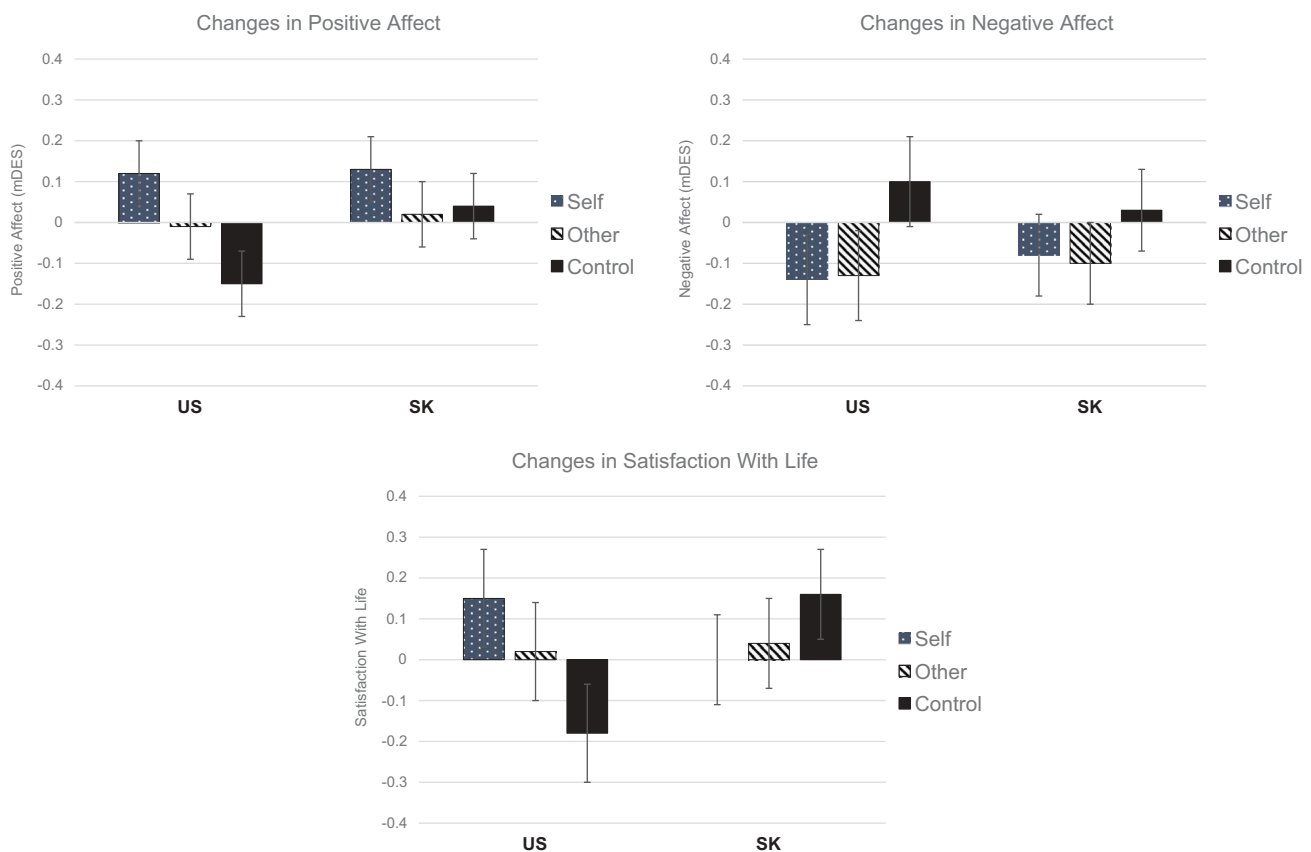
hypotheses, we were most interested in the planned contrast analyses reported below.

### United States

To test Hypothesis 1, we first calculated difference scores by subtracting Time 1 from Time 2 dependent variables – namely, positive emotions, negative emotions, life satisfaction, connectedness, and competence.<sup>3</sup> We then conducted planned contrasts on these difference scores to compare the Good for Self (+1), Good for Others (0), and Control (-1) conditions in both the U.S. and South Korean groups. The results of these analyses are shown in Table 1 and Figures 2 and 3. In support of Hypothesis 1, U.S. students who read that kindness was good for themselves showed greater increases in positive affect,  $t_{\text{contrast}}(277) = 3.25$ ,  $p = .001$ , satisfaction with life,  $t_{\text{contrast}}(277) = 2.80$ ,  $p = .01$ , feelings of connectedness,  $t_{\text{contrast}}(277) = 2.58$ ,  $p = .01$ , and greater decreases in negative affect,  $t_{\text{contrast}}(277) = -2.19$ ,  $p = .03$ , than those who read that organization was good (control). No differences were found between conditions in the U.S. for competence,  $t_{\text{contrast}}(277) = .55$ ,  $p = .58$ .

Notably, our U.S. sample included students from diverse backgrounds, including members of interdependent cultures, limiting the validity of the comparisons we could make to Asian students in Asia. In fact, only 7% of our sample identified as White/Caucasian, the prototypical race/ethnicity associated with individualism, whereas 52% identified as Asian/Asian American and 28% as Hispanic/Latino(a) – ethnic groups that have interdependent cultural

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**Figure 2.** Changes in subjective well-being for the Self, Other, and Control conditions in the U.S. and South Korea.

Note. US = United States, SK = South Korea. Self = Good-for-Self framing, Other = Good-for-Other framing, Control = Organization is good framing. Data represent

roots (Schwartz, 2007; Shin & Lyubomirsky, 2016). To address this sample characteristic, we ran the analyses exclusively with Asian Americans and found that the Asian Americans in our U.S. sample responded more similarly to the U.S. sample than they did to the South Korean sample. The only variable on which Asian Americans differed from the U.S. sample as whole – albeit marginally – was negative affect,  $t_{\text{contrast}}(142) = 2.39, p = .09$ . The other variables showed a similar pattern of effects as the U.S. sample as a whole.

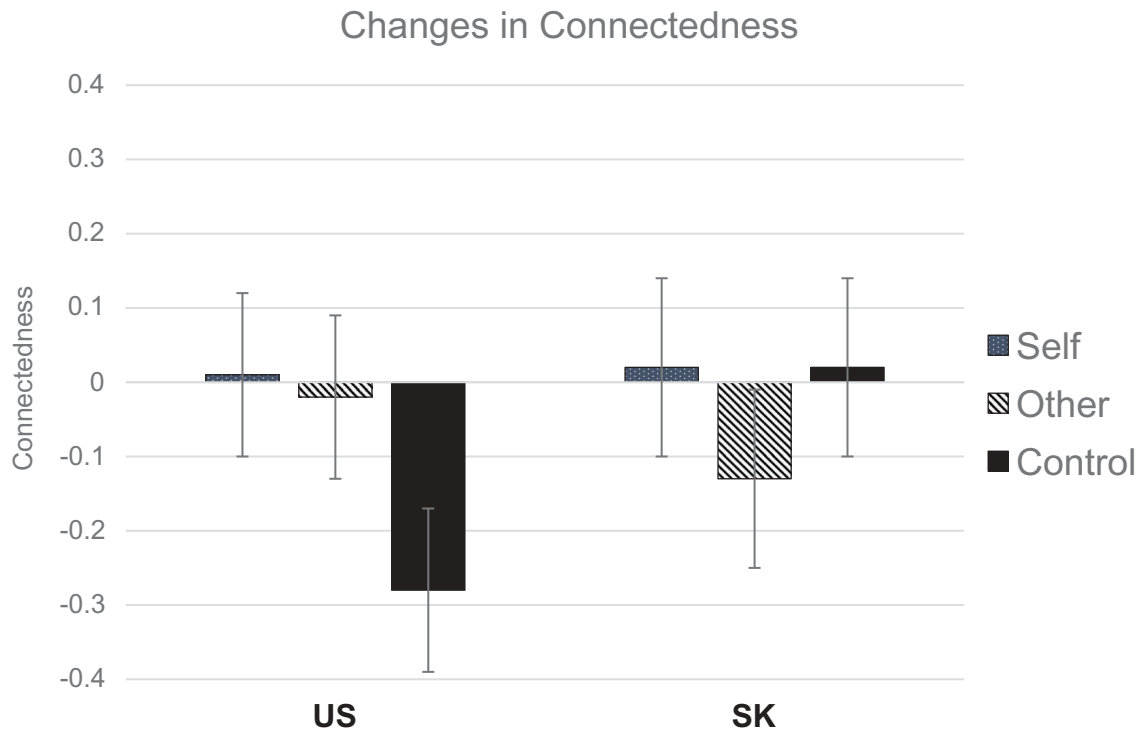
Additionally, the mean acculturation level of our Asian American participants was above the midpoint (3.07 on a 5-point scale), indicating that many of them identified at least to a moderate degree with American culture. We conducted regression analyses using acculturation level as a moderator and found

that none of the outcome variables were affected by the acculturation level of the Asian Americans. These results support our rationale for using the U.S. participants as our independent cultural sample, despite the high proportion of Asian Americans in the sample. Nevertheless, to provide a sharper contrast to participants residing in Asia, future investigations should aim to include more Western-residing participants with Anglo or European roots.

### South Korea

We conducted parallel analyses (using the following contrast weights: Good for Others [+1], Good for Self [0], and control [-1]) to test Hypothesis 2; the results are shown in Table 2 and Figures 2 and 3. Failing to provide support for this hypothesis, South Korean students who read that kindness was good for others did





**Figure 3.** Changes in connectedness and competence for the Self, Other, and Control conditions in the U.S. and South Korea.

Note. US = United States, SK = South Korea. Self = Good-for-Self framing, Other = Good-for-Other framing, Control = Organization is good framing. Data represent

not show greater increases in positive affect, life satisfaction, connectedness, or competence – or decreases in negative affect – compared to those in the control group (all  $t_{\text{contrasts}} < |1.35|$ ; all  $ps > .18$ ).

## Discussion

This study tested whether individuals from independent cultures would benefit in subjective well-being, connectedness, and competence when self-related rewards of prosocial behavior are underscored, while those from interdependent cultures would benefit when other-related rewards are underscored.

### Summary of findings

Supporting Hypothesis 1, U.S. participants who performed acts of kindness after reading that they were good for ‘them’ reported greater increases in positive affect, life satisfaction, and connectedness, as well as decreases in negative affect, than those who performed kind acts after reading a neutral framing. The article content may have helped explicate to individualists that they should be motivated to be prosocial because it could be a vehicle for the explicit pursuit of their happiness and also boost their self-esteem. Our results are consistent with the concept of independent

subjective well-being, in that members of individualist cultures may benefit from prosocial behavior when it is explicitly framed as a way by which to pursue their personal happiness (Uchida et al., 2004). Another possibility is that the benefits of kindness for others are obvious, so reading an article that frames kindness as good for others was not additionally motivating compared to reading an article that frames kindness as good for oneself. Indeed, these results provide additional evidence in support of the existing research that prosocial behavior is an effective way to increase well-being in individualist cultures (Dunn et al., 2008; Layous et al., 2013; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Nelson et al., 2015, 2016; Sheldon et al., 2012).

Our study, however, failed to support Hypothesis 2 for any of the outcome variables – namely, South Korean students who performed acts of kindness after reading that they were good for others did not increase in well-being, connectedness, and competence compared to those who performed acts of kindness after reading the neutral framing. Perhaps South Koreans do not experience additional gains in well-being from considering kind acts as good for others (vs. performing them without reasons/framing) because, due to their interdependent values, the benefits to others are obvious and pointing them out does not provide any further advantage (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Another

possible explanation is that the Good-for-Others article presented the benefits of doing kind acts for others' *individual* well-being, rather than their benefits to interdependent well-being, such as group harmony. To better appeal to the concepts of well-being shared by members of interdependent cultures, future studies that manipulate the framing of positive activities for collectivist cultures might consider incorporating the benefits for in-group relationships and the group as a whole. Additionally, framing kindness as good for others for South Koreans – especially within close relationships – may not be useful, because it might signal to them that those relationships are distant (Zhang, Li, Bai & Li, 2018). Finally, we may not have found significant well-being differences in South Korea (but did in the U.S.) because research shows that Americans tend to use more 'extreme' (e.g., *never* or *always*) responses on rating scales, whereas Koreans, with their preference for low-arousal emotions, are more likely to select answer choices in the middle or neutral point of the scale (Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1995; Mayer, Elliot, Haas, Hays, & Weinick, 2016).

### **Limitations and future directions**

A limitation of our study was that we measured the individual well-being of our American and South Korean participants rather than their interdependent well-being. Hence, we may not have measured what South Koreans actually value as well-being or happiness. To assess interdependent subjective well-being from an emic approach, future investigators could incorporate a measure like the Interdependent Happiness Scale (IHS), which has been designed and validated in both Western and Eastern countries (Hitokoto & Uchida, 2015). This scale is designed to answer the questions, 'Are we happy or not?' or 'Am I *making others* happy?' rather than 'Am I *happy*?' By incorporating the IHS or similar measures, future researchers may be able to capture not only the happiness of individual participants, but also their experiences of group harmony and collective well-being, which are critical to the experience of interdependent subjective well-being. Despite this limitation, there is evidence that the IHS is strongly positively correlated with life satisfaction ( $r = .61$ ) and positive affect ( $r = .61$ ) and negatively correlated with negative affect ( $r = -.60$ ), which were measured as outcomes in our study (Hitokoto & Uchida, 2015).

Similarly, because collectivists value the appraisal of their lives by close others (Suh, Diener, & Updegraff, 2008), future investigators may wish to consider using alternative measures of life satisfaction that include asking collectivist participants how close others (e.g., family members) would evaluate their lives instead of merely asking how they themselves evaluate their own lives (as we did in the current study). Furthermore, it has also been suggested that researchers who study emotions in members of Asian cultures inquire about psychosomatic symptoms, which might allow Asians to convey their emotions indirectly and thus minimize disruption to relational harmony (Shin & Lyubomirsky, 2016; e.g., see the literature on somatization: Hong, Lee, & Lorenzo, 1995; Kleinman, 1982; Park & Bernstein, 2008; Parker, Cheah, & Roy, 2001; Zhou et al., 2015).

Finally, although all three U.S. groups performed kind acts, the control group, which read about the benefits of being organized, displayed decreases in positive affect, satisfaction with life, and connectedness. We found it interesting that these control participants decreased in subjective well-being even after performing kind acts; perhaps, this occurred as a result of a mismatch between what they were led to believe was good for them (organization) and the task they were asked to carry out (kind acts). South Koreans, however, may not have been as affected by this mismatch due to their patterns of dialectical thought and/or respect for authority (Lu & Gilmour, 2004). To further unpack these results, future research could include comparison conditions with alternative ways of framing kind acts, such as a more neutral control article about kind acts (but not their benefits), or no framing at all. Finally, our U.S. participants who read that organization was good (and subsequently performed kind acts) did not show any differences in competence from participants who learned that kindness is good for the self. We speculate that students who read that organization is helpful may have practiced more organizational skills in addition to kind acts during the intervention period, which, in turn, may have helped maintain their sense of competence.

### **Concluding words**

The present study contributes to the sparse body of research about subjective well-being in independent versus interdependent cultures. Our results are consistent with the notion that Americans appear to value

independent subjective well-being, while raising questions about what interdependent subjective well-being looks like in modern South Korea. With mental health concerns on the rise in Asian countries, we urge researchers to investigate the optimal design and implementation of positive activity interventions in interdependent cultures.

## Notes

1. Prior to the current study, we conducted a similar study in which participants read news articles about how *happiness* is good for the self, how *happiness* is good for others, or about how being organized was beneficial and found no significant differences between these framing conditions for any of the outcome variables, PA, NA, SWL, Connectedness, and Competence (all  $t_{\text{contrasts}} < |1.78|$ ; all  $ps > .05$ ).
2. For negatively-worded connectedness items,  $\alpha = .44$  at baseline and  $\alpha = .43$  at post-intervention; for negatively-worded competence items,  $\alpha = .60$  at baseline and  $\alpha = .70$  at post-intervention; for negatively-worded autonomy items,  $\alpha = .57$  at baseline and  $\alpha = .63$  at post-intervention.
3. Standardized difference score contrasts (Time 1 was standardized by Time 1 SDs and Time 2 was standardized by Time 2 SDs) produced the same (significant) results as the unstandardized contrasts reported in this paper.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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