

Individualism, Collectivism and Subjective Well-Being: A Literature Review

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Abstract: Subjective Well-Being (SWB), as a crucial psychological indicator for measuring an individual's quality of life, has garnered extensive attention across economics, sociology, psychology, and cultural psychology. Cultural values, particularly individualism–collectivism (I–C), are viewed as profoundly shaping an individual's self-identity, social relationships, social comparison, and life satisfaction. This paper systematically reviews the influence of individualism and collectivism on subjective well-being based on domestic and international literature. Research indicates that I–C exerts its effects on SWB through multiple pathways, operating via mechanisms such as self-construction, social support, cultural fit, and social comparison. The paper also summarizes existing research limitations concerning sample representativeness and causal identification, while proposing directions for future studies.

1. Introduction

In recent years, subjective well-being (SWB) has emerged as a crucial psychological indicator for measuring residents' quality of life, becoming a research hotspot across multiple disciplines including economics, sociology, psychology, and cultural psychology. Studies indicate that subjective well-being is profoundly shaped not only by material conditions such as income, employment, health, and education, but also by non-material factors including cultural values, social identity, psychological belonging, and social comparison (Veenhoven, 1991^[1]; Easterlin, 1995^[2]; Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004^[3]; Diener et al., 1995^[4], 2003^[5]).

China, as a quintessential collectivist culture, emphasizes individual responsibility and obedience to family, organization, and society. However, with social transformation and value diversification, individuals exhibit marked differences in behavioral patterns and cultural orientations. These variations may directly influence well-being: for instance, individualists prioritize autonomy and self-actualization, while collectivists rely more heavily on group support and social connections (Triandis, 2001^[6]; Oyserman & Lee, 2008^[7]; Zhou et al., 2023^[8]). Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic response, the social cohesion and collaborative spirit embodied by collectivist culture exerted significant effects on psychosocial well-being and happiness.

Cross-cultural psychological research indicates that individualism-collectivism orientations influence happiness through multiple pathways, including autonomy, group identity, and social

support (Hofstede, 1980^[9]; Zalewska, 2018^[10]). However, the empirical relationship between individual collectivism orientation and well-being remains contested, with some studies suggesting cultural fit predicts well-being more strongly than orientation itself (Triandis, 2001^[6]). Within the Chinese context, prior research has examined the impact of collectivism differences on well-being (Steele & Lynch, 2013^[11]).

Although existing research has established a certain theoretical and methodological foundation, current studies still exhibit two shortcomings: First, they predominantly focus on cultural comparisons at the national or regional level, lacking systematic research on individual differences within the same cultural environment. Second, few studies integrate collectivist cultural orientation with subjective perception variables such as well-being and life satisfaction, while also paying insufficient attention to endogeneity issues. Based on this, this paper aims to review domestic and international research findings through a literature review, summarize the mechanisms through which individualism-collectivism influences subjective well-being, and provide reference for future theoretical research and empirical exploration.

2. Overview of Related Research

2.1. Concepts and Theoretical Foundations of Individualism and Collectivism

Individualism-Collectivism (I-C) as a key concept in cultural psychology was first systematically proposed by Hofstede (1980), who identified I-C as one of five dimensions for measuring cultural differences^[9]. Individualistic cultures emphasize personal independence, autonomy, and self-actualization, prioritizing individual goals and rights. Collectivist cultures, conversely, stress group identity, social responsibility, and interpersonal harmony, where individual behavior is shaped by group norms and societal expectations. In cross-cultural psychology, I-C is applied not only to describe national or regional cultures but also at the individual level, revealing variations among individuals within the same cultural context (Oyserman & Lee, 2008^[7]; Brewer & Chen, 2007^[12]). Triandis (1995) proposed that, from the perspective of self-concept, individualists emphasize an independent self, valuing personal goals and achievements; collectivists, however, tend toward an interdependent self, prioritizing group harmony and social responsibility^[13]. These differences in self-construction determine variations in individuals' cognition, emotions, behavior, and well-being.

Furthermore, Cultural Fit Theory emphasizes that the alignment between an individual's values and their cultural environment is a significant predictor of well-being. Oishi et al. (1999) proposed that cultural fit enhances an individual's sense of belonging and life satisfaction^[14]. Fulmer et al. (2010) validated the role of cultural fit in facilitating self-actualization and the acquisition of social support through a cross-national survey^[15].

2.2. Research at the National or Regional Level

Extensive cross-national research indicates that individualism can predict social well-being, with its influence even surpassing other social, economic, and cultural factors (Diener et al., 1995^[4]; Jasielska et al., 2018^[16]). Kryś et al. (2021), analyzing samples from 50 countries, further noted that national-level individualism correlates positively with life satisfaction^[17]. However, this relationship significantly weakened when group-level well-being indicators were introduced, indicating that culture influences well-being through multiple pathways. Germani et al. (2021) found that the influence of cultural orientations on well-being varies across national contexts^[18]. Steele & Lynch (2013) demonstrated that during China's rapid modernization, traditional collectivist values and emerging individualistic values jointly shape individual well-being, with the

tension between them serving as a crucial factor for understanding contemporary Chinese well-being structures^[11].

2.3. Individual-Level Research

At the individual level, the effect of cultural orientation on subjective well-being is conditional. Individuals with individualistic tendencies typically possess higher self-esteem, self-efficacy, and autonomy, leading to greater life satisfaction (Diener et al., 2003^[5]). Collectivist-oriented individuals, however, derive emotional support through interpersonal relationships and group identification, making their well-being more dependent on social connections and relationship quality (Brewer & Chen, 2007)^[12]. In the Chinese context, Li et al. (2019) constructed an individual collectivism orientation index using CFPS data and found it significantly influenced perceived income, consumption preferences, and life satisfaction^[19]. Tian (2020) noted that collectivism influences residents' quality of life through family and social networks^[20]. Zhou et al. (2023) further demonstrated that the integration of cultural identity and social networks enhances well-being, underscoring the importance of micro-level individual differences^[8].

3. Measurement Methods and Research Design

Existing research primarily unfolds across three dimensions: cultural value measurement, subjective well-being measurement, and research design strategies.

3.1. Measurement of Cultural Values

Cultural values can be measured at both macro and micro levels. The macro level commonly employs Hofstede's (1980) individualism-collectivism index, comparing cultural orientations across nations or regions through cross-national surveys^[9]. However, such indicators struggle to capture individual variation within the same cultural context. At the micro level, scholars typically use scales to directly measure cultural orientations. For instance, Singelis' (1994) Self-Construal Scale assesses individuals' cognitive preferences for self-independence or interdependence in daily life^[21]. Triandis' (1995) I-C Scale measures the relative importance individuals place on personal versus group goals through questionnaire items^[13]. Sivadas et al. (2008) conducted cross-cultural validation of these scales, demonstrating high reliability and validity across diverse cultural contexts^[22]. Furthermore, recent research has extensively employed cultural priming techniques, using brief experimental interventions to activate individuals' individualistic or collectivistic mental states and observe subsequent changes in behavior and well-being (Brewer & Gardner, 1996^[23]; Trafimow et al., 1991^[24]; Mandel, 2003^[25]). Research indicates that even within the same cultural environment, cultural priming can significantly influence individuals' social behaviors and well-being evaluations (Oyserman, 2017^[26]).

3.2. Measurement of Subjective Well-Being

Measurements of subjective well-being typically encompass two dimensions: cognitive evaluation and affective experience. Cognitive evaluation commonly employs the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), which measures well-being through self-assessments of overall life circumstances (Diener et al., 1985^[27]). Affective experience is assessed using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) to evaluate emotional states over a specific timeframe (Watson et al., 1988^[28]). Additionally, the Experience Sampling Method (ESM) captures real-time fluctuations in daily emotions, offering a dynamic measurement perspective for well-being research

(Hektner et al., 2007^[29]). In recent years, domestic studies have integrated large-scale questionnaires with micro-behavioral data, utilizing databases such as CFPS, CGSS, and CHNS to conduct quantitative analyses of individual subjective well-being.

3.3. Research Design Strategies

Existing studies primarily employ cross-cultural comparisons, individual difference analyses, experimental research, and longitudinal panel analyses in their design strategies. Cross-cultural comparative studies explore the macro-level mechanisms of cultural influence on well-being by examining residents' I–C tendencies and happiness levels across different countries or regions. Individual difference analyses focus on how I–C orientations among individuals within the same cultural context influence well-being. These studies measure cultural orientations using questionnaires and employ multivariate regression or structural equation modeling for analysis (Li et al., 2019^[19]; Tian, 2020^[20]). Experimental studies primarily employ cultural priming or micro-laboratory interventions to activate individualistic or collectivist mental states, observing their immediate effects on well-being and related behaviors (Oyserman, 2017^[26]). Longitudinal panel analyses, utilizing longitudinal tracking data such as CFPS and CGSS, examine the dynamic effects of cultural orientation on individual well-being while controlling for potential confounding factors like income, education, and health. Through these multi-level, multi-method research designs, scholars can comprehensively understand the mechanisms by which I–C influences well-being, spanning from macro-level cultural environments to micro-level individual behaviors.

4. Analysis of Influence Mechanisms

4.1. Social Support Pathway

Collectivist cultural orientation enhances individuals' emotional security and psychological well-being by reinforcing support from family, group, and social networks (Brewer & Chen, 2007^[12]). Social support not only alleviates life stress but also enhances individuals' sense of social belonging, thereby increasing subjective well-being.

4.2. Self-Esteem and Sense of Control Pathway

Individualistic cultures emphasize self-actualization and autonomy, fostering greater perceived capacity for achieving personal goals and controlling life events (Diener et al., 2003^[5]). Self-esteem and sense of control serve as crucial psychological mechanisms influencing well-being by enhancing psychological capital, promoting positive emotions, and elevating life satisfaction.

4.3. Social Comparison and Sense of Fairness Pathway

Social comparison is particularly significant in individualistic cultures, where individuals tend to engage in relative evaluations using themselves as a reference point (Clark & Oswald, 1996^[30]). This process may generate feelings of relative deprivation or relative superiority, thereby influencing well-being. In collectivist cultures, well-being is more heavily moderated by group standards and social expectations than by individual goals alone.

4.4. Person-Culture Fit Pathway

Person–culture fit refers to the influence of alignment between an individual's values and their sociocultural environment on well-being (Oishi et al., 1999^[14]). Research indicates that when an

individual's cultural orientation aligns strongly with their social environment, well-being significantly increases; mismatch, however, may lead to psychological stress, social isolation, and negative emotions (Fulmer et al., 2010^[15]). This mechanism reveals the dynamic interaction between cultural background and individual psychology, serving as a crucial theoretical basis for explaining the differential effects of I–C on well-being.

5. Research Limitations and Future Directions

Despite extensive research on individualism-collectivism and subjective well-being, existing literature exhibits several shortcomings warranting further academic attention.

5.1. Scope Limitations

Existing studies predominantly focus on cross-cultural differences or macro-level national analyses, lacking systematic investigations into individual variations within the same cultural context. Particularly within the Chinese domestic context, empirical research on how individual collectivism tendencies influence well-being remains limited, failing to fully elucidate the mechanisms through which cultural orientations affect micro-level individual well-being. Future research should integrate large-sample micro-level data to explore the heterogeneous effects of different individual cultural orientations.

5.2. Causal Identification Challenges

Most studies rely on cross-sectional surveys or questionnaire analyses, making it difficult to distinguish causal relationships between cultural orientation and well-being. While experimental studies and cultural priming techniques provide short-term causal evidence, the long-term effects of cultural alignment remain insufficiently validated. Future studies can enhance the credibility of causal inference through longitudinal panel data, natural experiments, or intervention studies.

5.3. Limited Dimensions in Well-being Measurement

Existing research predominantly relies on life satisfaction or affect scales, rarely integrating cognitive, affective, and social well-being indicators. The impact of cultural orientation on well-being may manifest differently across dimensions. For instance, individuals with collectivist tendencies may exhibit higher well-being in social connectedness but relatively lower well-being in self-actualization. Future research should develop multidimensional well-being indicator systems to more precisely capture the complex effects of cultural orientation.

5.4. Insufficient Addressing of Endogeneity and Moderating Mechanisms

A bidirectional relationship may exist between cultural orientation and well-being, with individual well-being potentially shaping cultural identity in return. Furthermore, socioeconomic status, social capital, and policy environments may moderate this relationship. Future research should address endogeneity concerns and explore multiple potential moderating mechanisms to develop more refined causal models.

6. Conclusion

This paper systematically reviews domestic and international research on the effects of individualism and collectivism on subjective well-being, revealing that cultural orientations

influence happiness through multiple pathways. Individualistic tendencies enhance life satisfaction and positive emotional experiences by boosting self-esteem, self-efficacy, and individual goal attainment. Collectivistic tendencies, meanwhile, strengthen emotional security and social belonging through social support, group identification, and interpersonal networks, thereby elevating well-being. This demonstrates that cultural values not only shape individual behavioral preferences but also jointly influence well-being formation through psychological and social mechanisms. Furthermore, cultural fit and social comparison mechanisms play crucial moderating roles in the culture-well-being relationship. When an individual's values align strongly with their sociocultural context, well-being significantly increases; conversely, cultural mismatch may lead to psychological stress, social isolation, and negative emotions.

Current research methodologies exhibit diversification. While traditional questionnaire scales remain predominant, the application of cultural priming experiments, longitudinal panel data analysis, and empirical sampling methods provides new empirical evidence for causal inference and mechanism validation. Future research should focus on expanding micro-level individual analysis, enhancing causal identification capabilities, and utilizing longitudinal panels, natural experiments, or cultural priming interventions to examine long-term effects.

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