

The Study on The Relationship Between Self-Construal and Subjective Well-Being: The Mediating Role of Buddhism Generosity

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Abstract: Over several past few decades, researchers have shed light on the link between individual difference in personality and subjective well-being. The present study was designed to explore this association by investigating the relationships between the self-construal (i.e., independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal), subjective well-being, and Buddhism Generosity. Notably, Buddhism Generosity is a construct derived from the Buddhist six perfections theory. It is composed of (1) the giving of material things (GMT), (2) the giving of the Dharma (GOD), and (3) the giving of fearlessness (GOF). We also examined the potential mediating role of Buddhism Generosity in the links between the self-construal and subjective well-being. Participants in the present study were 278 vocational students in China. A battery of questionnaires measuring the self-construal, Buddhism Generosity, and subjective well-being was administered to the participants. The results showed that the self-construal was positively correlated with Buddhism Generosity and subjective well-being. Results also indicated that Buddhism Generosity fully mediated the relationships between the self-construal and subjective well-being. Taken as a whole, the findings suggest that the effect of Buddhism Generosity among the teenager students in China might be associated with inadequate awareness of Buddhism Generosity. The present study reveals the possible mechanism governing the associations between the self-construal and subjective well-being and contributes to the process of bridging Buddhism and psychology.

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1. Introduction

With the modernization of Chinese society, people have been increasing their demands of well-being both physically and mentally especially for teenagers and students who are seen as the future of our society (Knight et al., 2009). As the main indicator of well-being, subjective well-being (Diener, 1984) has been implemented well-established researches all over the world (Diener et al., 2010; Costanza et al., 2007; Diener et al., 2000). Studies have proved its positive correlations with subjective well-being (Diener et al., 2003; Ryan et al., 2001, which suggests it might facilitate and enhance people's attitudes and motivations toward better lives (Sheldon et al., 1997). Moreover, those who lead a life full of experiences that are subjectively perceived as positive and a higher level of life satisfaction (Doğan et al. 2012; Ho et al. 2010; Moomal 1999; Shek 1992; Zika and Chamberlain 1992), have fewer physical and mental problems (Heisel and Flett 2014; Steger 2012), and are more likely to enjoy themselves in daily life (Bonebright et al. 2000; De Klerk 2005; Littman-Ovadia and Steger 2010). Given that subjective well-being plays a vital role in both destructive and constructive behaviors of people especially students

(Knight et al., 2009), knowing what promotes individuals' subjective well-being is a critical issue.

1.1. Self-construal and Subjective Well-being

Self-concept is a core of personality (Arnett, 2000; Diener, 1984). Traditional psychology researches think that an independent and solid self-concept is the main indication to one's maturity of mind (Marsh et al., 2013; Sheldon et al., 2001; Steinberg et al., 1989). According to this explanation, researches maintain that pursuing of one's individuality, consistency and separation from the social settings is not only the core demand of self-enhancement but also the reflection of well-adapted soul and mental health (Taylor et al., 1988; Thoits, 2011).

Over the past few decades, people have shed more and more light on the self-psychology especially in the personality and individual differences including the self-construal. The self-construal represents two different perspectives people treat themselves either involved with others or define themselves independently, including independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). These two dimensions share different views and behavior patterns toward the same issues in daily life. More specifically, independent

self-construal is characterized by pursuing to be self-disclosed and solitary to the social environment, understanding and expressing the uniqueness of oneself, and defining themselves as individual without using relationships with others (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994). In the contrast, interdependent self-construal emphasizes the involvement and conformation to the whole society, a tendency toward others and the social settings, and the harmony among people surrounding. They define themselves by the social roles and relationships with others (Cross, Bacon & Morris, 2000).

The influence of personality traits on subjective well-being has been evident in numerous studies. As Hayes (2003) found, subjective well-being is positively correlated with conscientiousness, openness, and extroversion, whereas inversely correlated with neuroticism. Similarly, Gutiérrez (2005) found that extroversion, neuroticism, and positive affect can predict the ability to experience subjective well-being. Moreover, neuroticism and negative affect (Deneve, 1998) were also found to be negatively associated with subjective well-being.

Although the influence of personality traits on subjective well-being is evident, the relationships between self-construal and subjective well-being have not been that clear. Previous studies mainly focused on the impact of genders and other demographical variables or overly broad cultural backgrounds on the relationship between self-construal and subjective well-being (Suh, Diener, & Updegraff, 2008). As we have mentioned earlier, subjective well-being plays a vital role in the learning-related behaviors of students (Cheng et al., 2011), and it is important to know how one specific personality traits would influence people's well-being especially self-construal, of which the dimensions are very common in Chinese culture especially the interdependent self-construal. Yet it is insufficient to explain the individual differences of subjective well-being with only personality traits or over-broad cultural settings, which would not facilitate further illuminated without the help of potential mediating role of some other personality variables. Since determining the associations between self-construal and subjective well-being and giving suggestions toward our daily lives is imperative, we are pursuing to finding extra complicated relationships between self-construal and subjective well-being.

In the current study, participants were all teenagers and vocational school students born and raised in a collectivist Chinese society. Therefore, we hypothesized that self-construal, especially the interdependent self-construal, would be positively correlated with subjective well-being.

1.2. Buddhism Generosity and Well-being

Based on a Buddhist perspective, Buddhism Generosity in the current study is defined as a concept that emphasizes an individual's capacity to have the attitudes and behaviors toward helping others, suggesting that people with high levels of Buddhism Generosity are consciously feeling their behaviors and thoughts to bring happiness and well-being mentally to themselves (Wright, 2009; Guruge & Bond, 1998).

For over 2000 years, the Buddhist tradition has focused on cultivating a generous mind, so as to experience the subjective well-being (Wallace and Shapiro 2006), and has developed a profound literature regarding theories of Buddhism Generosity and methods by which it can be cultivated (Shonin et al. 2014). According to the Buddhist literature, Buddhism Generosity includes three dimensions. The first is the *giving of material things* (GMT), namely to give people tangible substances to help them out. The second is the giving of the Dhamma (GOD). Dhamma means wisdom in Sanskrit (Wright, 2009; Harvey, 2000). This dimension means to enlighten people, disabusing their confusions and clings to things, solving mental problems people bear in mind. The last dimension is the giving of fearlessness, namely to help people out of danger or even sacrifice to save one's life. Overall, Buddhism Generosity is a personality trait which enables individuals to give hand to people in need even strangers (Wangmo & Valk, 2012).

In addition to the ability to help others in different ways, Buddhism Generosity in the current study also stands for the ability to cultivate for the authentic meaning of life and enhance one's subjective well-being (Deng and Li 2017). Moreover, Buddhism Generosity represents the very opposite of selfishness, aggression, and hostility (Zilian, 2018; Moe, 2017; Allen, Edwards & McCullough, 2015). It is analogous to altruism and prosocial behaviors, yet still has its unique features. The influence of Buddhism Generosity on subjective well-being is a relatively new topic, not found in existing research; however, in previous studies, positive relationships were found among altruism, helping behavior, prosocial behaviors and subjective well-being (e.g., Weinstein & Ryan, 2010; Gebauer et al., 2008). Since Buddhism Generosity shares numerous features with altruism and prosocial behaviors, we hypothesized that Buddhism Generosity would also be significantly and positively correlated with subjective well-being.

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1.3. Mediation Effect

According to Yu (2016), self-esteem mediate the effect of self-construal on subjective well-being. Further, Duan (2013) found the mediating role of relational harmony and self-esteem on the relationship between self-construal and subjective well-being. Previous studies also showed that altruism and prosocial behavior would enhance one's judgments on self-esteem (e.g., Kwon & Wen, 2010; Schwartz & Sendor, 1999), and relational harmony which could be facilitated with interdependent self-construal could also impact on one's perception of self-esteem and subjective well-being (Singelis et al., 1999), which indicated the possible mediating role of altruism and prosocial behaviors that related to the connotation of the Buddhism Generosity between the self-construal and subjective well-being.

In summary, this study was designed to explore the relationships between self-construal, Buddhism Generosity, and subjective well-being. Based on the findings from previous studies, we expected to find the following: (a) positive correlations between the self-construal and subjective well-being, (b) a positive correlation between Buddhism Generosity and subjective well-being, and (c) evidence that Buddhism Generosity serves as a mediator between self-construal and subjective well-being.

2. Material and Methods

2.1. Participants

The 278 participants in this study (54.7% female) were employees from a vocational school in Beijing, China. Among the participants, 97.1% were Atheist, 0.7% Buddhists, and 2.2% "Others", and they ranged from 18 to 24 years in age ($M = 19.5$, $SD = 1.608$).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Self-construal Scale

Self-construal was measured using the Self-construal Scale (SCS; Singelis et al., 1994) and translated and revised in Chinese by Qingan Li and Xinhui Wei. The SCS is a 24-item scale covering two dimensions of independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal. Each item is measured based on a Likert scale ranging from 1 = extremely disagree to 6 = extremely agree. In this study, results yielded a Cronbach alpha of 0.657 and 0.828 for each dimension, respectively.

2.2.2. Buddhist Generosity Questionnaire

Buddhism Generosity was measured using the Buddhism Generosity Questionnaire (BGQ; Han and

Li, 2016). The BGQ is an 18-item scale covering three dimensions, and each dimension is measured based on a scenario with 6 items. The first dimension is the Giving of Material Things (GMT). An example is an interaction between two coworkers: *Five minutes before the beginning of an English exam of professional title appraisal in which the test takers are allowed to use English-Chinese dictionaries, Hai Qiu tells to Han Wan in a panic, "I forget to bring the dictionary! And it's too late to get home back here! How should I do?" Qiu and Wan are coworkers and competing for the only place of the associate researcher. Wan then has two options: to lend the dictionary to Qiu because Wan is good at English yet Qiu's English is too poor to pass the exam, or not to lend it to Qiu because the chance of promotion could be in vain if Qiu passes the exam. What is the likelihood Wan will choose the second option?* The second dimension is the Giving of the Dhamma (GOD), which means enlighten or disabuse people off their confusions. An example is a scenario in which a teacher is interrupted by a student in the neighborhood: *Shaoyan Liu is a famous math teacher in local high school. In an early morning on Saturday, he is interrupted by a student named Qibing Zhang knocking the door, asking if Liu could help his math since the High School Entrance Examination is approaching. Liu then has two options: to help Zhang with his math because it is the duty of an educator, or refuse to help him in that the rest time will be less. What is the likelihood Liu will choose the first option?* The third is the Giving of fearlessness (GOF). An example is a scenario about a man seeing a little boy is falling from a six-floor building: *In the afternoon, Xuepu Huang is cozily sitting on the bench in a housing estate. Suddenly he sees a little boy is falling from a six-floor building. Huang then has two options: to catch the boy with his arms, or not to save the boy since he would totally break his arms. What is the likelihood Huang will choose the second option?* Participants' responses were rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 = extremely unlikely to 6 = highly likely. The 14-day test-retest reliability of the BGQ scores were .874, .832, and .686 for GMT, GOD, and GOF, respectively (Han and Li, 2016). In the present study, the three subscale scores yielded adequate Cronbach alphas: GMT ($\alpha = .735$), GOD ($\alpha = .734$), and GOF ($\alpha = .675$).

2.2.3. Positive and Negative Affect Scale

Positive and negative affect are components of SWB, which were measured by Positive and Negative Affect Scale (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Each item was rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree. Results of the PANAS yield a Cronbach alpha of 0.679 for Positive Affect and 0.850 for Negative Affect.

2.2.4. *The Satisfaction with Life Scale*

Life satisfaction is a component of SWB, which was measured by the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Pavot & Diener, 1993). The Scale contains five items, and participants' responses were rated on a 6-point-Likert scale ranging from 1 = extremely disagree to 6 = extremely agree, the higher the score, the higher level of one's life satisfaction. In this study, results of the SWLS yielded a Cronbach alpha of .702.

2.3. *Procedure*

After informed consent was obtained from participants, pen-and-paper surveys were administered in person at the company. Participants were asked not to converse with others while completing the survey and to hand in the survey within two hours.

2.4. *Statistical Analyses*

SPSS 21.0 and AMOS 22.0 were employed to analyze the data.

3. **Results**

3.1. *Descriptive statistics*

Table 1 displays the intercorrelations among the studied variables. First, independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal were both significantly and positively correlated with subjective well-being with coefficients of 0.525 and 0.266, $p < .01$. Second, the self-construal and the three dimensions of Buddhism Generosity well all significantly and positively correlated with coefficients ranging from .423 to .479, $p < .01$. Third, the dimensions of Buddhism Generosity and subjective well-being were significantly and positively correlated with coefficients ranging from .428 and .453, $p < .01$.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation matrix of study variables (N = 226)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Interdependent self-construal	1								
2. Independent self-construal	0.220**	1							
3. GMP	0.442**	0.297**	1						
4. GOD	0.423**	0.212**	0.676**	1					
5. GOF	0.479**	0.057	0.585**	0.528**	1				
6. PA	0.493**	0.239**	0.382**	0.314**	0.357**	1			
7. NA	-	-	-	-	-	-	1		
8. LS	0.356**	0.092**	0.314**	0.307**	0.349**	0.392**	-	1	
9. SWB	0.400**	0.300**	0.378**	0.287**	0.307**	0.551**	0.361**	-	1
M	5.248	4.241	4.378	4.670	4.952	4.356	2.484	3.868	5.740
SD	0.597	0.614	1.013	0.923	0.787	0.873	0.951	0.943	2.183

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. GMT = Giving of material things; GOD = Giving of the Dharma; GOF = Giving of the fearlessness; SWB = Subjective well-being

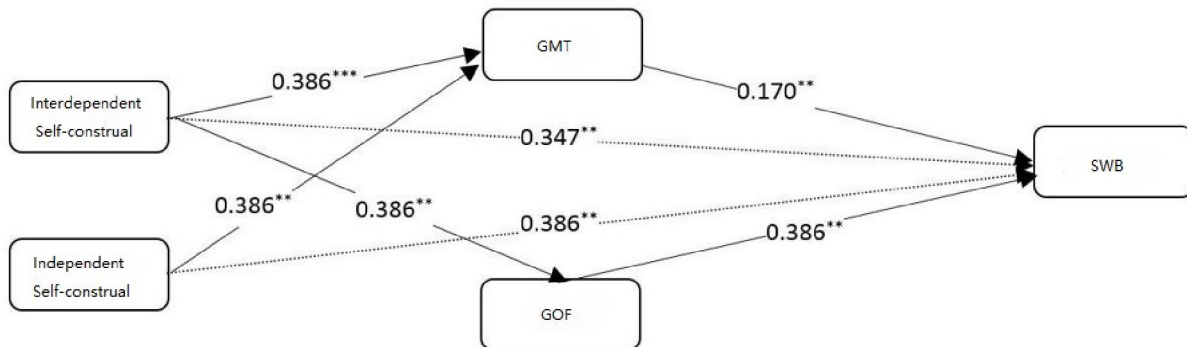


Fig. 1 The mediation model of Buddhism Generosity between self-construal and subjective well-being.

Table 2. Results from bootstrap analysis

Pathways of Models	Indirect Effect	SE	95% Confidence interval	
			LL	UL
Interdependent self-construal→GMT→SWB	.095**	.032	.041	.171
Interdependent self-construal→GOF→SWB	.060*	.029	.004	.122
Independent self-construal→GMT→SWB	.121**	.029	.070	.185

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. GMT= Giving of Material things; GOF =Giving of Fearlessness; SWB= Subjective Well-being; LL= Lower Level; UL= Upper Level.

3.2. Structural Equation Model

To examine the mediation effect, we tested structural equation models using the AMOS 22.0 program and maximum likelihood estimation with each one of the self-construal as the predictor variables, subjective well-being as the outcome variable, and Buddhism Generosity as the mediator.

As shown in Fig.1, the second dimension of the Buddhism Generosity GOD was not in the model. It can be explained that subjective well-being cannot be significantly predicted by GOD while significantly predicted by GMT and GOF. Besides, GMT and GOF both mediated the relationship between the two dimensions of self-construal and subjective well-being.

To further examine the mediation effects, we performed a bootstrap analysis (Felsenstein, 1985). We generated 1000 bootstrap samples through random sampling. If the 95% CI for the estimates of the mediation effect does not include zero, then the mediation effects were significant. The results are shown in Table 2. The results indicated that Buddhism Generosity exerted significant indirect effects on the links between subjective well-being and self-construal.

4. Discussions

The present study is one of the first to examine the relationship between the self-construal and subjective well-being using the Buddhism Generosity as mediator. It has revealed the inner mechanism whereby the presence of Buddhism Generosity facilitates people in both the independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal experiencing subjective well-being in their lives. These findings have highlighted the importance and utility of Buddhism Generosity in experiencing subjective well-being, which further extends the dialogue between modern psychology and Buddhism.

The first hypothesis of this study was supported by the finding that both dimensions of the self-construal were positively associated with subjective well-being. This finding contributes new knowledge to the literature on the relationship between personality and subjective well-being. The finding is in line with the notion that independent self-construal is positively correlated with subjective well-being

(Cheng et al., 2016) and that interdependent self-construal is also positively correlated with well-being among middle school students in China (Zhang, 2013).

The second hypothesis was also supported in the positive correlation found between Buddhism Generosity and subjective well-being. As mentioned earlier, Buddhism Generosity is similar to altruism (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010), and shares some common features with conscientiousness (Gebauer et al., 2008). The finding corresponds to previous studies regarding the positive associations between Buddhism Generosity and subjective well-being, between altruism and subjective well-being, and between prosocial behavior and meaning. Additionally, Buddhism Generosity entails inner open-minded soul and the capacity to accept an ever-broadening and wholesome view of reality that might cause a sense of uncertainty toward the return for the Atheists. These results are in line with recent research findings suggesting that individuals who are emotionally stable and tolerant to uncertainty experience more subjective well-being than those who are less devout and more selfish (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2013).

The third hypothesis of this study that Buddhism Generosity may have a mediating effect on the relationships between self-construal and subjective well-being. As for the indirect effects of the three paths, the 95% confidence intervals all did not contain zero, which means the mediating effects of GMT and GOF between both dimensions of the self-construal and subjective well-being were all significant. Besides, according to Baron and Kenny (1986), full mediation was generated when the indirect effect of mediator was significant but the direct effect of the independent variable was not significant; partial mediation was generated when the direct effect of the independent variable was still significant. As shown in the Table 2, the indirect effect of the GMT was significant in the path of Interdependent self-construal → GMT → SWB and Independent self-construal → GMT → SWB. As also shown in Fig.1, the direct effect of both dimension of the self-construal were all significant, which means GMT was partial mediator in these two paths. Similarly, GOF was also partial mediator in the path of the Interdependent self-

construal → *GOF* → *SWB* and Independent self-construal → *GOF* → *SWB*.

The hypothesis was confirmed by the results that two dimensions of the Buddhism Generosity fully mediates the links between of the self-construal and subjective well-being. The second dimension of Buddhism Generosity namely Giving of Dharma (*GOF*) was not in the model may because the participants who were in their teens were too young to give potent spiritual guidance and mental instructions toward the confusion of people surrounding, which would be enhanced after they grow up. Overall, it is in line with the findings that altruism and prosocial behavior are positively correlated with and have effect on individuals' subjective well-being (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010; Moynihan, DeLeire & Enami, 2015), suggesting that Buddhism Generosity is positively correlated with life satisfaction and mediates the relationship between self-construal personality traits and subjective well-being.

The present study has a few noteworthy limitations, which suggest directions for future research. First, it was a cross-sectional design, and thus causal effect could not be concluded. Future studies may adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to further examine the cause-and-effect relationships. Second, the negative association between narcissism and subjective well-being in this study should be further examined. More cross-cultural studies are needed to investigate whether covert narcissism is more prevalent in collectivistic societies and to examine the differences of perceptions of subjective well-being in people with independent self-construal across cultural contexts.

Buddhist literature states that the Buddha nature—including Buddhism Generosity—exists in all human beings without exception. However, as the participants in this study were mainly atheists, further studies bringing in more participants from different religious and cultural backgrounds are needed to provide more concrete evidence that Buddhism Generosity is a psychological attribute every human being possesses, regardless of his or her religious beliefs. Identifying the cultural factors that may influence an individual's level of Buddhism Generosity through cross-cultural studies is a promising direction.

In addition, although Buddhism Generosity has already been proven to share similarities with altruism and prosocial behaviors (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010; Gebauer et al., 2008), future studies thoroughly exploring the relationships between Buddhism Generosity and other related variables aside from altruism and prosocial behaviors—like mindfulness, empathy—can provide a clearer understanding of the unique nature of Buddhism Generosity. Lastly,

participants may have tended to avoid self-reporting their possession of independent self-construal. Thus, future studies may also consider including social desirability as a covariate.

Despite these limitations, we did make an attempt to take a closer look at the links between self-construal, Buddhism Generosity, and subjective well-being. By doing so, we explored the richness of Buddhist resources for cultivating character and traits as well as obtaining subjective well-being. Our attempt to incorporate this part of Buddhist literature into modern psychology may be just a small drop in the vast ocean of Buddhist teachings. However, slowly but surely, this kind of cross-fields integrative work will prove its own value, and may provide another new direction for positive psychology.

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