



Short Communication

Authoritarian personality and subjective well-being in Chinese college students: The moderation effect of the organizational culture context

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ABSTRACT

Authoritarian personality has been repeatedly shown to be associated with greater subjective well-being largely in the western countries. Contextual factors have been demonstrated to be capable of moderating this association at the macro level, and yet whether micro level organizational culture context could have a similar moderation effect remains elusive. The present study aims to verify authoritarian personality - subjective well-being association among a sample of Chinese college students, as well as testing the potential moderating role of the authoritarian organizational culture context. 1007 Chinese male undergraduates from both military and non-military medical universities were recruited, and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), happiness index and life satisfaction were measured. We found that higher score on authoritarian personality is significantly correlated with greater subjective well-being, and this association indeed can be moderated by the organizational culture context (military vs civilian). Overall, this study verifies and extends the findings of a positive authoritarian personality - subjective well-being relationship to an oriental cultural context.

1. Introduction

1.1. Authoritarian personality and subjective well-being

Are authoritarians happier? This question has haunted psychologists for decades. Authoritarian personality refers to the trait of obeying or submitting to the authority (Altemeyer, 1998), while subjective well-being refers to an individual's emotional (happiness) and cognitive judgement (life satisfaction) of his or her life (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003). While early works often associated authoritarianism with psychological ill-being, such as higher incidence of depression and personality disorders (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950) and negative emotions like fear and shame (Tomkins, 1965; Wilson, Ausman, & Mathews, 1973), follow-up studies found either neutral or positive relations between the two, e.g., not significantly related to self-esteem (Altemeyer, 1998; Houston, 1984; Houston & Springer, 1980), happiness or life satisfaction (Butler, 2000). In fact, the findings are often inconsistent and even contradictory (Butler, 2000; Mehrabian, 1996).

Recent cumulative evidence also tends to support a link between political ideology and subjective well-being: conservatives seem to be happier than liberals – the so-called “ideological happiness gap” (Napier & Jost, 2008; Schlenker, Chambers, & Le, 2012; Van Hiel &

Brebels, 2011). In other words, in geographical regions like North America, people who have high levels of submission to the established authorities may often be political conservatives (right-wingers), which can be measured for example by the Right-Wing Authoritarian scale (Altemeyer, 1981). In Communist countries like China however, the political left-wingers are often those can be categorized as psychological right-wing authoritarians (Altemeyer, 1996). Regarding the relationship between authoritarian personality and subjective well-being, much less attention has devoted to the Chinese.

1.2. The putative role of the macro-level context as a moderator

Motivated by the inconsistencies of findings, a few recent studies moved one step further – to examine the potential contextual moderators of the authoritarian personality – subjective well-being association. For example, Onraet, Van Assche, Roets, Haesevoets, and Van Hiel (2016) investigated a representative worldwide sample covering 137,890 individuals from 94 countries, and demonstrated that the context of the country-level threat can moderate this relationship. Roccato and Russo (2017) show—through two quasi-experimental vignette studies—that societal threat to safety can moderate the association between right-wing authoritarianism and psychological distress. The political environment might moderate this relationship as well,

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e.g., right-wing adherents could experience greater well-being than liberals in conservative context (Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016), and supporters report higher life satisfaction when the president elected was from the same political party (Mandel & Omorogbe, 2014). After all, as concluded by Butler (2000): “one cannot gain a complete picture of the personality-outcome relationship at the individual level without considering the environment to which the individuals belong.” Most of the putative contextual moderators being tested, however, are at the national or macro level. The possible moderating effects of the micro level context are yet to be uncovered.

One possible explanation underlying the contextual moderation to the authoritarianism—well-being relationship is person-culture fit. It refers to a match between one's attitude/value and the prevailing attitude/value of the environment he or she lives in (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). If an individual embraces the same attitude with the surrounding majority, he or she might feel certain and stable about themselves as well as the environment, which could lead to positive outcomes (Turner, 1991). Indeed, scholars show that when individual's personality matches the prevailing environmental trait, he or she experiences better well-being (Fulmer et al., 2010). Another possibility is the shared reality hypothesis, which states that individual's subjective reality or personal experience is verified and shared by others, reaching the status of objective reality (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Shared reality may help establish and maintain positive relationships in the social context which are, in turn, associated with higher feelings of well-being.

1.3. The present study

From the perspective of person-culture fit and shared reality theory, it is reasonable to assume that the micro level factor like organizational cultural context, might also be able to moderate the authoritarianism—well-being relationship. To this end, in this study we aim to examine the relationship between authoritarian personality and subjective well-being, as well as the moderation effect of the organizational cultural context among Chinese. In particular, we sample from two distinct groups of college students, that is, military and civilian medical universities.

Cultivated by the single-party authoritarian regime, one of the mainstream values in Chinese society is respecting and obeying the authorities or those higher status “leaders”. Only a few studies found a high degree of authoritarian personality among Chinese people, which actually can be considered as a national character (Chien, 2016). Military college environments have also been associated with high authoritarian attitudes among students (Kurpius & Lucart, 2000). We thus hypothesize that 1) among both the military and non-military students sampled, authoritarian personality is positively associated with happiness and life satisfaction; 2) the organizational culture can moderate the authoritarianism-well-being association, such that this association can be stronger among military students than that among civilian students.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Prior to the data collection, the study was approved by the ethical committee of the authors' university. Clinical medicine undergraduates from four medical universities in mainland China – two military and two civilian (U_{1-4}) – were recruited. As the proportion of female students was very low in military universities sampled, only male students were included in this study. 1138 questionnaires were distributed from April to May 2016, 1007 of which were returned. The effective response rate is 88.48%. The sample ($N = 1007$, mean age = 19.1 years, $SD = 1.07$, min = 16, and max = 22) includes 586 (58.2%) military male students ($U_1 = 339$, $U_2 = 247$) and 421 (41.8%) non-military

male students ($U_3 = 153$, $U_4 = 268$). Participants completed the measures described below during regular class hours anonymously.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Authoritarianism

Chinese translated and modified version (Liu, 2009) of the right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) scale (Altemeyer, 1981) was administered on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree; higher mean scores indicate high RWA). The reliability and validity of the Chinese version has been established in mainland China (Liu, 2009). The Cronbach's α for the present study was 0.69.

2.2.2. Subjective well-being

Subjective well-being was measured by the Campbell Index of Well-being (for happiness) as well as the Satisfaction with Life Scale (for life satisfaction). Chinese translated version (Wang, Wang, & Ma, 1999) of Campbell Index of Well-being (Campbell, Converse, & Rogers, 1976) contains nine bipolar adjective items rated on a 7-point Likert scale, measuring the degree of positive and negative affective states, including interesting/boring, happy/painful, valuable/useless, hopeful/hopeless, etc., as well as the general degree of life satisfaction (one item). A total score (ranges from 2.10/most unhappy to 14.70/most happy) is calculated by summing the mean score of the first eight items on general affect with weight 1.0 and the last item on life satisfaction with weight 1.1. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) was translated and validated by Qiu and Zheng (2005). It contains five items rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree; higher mean scores indicate greater life satisfaction). In the present study, the Cronbach's α of the two scales were 0.89 and 0.86 respectively.

2.3. Power analysis

We didn't conduct a priori power analysis, however, based on the effect sizes from two published studies (MacInnis, Busseri, Choma, & Hodson, 2013; Onraet, van Hiel, & Dhont, 2013), we performed a post-hoc sample size estimation. Specifically, the association between right-wing authoritarianism and subjective well-being has an effect size (correlation coefficient) of around 0.06–0.19. Assuming an effect size of 0.10, with an alpha = 0.05 and power = 0.80, the estimated sample size needed in the current study – calculated by GPower 3.1 – is approximately $N = 782$ for the simplest bivariate correlation. Thus, it suggests that our proposed sample size of $N = 1007$ could be adequate for the evaluation of the possible relationship between right-wing authoritarianism and subjective well-being. In addition, following Simmons, Nelson, and Simonsohn (2012), we report how we determined all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures in the study.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary analysis

A preliminary analysis of the data shows that there are 2.5% missing value due to incomplete fillings of the questionnaires. Little's Missing Completely At Random (MCAR) test (Little, 1988) was applied to analyze the missing values. The result reached statistical significance (Chi-square = 17,678.165, $df = 15,680$, $p < 0.001$), which suggests that the values are not missing completely at random. Following the recommendations from Pigott (2001), Expectation Maximization (EM) algorithm was then used to estimate the missing data.

3.2. Descriptive statistics (Table 1)

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