

Emotional Expression and Life Satisfaction in Germany and Japan: Self-Construal as a Mediator

 Fabian Schunk^a, Gisela Trommsdorff^a, and Dorothea König-Teshnizi^b
^aDepartment of Psychology, University of Konstanz | ^bFaculty of Psychology, University of Vienna

Fabian Schunk

 fabian.schunk@uni-konstanz.de
 

Introduction

Emotional suppression has frequently been found to be related to lower life satisfaction among Western participants. Among East Asian participants, however, the link between suppression and lower life satisfaction was nonsignificant or reduced (Ford & Mauss, 2015). Negative consequences of suppression might be attenuated for individuals fostering an interdependent self-construal due to benefits that arise from masking negative emotions in social contexts (Le & Impett, 2013).

Self construals: Western European cultures encourage the development of an independent self-construal, whereas Japan and many other East Asian cultures promote an interdependent self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

- An **independent self** emphasizes uniqueness, individuality, autonomy, self-expression, and self-enhancement.
- An **interdependent** emphasizes connectedness with others, interpersonal relationships, and self-effacement.

Previous cross-cultural research focused on emotional suppression in a broader sense and rarely explicitly measured self-construal. This study aims to examine interdependent self-construal as a potential mediator for associations between emotion regulation and life satisfaction. We examined two specific strategies for the regulation of negative emotions:

- **Uncontrolled expression** = Disinhibited display of emotions
- **Empathic suppression** = Masking emotions out of empathic concern (e.g., to prevent hurting or burdening other people)

Hypotheses

- 1) Uncontrolled expression will be related to higher life satisfaction among Germans but related to lower life satisfaction among Japanese.
- 2) Empathic suppression will be related to lower life satisfaction among Germans but related to higher life satisfaction among Japanese.

Exploratory Research Question:

Does an interdependent self mediate these associations within cultural groups?

References

Diener, E., Emmons, R. A., Larsen, R. J., & Griffin, S. (1985). The Satisfaction With Life Scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 49(1), 71–75. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa4901_13. Ford, B. Q., & Mauss, I. B. (2015). Culture and emotion regulation. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 3, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2014.12.004>. König, D. (2011). *Die Regulation von negativen und positiven Emotionen. Entwicklung des Emotionsregulations-Inventars und Vergleich von Migränikerinnen mit Kontrollpersonen* [The regulation of negative and positive emotions. Development of the Emotion Regulation Inventory and comparison of migraineurs with controls] [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Vienna. Le, B. M., & Impett, E. A. (2013). When holding back helps: Suppressing negative emotions during sacrifice feels authentic and is beneficial for highly interdependent people. *Psychological Science*, 24(9), 1809–1815. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797613475365>. Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review*, 98(2), 224–253. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0033-295x.98.2.224>. Triandis, H. C., & Gelfand, M. J. (1998). Converging measurement of horizontal and vertical individualism and collectivism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74(1), 118–128. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.74.1.118>.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

1 000 university students from Japan and German-speaking countries (Germany and Austria; “Germans” to ease reading) completed a paper-pencil survey at universities in their respective country.

- 524 Japanese: $M = 19.00$ years, $SD = 1.14$; 36.8% female
- 476 Germans: $M = 21.71$ years, $SD = 2.85$; 60.9% female

Analyses

- Pearson correlations
- Mediation analyses using SPSS macro PROCESS (version 3.5, model 4, bootstrapping, 5,000 resamples). Gender and age were included as covariates.

Measures

Emotion Regulation Inventory (ERI, König, 2011)

- **Uncontrolled expression**, e.g., “When I feel negative emotions, I show them in strong ways”
 - **Empathic suppression**, e.g., “When I feel negative emotions, I try not to show them, so as not to burden anyone else”
- Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985)
- **Life satisfaction**, e.g., “I am satisfied with my life”
- Cultural Orientation Scale (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998), interdependent self was measured by summing up the subscales for horizontal and vertical collectivism
- **Interdependent self-construal**, e.g., “I feel good when I cooperate with others” (We also measured independent self-construal in our study but found no mediation effects)

Results

Figure 1. Interdependent Self Partially Mediates the Negative Relationship Between Uncontrolled Expression of Negative Emotions And Life Satisfaction Among Japanese

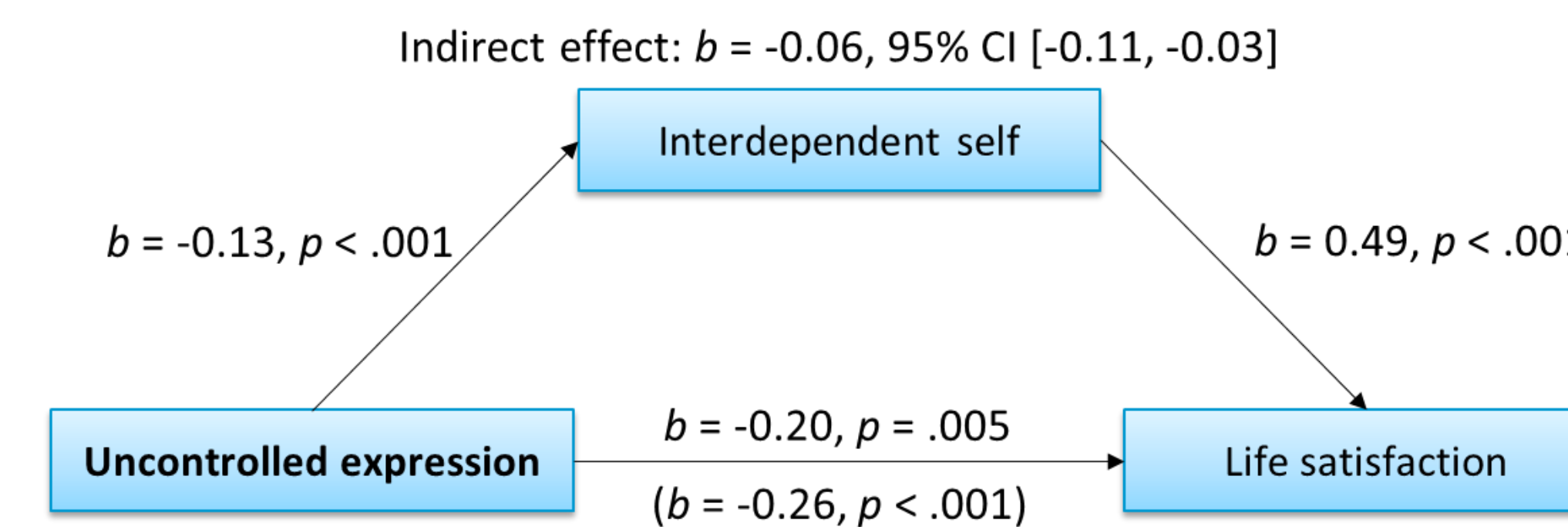


Figure 2. Interdependent Self Completely Mediates the Positive Relationship Between Empathic Suppression of Negative Emotions And Life Satisfaction Among Japanese

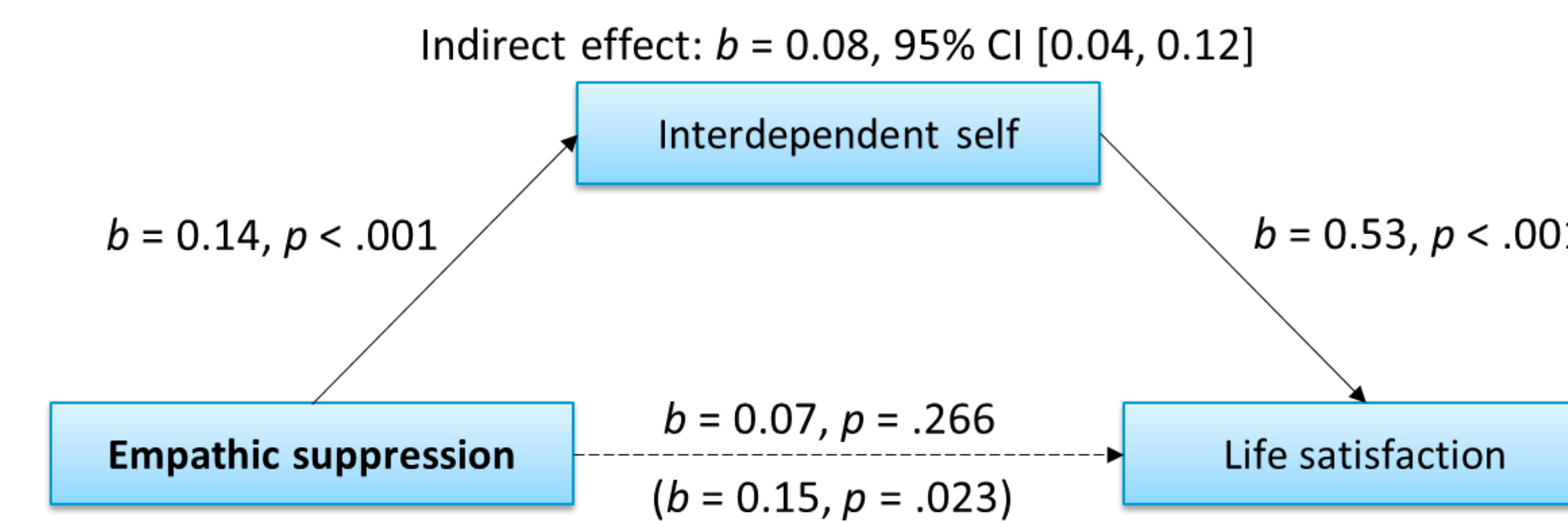


Table 2. Pearson Correlations by Sample

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Uncontrolled expression	–	-.38**	-.05	.01
2. Empathic suppression	-.39**	–	.08	-.16**
3. Interdependent self	-.19**	.22**	–	.26**
4. Life satisfaction	-.14**	.09*	.23**	–

Note. Correlation for the German sample are shown above the diagonal. Correlations for the Japanese sample are shown below the diagonal.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

Summary and Conclusion

The present research highlights the role of culture in emotion regulation and provides new evidence on cultural differences in the relationship between emotion regulation and life satisfaction. **Uncontrolled expression** of negative emotions was related to lower life satisfaction among Japanese and unrelated among Germans. **Empathic suppression** of negative emotions was related to lower life satisfaction among Germans but to higher life satisfaction among Japanese.

Moreover, we found that an interdependent self mediated the relationships in the Japanese sample (see Figures 1–2). No mediation effects were found among Germans (confidence intervals for indirect effects included zero).

These findings suggest that specific emotion regulation strategies may promote life satisfaction by contributing to a cultural fit with the respective cultural model of self.