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POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN ASIAN AMERICANS: THEORY AND RESEARCH

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Despite the tremendous advances that positive psychologists have made to our understanding of optimal human functioning, little attention has been paid to the role of culture in shaping these processes (Diener, 2000; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010; Tsai & Park, 2014). Yet, a growing body of empirical research demonstrates cultural variation in how people think, feel, and relate to others, suggesting that optimal functioning for Asian Americans and European Americans may differ in important ways. Thus, current ways of assessing and increasing well-being, which have been primarily developed in European American contexts, may be only partially applicable to Asian Americans. In this chapter, we review the research on positive affect, cognitions, and behaviors of Asian Americans and discuss implications for developing a positive psychology of Asian Americans.

OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY AND DEMOGRAPHICS
OF ASIAN AMERICANS

Asian Americans are an extremely diverse group: 21.9% of Asian Americans are of Chinese descent, 18.8% of Filipino descent, 17.5% of Indian descent, 10.2% of Vietnamese descent, 9.5% of Korean descent, and 7.1% of Japanese descent. The remaining 15% of Asian Americans include at least 16 other ethnic groups (i.e., Bangladeshi, Burmese, Cambodian, Hmong, Indonesian, Laotian, Taiwanese, Thai; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Despite tremendous variation in immigration histories and cultures of origin of Asian Americans, most research in psychology has focused on comparisons between East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Korean, Japanese) and European American groups. Because of this, much of the research we review here is based on these two groups.

Today, Asian Americans are the fastest-growing minority group in the United States, with 18.9 million documented residents. Asian American population growth is driven by international migration: 60% of Asian American population growth in 2012 was due to international migration; in comparison, 76% of Hispanic population growth in 2012 was due to actual births in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). This suggests that Asian Americans may be even more influenced by their cultures of origin than other ethnic groups in the United States.

Asian Americans vary in the degree to which they are oriented to American culture and their cultures of origin (Abe-Kim, Okazaki, & Goto, 2001). Research on *acculturation* (i.e., the degree to which one adopts the values and practices of the host culture; B. S. K. Kim & Abreu, 2001; Suinn, 2010) in Asian Americans suggests that being oriented to American culture has both positive (e.g., decreased depression and anxiety; Yoon, Hacker, Hewitt, Abrams, & Cleary, 2012) and negative (e.g., increased stress due to acculturation; Ward & Kennedy, 1994) outcomes. Similarly, research conducted on *enculturation* (i.e., the degree to which one retains their culture of origin) suggests that being highly oriented to East Asian culture can lead to positive outcomes (e.g., higher educational achievement; Huntsinger, Jose, Larson, Balsink Krieg, & Shaligram, 2000; strong work and family values; Phinney, 1990) as well as negative ones (e.g., adjustment difficulties and psychological distress; Shim & Schwartz, 2007).

CULTURAL MODELS OF THE SELF

Although Asian Americans vary in their exposure to mainstream American and Asian cultures, by definition, they are directly or indirectly exposed to U.S. and Asian cultural ideas and practices, which vary in a

number of ways. One fundamental difference between Western and East Asian cultures is the dominant model of the self and personhood (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In Western cultures like the United States, the dominant model of the self is *independent*, autonomous, stable, and distinct from others; in East Asian cultures, however, the dominant model of the self is *interdependent*, fluid, contextual, and bound to others (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Markus & Conner, 2013; Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2002). As an illustration of these differences, Figure 3.1 shows the independent self as distinct from others (indicated by the solid line around the self and the distance between circles) and the interdependent self as connected to close others (indicated by the dotted line around the self and the overlap among circles; Markus & Conner, 2013; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In contexts with independent views of the self, a good, well-adjusted, and happy person is one who asserts and expresses his or her desires, beliefs, and preferences; exerts influence over others; and acts consistently across situations. In contexts with interdependent views of the self, however, a good, well-adjusted, and happy person is one who adjusts his or her desires, beliefs, and preferences to fit in with others; accommodates others; and is responsive to situational demands (Cross, Morris, & Gore, 2002; Kanagawa, Cross, & Markus, 2001; Tsai, Knutson, & Fung, 2006; Tsai, Miao, Seppala, Fung, & Yeung, 2007).

Because they are exposed to both Western and East Asian cultures, Asian Americans may endorse both models of self. However, the ways in which these
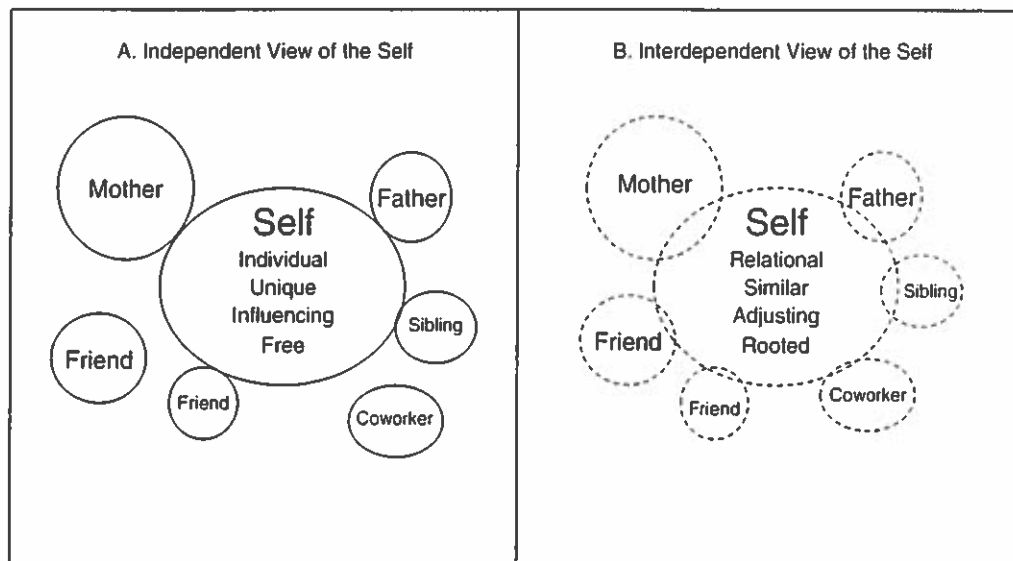

Figure 3.1. View of the self: A. Independent; B. Interdependent. Adapted from "Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation," by H. R. Markus and S. Kitayama, 1991, *Psychological Review*, 98, p. 226. Copyright 1991 by the American Psychological Association.

models are expressed may depend on the situation. Priming studies, in which one culture is made more salient than the other, suggest that Asian Americans who are highly oriented to both cultures behave in ways that are consistent with the culture being primed (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000). Most recently, Asian Americans' different models of self have been validated with neuroimaging data. Whereas European Americans show greater activation in areas that process self-relevant information (medial prefrontal cortex [MPFC]) in response to general self-descriptions (i.e., "In general, I am honest"), Japanese show greater MPFC activation in response to contextualized self-descriptions (i.e., "With my mother, I am honest"; Chiao et al., 2009). Asian Americans, who endorse both sets of values, show both patterns of MPFC activation depending on which culture is primed (Chiao et al., 2010).

VALUE OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY FOR ASIAN AMERICANS

Positive psychology's goals of encouraging optimal human functioning, creating thriving individuals and communities, and helping people achieve their full potential (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) are relevant across cultures. However, most interventions designed to facilitate positive outcomes are based on European American views of optimal functioning, which may be less effective for individuals who are also influenced by East Asian ideas and practices. For instance, expressing gratitude, an increasingly popular way of enhancing well-being, seems to be more effective for European Americans[1] than South Koreans (Layous, Lee, Choi, & Lyubomirsky, 2013). Thus, understanding how culture shapes the meaning of optimal functioning should help researchers and practitioners develop more effective practices and interventions to improve the well-being of Asian Americans. Next, we review research on positive affect, cognitions, and behaviors of Asian Americans. We treat them as separate constructs for analytic purposes, but in fact positive affect, positive cognitions, and positive behaviors often co-occur.

THEORY AND RESEARCH ON POSITIVE AFFECT
OF ASIAN AMERICANS

One important contribution of positive psychology is its emphasis on positive affective states. Across cultures, affective states (i.e., feeling states that include emotions, attitudes, moods, and preferences) are organized in terms of

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[1]When describing research findings in this chapter, we use the term *American* to describe people living in the United States. We use the terms *European American* and *Asian American* to describe specific ethnic groups living in the United States.

at least two dimensions: *valence* (positive to negative) and *arousal* (high to low; Barrett & Russell, 1999).

Relationship Between Positive and Negative States

In European American contexts, reports of positive and negative affective states are usually negatively correlated (i.e., less "mixed"); the more European Americans feel good, the less they feel bad. However, reports of positive and negative affective states are typically less negatively correlated (i.e., more "mixed") in East Asian contexts (Kööts, Realo, & Allik, 2012; Schimmack, Oishi, & Diener, 2002; Sims, Tsai, Wang, Fung, & Zhang, 2014). In other words, individuals in East Asian contexts are more likely to report feeling the good with the bad and the bad with the good than those in European American contexts. Furthermore, studies of Asian Canadians suggest that their experiences of positive and negative states depend on the cultural context they are in. Following situations in which they recently spoke English, Asian Canadians' positive and negative feelings resemble those of their European Canadian counterparts, and following situations in which they recently spoke an Asian language, Asian Canadians' positive and negative feelings resemble those of their East Asian counterparts (Perunovic, Heller, & Rafaeli, 2007).

Why do these differences exist? In European American contexts that promote independent selves, individuals are encouraged to stand out in a positive way. Maximizing the experience and expression of positive emotion (and dampening the experience and expression of negative emotion) is one way to achieve this. However, in East Asian contexts that promote interdependent selves, individuals are encouraged to fit in with others. Moderating experiences and expressions of positive and negative emotions makes it easier for individuals to adjust to others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Consistent with this idea, Sims and colleagues (2014) found that European Americans ideally want to feel positive states more and negative states less than their Chinese American counterparts do and that both groups want to feel positive states more and negative states less than their Hong Kong Chinese and Beijing Chinese counterparts do. Moreover, these cultural differences in ideal affect accounted for cultural differences in the experiences of mixed emotions. Thus, European American contexts teach people to value maximizing positive and minimizing negative emotions more than Asian American or East Asian contexts do, which influences how individuals experience positive relative to negative emotions.

Positive States That People Ideally Want to Feel

Although most people want to feel positively, cultures differ in the specific positive states they encourage. European Americans ideally want to feel high

arousal positive states (i.e., excitement and elation) more than East Asians, and East Asians want to feel low arousal positive states (i.e., calm and serenity) more than European Americans (Tsai et al., 2006). Asian Americans value high arousal positive states more than their East Asian counterparts do, but they also value low arousal positive states more than their European American counterparts do (Tsai et al., 2006). These cultural differences emerge even after controlling for how much people actually feel these states (*actual affect*; Tsai et al., 2007).

These differences in ideal affect are again related to cultural differences in models of the self (Tsai et al., 2007). In contexts that have independent models of the self, individuals are encouraged to exert influence (i.e., shape their environments to be consistent with their own desires, needs, and preferences; Morling et al., 2002). Because influencing others requires action, and action requires increases in physiological arousal, individuals (and cultures) that value influence should also value high arousal positive states. In contexts that have interdependent models of the self, individuals are encouraged to adjust (i.e., change their own desires, needs, and preferences to be consistent with their environments; Morling et al., 2002). Because adjusting to others requires suspending action, and suspending action requires decreases in physiological arousal, individuals (and cultures) that value adjustment should also value low arousal states. In support of these predictions, correlational and experimental studies find that, across cultures, individuals whose goal it was to influence their partner preferred excited (vs. calm) states more than those whose goal it was to adjust to their partner (Tsai et al., 2006, 2007). These findings suggest that individuals value the affective states that are consistent with the larger interpersonal goals of their cultures.

Social Context of Emotions

Although people across contexts experience both socially engaging (e.g., feeling friendly, respectful) and disengaging (e.g., feeling proud, superior) emotions, culture influences how prevalent these emotions are and whether they are associated with general positive feelings. In Japan, socially engaging emotions are more prevalent than socially disengaging emotions, whereas the opposite is true in the United States (Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000). Furthermore, socially disengaging emotions are more strongly associated with general positive states (i.e., happy) for Americans than for Japanese, and socially engaging emotions are more strongly associated with general positive states for Japanese than Americans (Kitayama, Mesquita, & Karasawa, 2006). These differences are due to different models of the self in European American and East Asian contexts.

THEORY AND RESEARCH ON POSITIVE COGNITIONS
OF ASIAN AMERICANS

Several interventions that aim to increase well-being focus on changing people's cognitions, or ways of thinking about themselves and the worlds around them (i.e., cognitive behavior therapy, Fordyce happiness program; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). However, as with positive affect, researchers have observed cultural differences in cognitive processes. In this section, we review two areas in which positive cognitions vary across European American and East Asian contexts.

Thinking About the Self (Self-Esteem)

High self-esteem (i.e., evaluation of one's own worth) is regarded as positive, desirable, and motivating in European American contexts (Baumeister, 1993; Fulmer et al., 2010). Significant research suggests that East Asians and Asian Americans report lower levels of self-esteem than European Americans and European Canadians (Yamaguchi et al., 2007) do. From a European American perspective, these differences suggest that East Asians and Asian Americans are more psychologically distressed than their European American counterparts; however, research suggests that having high self-esteem may not be as adaptive in East Asian cultures because it works against the goal of adjusting to and fitting in with others (Heine et al., 1999). Thus, having lower self-esteem may better facilitate interdependent goals in East Asian contexts.

Although Chinese individuals score lower than European Americans on overall self-reported self-esteem, these differences are driven by responses to the negative statements. Whereas Chinese individuals and European Americans equally endorsed positive statements like, "I take a positive attitude toward myself," Chinese were more likely than European Americans to endorse negative statements like, "At times I think I am no good at all." These findings have been replicated with measures of implicit self-esteem (i.e., the Implicit Association Test), suggesting that cultural differences are not just due to differences in self-presentation (Boucher, Peng, Shi, & Wang, 2009; Spencer-Rodgers, Boucher, Mori, Wang, & Peng, 2009). For Asian Americans, reports of self-esteem vary by cultural orientation (e.g., Chinese Americans highly affiliated with other Chinese report lower self-esteem; Tsai, Ying, & Lee, 2001) and social context (e.g., Asian American reports of self-esteem depend on the reference group against which individuals are comparing themselves; Yamaguchi et al., 2007).

Thinking About the World (Dialecticism and Optimism/Pessimism)

Dialectical thinking includes the beliefs that (a) the universe is always changing in dynamic and unpredictable ways (i.e., theory of change), (b) contradictory statements can both be true (i.e., theory of contradiction), and (c) everything exists as part of a whole and cannot be understood absent of a larger context (i.e., holism). Dialectical ways of thinking are higher among East Asians and Asian Americans than European Americans (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). These differences in dialecticism have implications for how individuals process and recall information and make inferences. For instance, when asked to look at an image with focal and background features (e.g., a fish in water with background bubbles and plants), Americans attended more to focal objects (e.g., fish) than to background features (e.g., water color, bubbles, plants), whereas Japanese did the reverse (Masuda & Nisbett, 2001; Miyamoto, Nisbett, & Masuda, 2006). Moreover, whereas Japanese better recognized focal objects when paired with their original backgrounds, Americans recognized focal objects regardless of the background. These findings also extend to emotional processing: Japanese are more likely to consider the emotions of the people surrounding the central figure than are Americans (Masuda, Gonzalez, Kwan, & Nisbett, 2008).

Dialecticism also highlights differences between Americans and East Asians in the types of predictions they make about the future. For instance, when given a sequence of numbers (e.g., 200, 300, 400, 500, ___), Americans were more likely to predict that the fifth data point was consistent with the trend (e.g., increase in number). However, Chinese more often predicted that the fifth data point was inconsistent with the trend (e.g., decrease in number). Americans were more likely to continue the trend if it was in the positive direction than if it was in the negative direction, an interesting finding that is consistent with Americans' desire to maximize the positive (Ji, Nisbett, & Su, 2001).

Another difference in the cognitive processes of East Asians and European Americans is their levels of optimism and pessimism. Among European Americans, *optimism* (i.e., expecting future positive outcomes) is linked to numerous positive outcomes related to coping, adjustment, and mental health (Norem & Chang, 2002), whereas *pessimism* (i.e., expecting negative outcomes) is related to negative outcomes, including problem avoidance, depression, and social withdrawal (Chang, 1996; Long & Sangster, 1993). The benefits of being optimistic and the costs of being pessimistic, however, may be less applicable to Asian Americans. Although Asian Americans and European Americans do not differ in their levels of optimism, the former are significantly more pessimistic than the latter;

however, pessimism is a stronger predictor of depression for European Americans than it is for Asian Americans (Chang, 1996). Thus, expecting negative outcomes may have different implications for psychological functioning for European Americans and Asian Americans.

Cultural differences in outcomes related to optimism and pessimism are a product of different models of self. In independent contexts, where individuals are encouraged to maximize positive and minimize negative cognitions and emotions, pessimism is more detrimental to psychological functioning. In interdependent cultures, where individuals are encouraged to moderate positive and negative cognitions and emotions, pessimism exacts a lesser cost.

THEORY AND RESEARCH ON POSITIVE BEHAVIORS OF ASIAN AMERICANS

Differences in affective and cognitive processes between Asian Americans and European Americans have implications for the specific behaviors that the two groups view as positive and optimal. In this section, we provide examples of behaviors that have different meanings in Asian American and European American settings.

Interactions With the Environment (Authenticity, Choice)

One difference between European Americans and East Asians is the emphasis placed on *authenticity*, or the degree to which one is consistent in personality, thoughts, and behaviors across situations, despite external pressure to change. For European Americans, greater authenticity is associated with better psychological adjustment (Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993; Swann, De la Ronde, & Hixon, 1994); however, less of an association is observed for Asian Americans and East Asians (English & Chen, 2011). Compared with European Americans, East Asians are less disturbed by inconsistencies between public and private thoughts and actions and less critical of others' incongruent behaviors (Kashima, Siegal, Tanaka, & Kashima, 1992). Furthermore, Koreans spontaneously describe themselves as inconsistent in their personality traits (Choi & Choi, 2002) and as "two-faced" (Suh, 2002), suggesting that flexibility, not authenticity, is considered normative and positive in Korean culture. These cultural differences also influence social judgments: European Americans tend to attribute people's behavior to their personality traits (vs. situational circumstances) more than East Asians do (Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999; Morris, Nisbett, & Peng, 1995).

Individuals in European American contexts value making autonomous choices; they are more likely to construe daily actions as self-choices and are

faster at making self-choices compared with individuals in Indian contexts, who less often construe actions as choices and are slower at making self-choices (Savani, Markus, & Conner, 2008; Savani, Markus, Naidu, Kumar, & Berlia, 2010). Moreover, individuals from European American contexts enjoy objects they have chosen for themselves more than those they have not chosen, and they are willing to pay more for an object they choose for themselves than one they do not. Indians do not show the same bias for objects they have chosen (Savani et al., 2008). In addition, European American children perform better on, spend more time doing, and enjoy self-selected tasks more than tasks that were selected for them, but the opposite is true for Asian American children (Chen & Stevenson, 1995; Fu & Markus, 2014; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). Different models of self can explain these differences in the value of choice. In European American contexts, choice for oneself is highly valued because it reinforces the importance of individual traits and preferences. However, in Asian contexts, personal choice may be less valued because it reduces the importance of social norms and prevents people from adjusting to the preferences of others.

In addition, there are cultural differences in how individuals make choices; European Americans more often make personal choices for themselves (i.e., choices based on individual preferences) by choosing the item they rate highest among similar items (e.g., several different CDs; Kitayama, Snibbe, Markus, & Suzuki, 2004). In contrast, Indians and Japanese less often make personal choices, as they are less likely than European Americans to choose products they rate highest for themselves (Savani et al., 2008). Similarly, European Americans often strive to be unique in their choices and preferences, whereas East Asians often strive to conform to the norms of the group. For instance, when given the option to choose one pen from five similar pens (four of the same color, one of a different color), European Americans more often choose the minority pen color. East Asians, however, more often choose the majority pen color (H. S. Kim & Markus, 1999). Whereas in European American contexts, choice behaviors express one's independence and personal preferences, in Asian cultures, choice behaviors appear to express one's interdependence and group preferences.

Interactions With Others (Self-Presentation, Emotion Regulation, Interpersonal Relationships)

The way in which individuals present themselves to others reflects cultural differences in values. Considerable research suggests that in Western contexts, individuals are motivated to view and present themselves positively instead of negatively: European Americans recall information about successes more than about failures (Crary, 1966), evaluate themselves more

positively than others evaluate them (Heine & Renshaw, 2002), and more strongly associate themselves with positive than negative words (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000). However, the opposite is true of East Asians and Asian Americans. Japanese students, for instance, not only rate themselves less positively than others rate them, but they are also more self-critical than European Americans (Heine & Lehman, 1999). In a meta-analysis of 91 cross-cultural comparisons, Westerners self-enhanced significantly more than East Asians, and Asian Americans scored somewhere between the two groups (Heine & Hamamura, 2007). Again, these differences stem from different models of self. Self-enhancement is more useful in European American contexts, which value influencing others and positively differentiating oneself from others; for Asian Americans and East Asians, by contrast, adjusting to others and minimizing differences to fit in with others are valued (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Morling et al., 2002). Research suggests that Asian Americans, who are influenced by both cultures, alternate in the degree of self-enhancement depending on the culture being primed (Zusho, 2008).

Emotional behaviors also factor into self-presentation during interpersonal interactions. Emotional suppression (i.e., actively inhibiting emotional expressions) is associated with negative outcomes for European Americans, including avoidant attachment, reduced feelings of closeness, increased negative feelings about interpersonal interactions, depressive symptoms, and lower life satisfaction (Gross & John, 2003). However, emotional suppression is not associated with these negative outcomes for Asian Americans or East Asians, for whom suppression is a critical part of maintaining interpersonal harmony (English & John, 2013; Soto, Perez, Kim, Lee, & Minnick, 2011).

Cultural differences in models of self also influence what is expected and valued in interpersonal interactions and the ways in which they influence individual attitudes and behaviors. For example, employees in European American contexts show less deference and respect for authority, are more likely to see the self as equal to leaders, and focus more on personal goals (vs. duties and obligations) than employees in East Asian contexts (Farh, Hackett, & Liang, 2007). Indeed, a meta-analysis suggests that perceived employee–supervisor relationship quality (known as *leader–member exchange*) is more strongly related to job satisfaction and employee turnover in Western than in Eastern contexts (Rockstuhl, Dulebohn, Ang, & Shore, 2012). A poorer relationship between employer and employee (lower leader–member exchange) hurts employee performance across cultures, but it has a greater impact on employee satisfaction and the likelihood that employees stay in their jobs in Western contexts than in East Asian contexts. In East Asian contexts, identification with collective goals seems to be more important. Although few studies have examined these processes in Asian American employees, it is likely that they are influenced by a combination of these East Asian and Western values.

The work described here suggests that a positive psychology of Asian Americans may, in many ways, look different from a positive psychology of European Americans. For instance, instead of defining *well-being* as the presence of positive states and the absence of negative states, practitioners might consider the possibility that, for some Asian Americans, *well-being* is the presence of moderate levels of both positive and negative affect. In this section, we describe what a positive psychology of Asian Americans might look like and how it might be achieved.

Rethinking Optimal Functioning

As illustrated in Figure 3.2, a good, well-adjusted person in independent European American contexts (light gray circle on the right) is one who focuses on positive instead of negative emotions and experiences; values high arousal positive states such as excitement; experiences emotions that differentiate one from others; has positive feelings about the self; thinks in a linear, analytic way; attends to focal objects; is consistent in one's thoughts and behaviors across situations; has positive feelings about the self; is highly optimistic; makes choices that express one's uniqueness and personal preferences; and is not suppressing core elements of oneself, like emotional expressions. In contrast, a good, well-adjusted person in interdependent East Asian contexts (in Figure 3.2, dark gray circle on left) is one who maintains balance between positive and negative emotions and experiences; values low arousal positive states such as calm; experiences emotions that connect one with others; has positive and negative feelings about the self; thinks in a holistic way; attends to context; is responsive to the situation; suppresses emotional expressions to facilitate social harmony; and is tolerant of contradiction, change, and inconsistencies in the self and the world.

Because Asian Americans are exposed to both European American and East Asian cultural ideas and practices (as indicated by the medium gray middle circle in Figure 3.2), they often internalize both models of optimal functioning. For instance, because Asian Americans, like their Asian counterparts, recognize and value both positive and negative aspects of the situation, negative cognitions like pessimism and low self-esteem may be less useful when diagnosing depression or anxiety in Asian Americans. Similarly, counseling practices that emphasize replacing negative cognitions with more positive ones (e.g., cognitive reappraisal; Beck, 1976) may be less effective for Asian Americans. Thus, in both research and practice, psychologists should evaluate Asian Americans' affect, thoughts, and behaviors in the context of European American and East Asian models of optimal functioning.
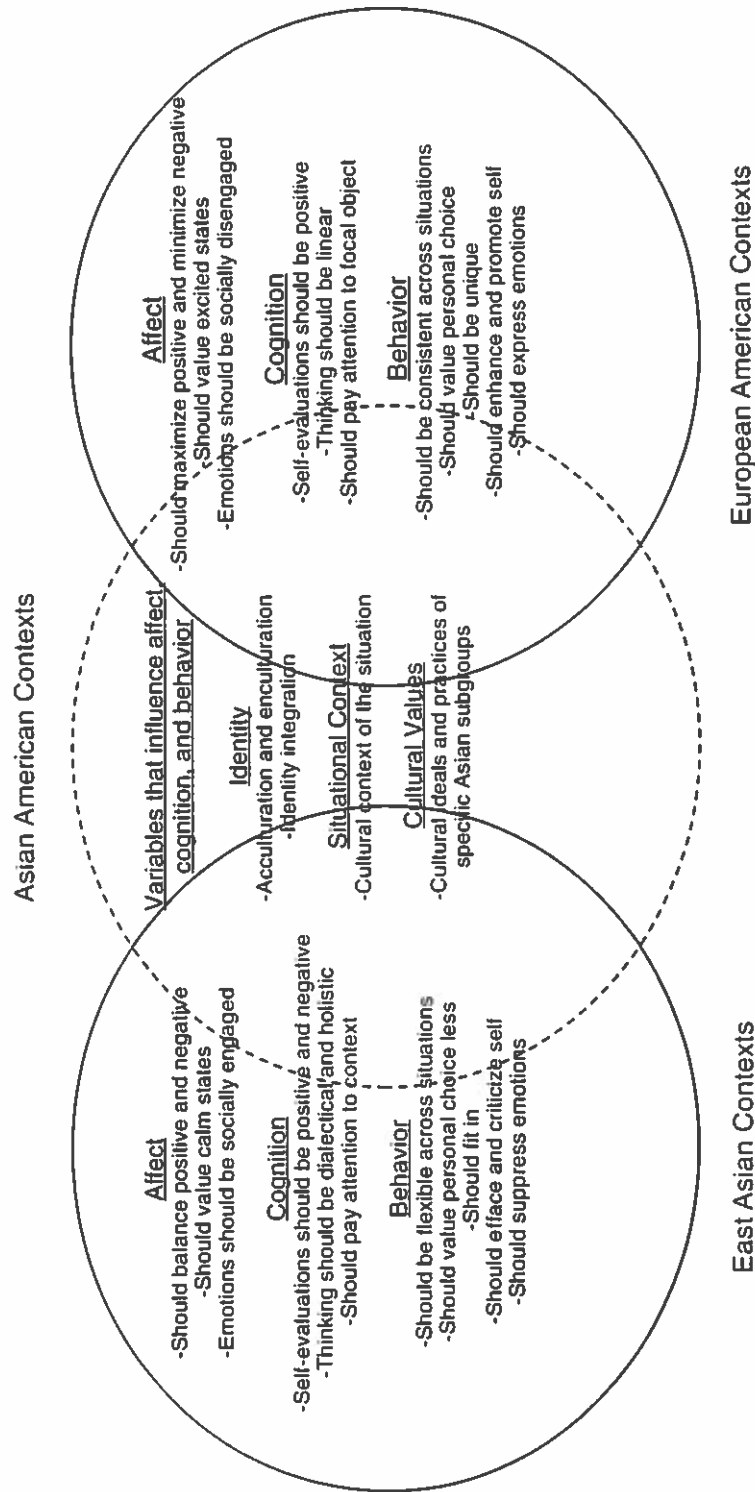
Asian American Contexts

Affect
-Should maximize positive and minimize negative
-Should value excited states
-Emotions should be socially disengaged

Cognition
-Self-evaluations should be positive
-Thinking should be linear
-Should pay attention to focal object

Behavior
-Should be consistent across situations
-Should value personal choice
-Should be unique
-Should enhance and promote self
-Should express emotions

Variables that influence affect, cognition, and behavior

Identity
-Acculturation and enculturation
-Identity integration

Situational Context
-Cultural context of the situation

Cultural Values
-Cultural ideals and practices of specific Asian subgroups

Affect
-Should balance positive and negative
-Should value calm states
-Emotions should be socially engaged

Cognition
-Self-evaluations should be positive and negative
-Thinking should be dialectical and holistic
-Should pay attention to context

Behavior
-Should be flexible across situations
-Should value personal choice less
-Should fit in
-Should efface and criticize self
-Should suppress emotions

European American Contexts

East Asian Contexts

Figure 3.2. Optimal functioning in East Asian, Asian American, and European American contexts.

Promoting Positive Outcomes in Ways That Are Culturally Meaningful

Practitioners who plan interventions to promote healthy behavior should also consider these cultural differences. For instance, *ideal affect* (i.e., emotions that people ideally want to feel) determines perceptions of how vigorous exercise is, preferences for exercise intensity, and emotional experiences after exercise. Specifically, individuals who value high arousal positive states are more likely to perceive exercise as vigorous and to prefer high intensity exercise (Hogan, Chim, Sims, & Tsai, 2012). Therefore, in cultures that value high arousal positive states (i.e., European American contexts), individuals may be more likely to seek intense exercises (e.g., running) and have a higher threshold for intensity than in cultures that value low arousal positive states (i.e., East Asian contexts). Practitioners should take these individual and cultural differences into consideration when recommending health-related behaviors (e.g., running vs. walking) to Asian Americans.

Practitioners should also consider cultural values when designing health messages for Asian Americans. Sims and colleagues (2014) showed that choosing a physician depends on how individuals ideally want to feel. Because highly enculturated Chinese Americans value calm states more than their European American counterparts, they were more likely to choose physicians who promoted a calm and relaxed lifestyle versus those who promoted a dynamic, vital lifestyle. In another study, East Asians increased health behaviors (e.g., flossing) following loss-framed health messages ("Floss now or suffer from cavities and gum disease") more than British participants did. British participants, however, increased flossing after promotion-framed messages ("Healthy teeth and gums only a floss away") more than East Asians did (Uskul, Sherman, & Fitzgibbon, 2009). Thus, counselors and clinicians should design and market mental health services in culturally congruent ways.

Developing Interventions That Are Culturally Consistent

Interventions should also be designed to consider Asian American cultural ideas and practices. For instance, Western models of coping herald forgiveness as a necessary and important element in relationship repair; researchers have found that forgiveness interventions are effective for treating depression and anxiety (Reed & Enright, 2006; Williamson & Gonzales, 2007). This may be because, in Western contexts, forgiveness is viewed as an individual choice. In contrast, in certain Asian contexts, forgiveness is often defined in terms of the situation, with some situations being more forgivable than others (Sandage, Hill, & Vang, 2003). Moreover, relationships of mutual obligation (more common in Asian

contexts) often continue in the absence of forgiveness (McCullough, 2000). Thus, forgiveness interventions may be less effective for some Asian American groups.

Another example is related to social support, a coping mechanism related to increased well-being and decreased stress (Taylor, 2007). Despite having social networks that are equally supportive as European Americans, Asian Americans are less likely to explicitly ask for support or help from social networks during stressful times because they do not want to burden others (H. S. Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008; S. Kim, Gonzales, Stroh, & Wang, 2006; Sasaki & Kim, 2011). Instead, Asian Americans benefit more from *implicit social support* (the knowledge that one has support). In fact, Asian Americans show decreased stress responses (i.e., cortisol levels) when they are simply asked to think about groups that they feel close to before completing a stressful task (Taylor, Welch, Kim, & Sherman, 2007). In contrast, European Americans more often seek and benefit most from explicit social support (H. S. Kim et al., 2008). These findings suggest that one way clinicians can decrease stress and facilitate well-being among Asian Americans is to focus less on talking through problems and more on thinking about close others.

A major source of reduced happiness and well-being and increased depression and anxiety in Asian Americans is *acculturation gap distress* (conflicts that arise from unequal rates of acculturation between parents and children; Phinney, 2003). When children acculturate faster than parents (i.e., become more American than parents), changes in language, values, and behaviors may increase familial tension. One way to reduce acculturation gap distress is family therapy, with a focus on cultural competence (Phinney, 2010). For example, practitioners might identify one or more domains in which conflicts occur (e.g., interpersonal relationship, academic achievement, leisure time), isolate behaviors and values that contribute to conflict, and then encourage parents and children to share their cultural perspectives with each other to increase intergenerational understanding (Ying, 1999).

Acculturation and identity research suggests that Asian American bicultural individuals (those who identify highly with both American and Asian cultures) have better outcomes compared with other identification profiles (Yoon et al., 2012). This may be because bicultural individuals are more familiar with the values and practices of both cultures and are, thus, better equipped to navigate both European American and Asian cultural contexts (Hong et al., 2000). It may also be because bicultural individuals have integrated their Asian and American identities and view these identities as compatible and connected as opposed to incompatible and separate (Haritatos & Benet-Martínez, 2002). These findings suggest that interventions should focus on increasing identification with and integration of

American and Asian cultures among Asian Americans, ideally at a young age. Recognizing cultural differences and promoting intergroup dialogue in schools or other institutions would facilitate this process.

Doing More Research on Asian American Contexts

Although more research has been conducted on Asian Americans than many other ethnic groups, unanswered questions remain. First, most current cross-cultural researchers have examined differences between European Americans and East Asian Americans. Much less work has focused on Filipino Americans and Indian Americans, who are increasing in number and who differ from Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans in their religious and cultural ideals and practices. Future research should focus on other Asian American groups to see how they compare with each other as well as with other ethnic groups in the United States.

Second, researchers should also consider how other social categories, like social class, interact with culture to shape affective, cognitive, and behavioral processes. Most findings on promoting positive outcomes, like much of psychological research, are based on middle class groups (Henrich et al., 2010; Markus & Conner, 2013). It is possible that in working class contexts, where resources are sparse, these cultural differences are even more pronounced as individuals struggle to meet basic needs.

Another important research direction is to examine ways in which Asian American models of optimal functioning are fostered. For instance, East Asian parents often take an active role in helping children work to achieve high standards (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998). Asian American children appear to be motivated by parental pressure, whereas parental pressure appears to undermine motivation among European American children (Fu & Markus, 2014). Thus, whereas discouraging parents from applying too much pressure on their children might be helpful in European American contexts, it might have unintended costs in Asian American contexts. More work should focus on the practices that foster different forms of optimal functioning in European American, Asian American, and East Asian contexts.

We have described Asian Americans as being influenced by both East Asian and European American contexts, but some experiences, ideas, and practices that are unique to Asian Americans. For instance, whereas enculturation and acculturation were more predictive of well-being for immigrant than American-born Asian Americans, discrimination was more predictive of well-being for American-born than immigrant Asian Americans (Ying, Lee, & Tsai, 2000). More research is needed to focus on these aspects of being Asian American and the implications they have for optimal functioning.

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