

Research Article

Positive Thinking Across Cultural and Contextual Divides

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Abstract

This article examines the heterogeneity of positive thinking across cultures, challenging the notion of it as a universal, invariant trait. Positive thinking is conceptualized as a preponderance of positive thoughts, a disposition often linked to favorable life outcomes. Historically, psychology has focused more on pathology than on positive states, and early cross-cultural theories often presented differences in optimism as fixed, dispositional traits. For instance, Western individualism was thought to foster more positivity than Eastern collectivism, a view often rooted in frameworks like Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory. This paper critiques such static models, advancing the thesis that cross-cultural variance in positive thinking is not static but is fundamentally contingent upon a situational context, specifically the valence of an external event. The central argument is that apparent cultural divergences are relative and are governed by distinct cognitive frameworks, primarily dialectical reasoning and the Lay Theory of Change (LTC). By examining Western models of individualistic positive thinking against the backdrop of East Asian holistic and cyclical philosophies, this article posits that the utility of positive thinking is conditional, functioning either as an adaptive, learned skill or a detrimental, idealized fantasy. This complex view moves beyond cultural stereotypes to understand how culture and context interact to shape psychological responses, offering a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of human cognition.

Keywords

Positive Thinking, Cultural Differences, Context, Lay Theory of Change, Dialectical Reasoning, Self-Enhancement, Self-Improvement, Cognitive Mechanisms, Cross-Cultural Psychology, Holism

1. Introduction

The concept of positive thinking, broadly defined as the tendency to possess more favorable than unfavorable thoughts, has long been a subject of both popular fascination and empirical study. It is consistently correlated with a host of benefits, including greater life satisfaction, enhanced psychological well-being, and improved recovery from medical challenges. Despite its value, systematic academic inquiry into positive concepts has historically been overshadowed by a disciplinary bias toward negative psychological states and pathology.

Early scholarly conversations on cross-cultural variations in positive thinking often treated these differences as stable traits inherent to national groups. For instance, a common narrative suggested that East Asians engage in less positive thinking than their Western counterparts, attributing this variance to broad, static cultural dimensions like individualism versus collectivism [1]. However, such conventional theories are insufficient as they overlook the dynamic interplay between culture and immediate circumstances [2]. Furthermore, these frameworks have been criticized for their

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tendency to oversimplify the complexity of culture and for promoting a static view that may not capture contemporary cultural shifts [3, 4].

This article challenges the notion of fixed cultural distinctions. The central thesis presented here is that cross-cultural variance in positive thinking is not invariant but is profoundly dependent upon situational factors [2]. Specifically, the valence of the event to which an individual is responding dictates the nature of their cognitive reaction. This dynamic is mediated by culturally ingrained cognitive mechanisms, such as a predisposition toward dialectical reasoning [5] and the internalization of the Lay Theory of Change (LTC) [2]. By moving beyond static trait-based models, we can begin to appreciate the more fluid and context-dependent nature of human cognition across cultures.

2. The Complexity of Positive Thinking

It is crucial to deconstruct "positive thinking" itself, as the term is often used in a broad and sometimes ambiguous manner. For the purposes of this analysis, we differentiate between several facets of positive thinking. The first is dispositional optimism, a generalized expectancy that good things will happen. This is often what is measured in large-scale cross-cultural psychological studies. A second facet is positive reappraisal, the cognitive strategy of reframing a negative or stressful event in a more positive light. A third is positive affect, the experience of joyful, contented, and other positive emotions. Finally, there is the popular cultural understanding of positive thinking, which often involves the active suppression of negative thoughts and a conscious effort to focus only on the positive, a concept sometimes referred to as "toxic positivity." This multifaceted view allows for a more granular understanding of how different cultures may engage with, value, and express positivity in varied ways. For instance, while one culture may score lower on dispositional optimism, they might exhibit higher levels of positive reappraisal in specific contexts. This distinction is vital for moving beyond simplistic cultural comparisons.

The evolution of cross-cultural psychology itself provides a necessary backdrop for understanding the shift away from static models of cultural traits. Early cross-cultural research was often criticized for its "etic" approach, where concepts and measures developed in one culture (typically Western) were applied to others without sufficient consideration for their cultural validity. This could lead to a deficit-based model, where cultures that deviated from the Western norm were seen as lacking in some way. For example, lower scores on a Western-developed optimism scale in an East Asian population might have been interpreted as a deficiency in positive thinking, rather than a reflection of a different, culturally-specific way of approaching the world. More contemporary research strives for an "emic" approach, which seeks to understand psychological phenomena from within a specific

cultural context. This shift has been instrumental in challenging the universal applicability of Western psychological constructs and has paved the way for more nuanced theories like the Lay Theory of Change. It is within this evolving methodological landscape that the context-dependent nature of positive thinking has come to the forefront.

3. The Western Model

The Western philosophical tradition has predominantly framed positive thinking as a stable, internal, and individual trait. This construction is deeply intertwined with the psychoreligious self-help movements that emerged in the late 19th century, such as the New Thought movement. These movements positioned individual thought as the sovereign mechanism for achieving health, happiness, and success, famously captured by the premise that "what one thinks becomes real" [6]. This perspective promotes an internal cognitive process, or "autosuggestion," where thought alone is the primary vehicle for transforming one's environment.

This ideology of self-contained cognitive power can be traced further back to the influence of the Protestant work ethic on the development of American individualism. Max Weber [7] argued that certain Protestant beliefs, particularly Calvinism, fostered a focus on worldly success as a sign of divine favor. This created a cultural emphasis on hard work, diligence, and the rational pursuit of economic gain as a moral obligation. While the religious underpinnings may have faded over time, the ethos of individual responsibility for one's own success remains deeply embedded in American culture.

This focus on the sovereign self creates a powerful morality of individual responsibility. Within this framework, failure to achieve wellness is often attributed to one's own deficient thinking. In the modern era, defined by precarious labor markets and social instability, this philosophy functions as a "hidden curriculum," promoting individual resilience and adaptation while marginalizing the potential for collective action to address underlying structural problems [8]. It inadvertently supports a system that privatizes social responsibility and stifles dissent by encouraging individuals to locate both the cause and the cure for problems solely within themselves.

A key psychological driver of the Western model of positive thinking is the emphasis on high self-esteem and self-enhancement. From a young age, individuals in many Western societies are encouraged to feel good about themselves, to focus on their strengths, and to maintain a positive self-view. This cultural script prioritizes individual achievement and uniqueness, and positive thinking becomes a tool for bolstering self-esteem. When faced with a setback, the emphasis is often on protecting one's self-esteem by attributing the failure to external factors ("It wasn't my fault") or by focusing on one's inherent abilities ("I know I can do better next time"). This contrasts sharply with the self-improvement orientation often seen in East Asian cultures, where ac-

knowledging weaknesses is seen as a crucial first step towards growth. The motivation for self-enhancement can also explain the Western tendency towards dispositional attributions; seeing oneself as a stable, positive individual requires attributing successes to internal qualities and failures to external circumstances. Author Barbara Ehrenreich [6] has sharply criticized this "relentless promotion of positive thinking," arguing that it can lead to self-blame and a dangerous disregard for negative outcomes, contributing to economic and social crises.

This individualistic approach to positive thinking is also reflected in Western psychological theories of attribution. There is a well-documented tendency for individuals in Western cultures to make more dispositional attributions for behavior, meaning they are more likely to explain events in terms of an individual's personality traits rather than situational factors [9, 10]. This "fundamental attribution error" aligns with a worldview that emphasizes the autonomy and centrality of the individual.

4. The Eastern Perspective

In stark contrast to the Western model, East Asian thought traditions emphasize a holistic orientation toward reality, attending closely to the surrounding field and context. This cognitive architecture commonly relies on dialectical reasoning, an approach characterized by the tolerance and acceptance of contradiction. Where Western Aristotelian thought demands the resolution of a conflict to find a single truth, dialectical thought seeks a "middle way," accepting that opposing propositions can coexist and be reconciled [5].

The practical implications of dialectical reasoning are profound. In a Western, linear-thinking framework, happiness and sadness are often seen as mutually exclusive opposites; to be happy, one must not be sad. However, from a dialectical perspective, it is perfectly conceivable to experience both happiness and sadness simultaneously. One can feel joy about a personal achievement while also feeling sorrow for a friend's loss. This acceptance of contradiction means that positive and negative emotions are not seen as being in a zero-sum relationship. Research has shown that individuals from East Asian cultures are more likely to report experiencing mixed emotions than their Western counterparts. This emotional complexity is not a sign of confusion or ambivalence, but rather a reflection of a holistic and dialectical understanding of the world. It allows for a more nuanced and realistic appraisal of life's events, which are rarely purely positive or purely negative. This contrasts with the Western tendency to categorize experiences in a more black-and-white manner.

Embedded within this tradition is a profound belief in change, formally captured by the Lay Theory of Change (LTC) [2, 11]. The LTC is an implicit belief system that the world is constantly and cyclically changing. Its core tenet is that events evolve nonlinearly: a positive situation will likely turn nega-

tive, and a negative situation will likely turn positive. This conviction that "what goes up will come down, and vice versa" is deeply ingrained in many East Asian cultures from an early age [2]. Foundational research by Ji, Nisbett, and Su [12] demonstrated that Chinese participants were more likely than Americans to predict a change in the direction of a trend, reflecting this underlying belief in flux.

This cognitive framework yields distinct predictions for positive thinking. It suggests that East Asians should exhibit less positive thinking when faced with positive events, as they anticipate a subsequent downturn. Conversely, they should express more positive thinking when faced with negative events, as they anticipate a future improvement [2]. This pattern is driven not by a disposition toward pessimism, but by a culturally learned expectation of fluctuation.

This perspective aligns with a motivation for self-improvement, which requires a realistic appraisal of one's circumstances, over the Western drive for self-enhancement, which seeks to maintain a consistently positive self-view regardless of context. The concept of self-cultivation is central to Confucianism, which emphasizes lifelong learning and moral development to become a better person [13]. This focus on continuous self-improvement necessitates an awareness of one's shortcomings and a willingness to embrace change as an opportunity for growth.

The philosophical roots of this cyclical view of change can be found in ancient Chinese philosophies such as Taoism and Buddhism. The Tao Te Ching, a foundational text of Taoism, emphasizes the concept of wu wei (effortless action) and the idea that all things are in a constant state of flux. Similarly, a core tenet of Buddhist philosophy is the doctrine of impermanence (anicca), which asserts that all conditioned existence is transient and in a continuous state of change. This understanding encourages non-attachment to both positive and negative experiences, fostering a sense of equanimity in the face of life's ups and downs.

In terms of attributional styles, individuals from East Asian cultures tend to make more situational attributions, taking into account the context and the influence of external factors on behavior [14]. This holistic perspective aligns with a worldview that sees individuals as interconnected and embedded within a larger social fabric.

The holistic and context-aware nature of East Asian thought is further reinforced by the cultural dimension of collectivism. In collectivistic societies, the emphasis is on the group rather than the individual, and maintaining social harmony is a primary goal. This has several implications for positive thinking. Firstly, overt displays of individual success and happiness can be seen as disruptive to group harmony, as they can elicit envy or create social comparison. Therefore, a more modest and balanced emotional expression is often favored. Secondly, in a collectivistic context, the well-being of the group is paramount. An individual's positive thinking is therefore more likely to be directed towards the collective good rather than individual self-enhancement. For example,

after a negative event, an individual might focus on how the group can learn and grow from the experience, rather than solely on their own personal feelings. This collectivistic orientation provides a social and relational context for the Lay Theory of Change, as the cyclical nature of events is seen as something that affects the entire group, and the group's resilience is a key focus.

5. Idealized Fantasy vs. Learned Skill

The divergence between these cultural models highlights a crucial philosophical distinction: is positive thinking an unconditional, idealized fantasy, or is it a disciplined, adaptive skill?

Research on idealized positive thinking, defined as the unconditional creation of idyllic future outcomes detached from present reality, reveals its detrimental effects. Studies show that graduates who indulge in such fantasies about their careers ultimately submit fewer job applications and earn lower salaries [15]. This type of mental escapism has been shown to predict poor outcomes across various domains because it reduces the energy needed for tangible action and planning. At a societal level, cultural climates of idealized positive thinking, measured through historical texts, have been found to predict subsequent economic downturns [15].

Recent neuroscientific research provides further insight into why idealized positive thinking can be detrimental. When an individual engages in elaborate fantasies about achieving a goal, the brain can actually react as if the goal has already been accomplished. This can lead to a decrease in motivational energy and a reduction in the physiological readiness for action. Studies have shown that fantasizing about a desired future can lower blood pressure and heart rate, which are indicators of a relaxed, low-energy state. This is the opposite of the energized state that is needed to pursue challenging goals. Cognitively, idealized fantasies can also lead to a failure to anticipate and plan for obstacles. By mentally "leaping over" the hard work and potential setbacks involved in achieving a goal, individuals are left unprepared when they inevitably encounter difficulties in the real world. This can lead to frustration, disappointment, and a greater likelihood of abandoning the goal altogether.

Conversely, conceptualizing positive thinking as a learned cognitive skill reveals its profound benefits. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), for example, is a widely used therapeutic approach that focuses on identifying and challenging negative thought patterns and replacing them with more balanced and realistic ones. Techniques such as cognitive restructuring and mindfulness help individuals develop practical skills to manage their thoughts and emotions effectively. The Positive Thinking Skills Scale (PTSS), for example, measures the use of specific, deliberate techniques like transforming negative thoughts and highlighting the positive aspects of a situation [3, 4, 7, 9, 10, 16]. This approach is grounded in cognitive-behavioral theory and embraces real-

istic appraisal. The use of these skills is empirically linked to increased resilience, greater life satisfaction, and decreased burnout, serving as a modifiable protective factor against adversity.

This evidence demonstrates that the utility of positive thinking is profoundly conditional. Its value depends entirely on its manifestation. As a fixed fantasy, it encourages passivity and leads to poor outcomes. As a set of adaptive, learned skills, it fosters resilience and promotes well-being.

Further nuance is added by the concept of "defensive pessimism," a strategy where individuals set low expectations and think through worst-case scenarios to manage anxiety and improve performance. Research has shown that for some individuals, this approach can be more effective than "strategic optimism," where one maintains a consistently positive outlook. This suggests that the optimal cognitive strategy can vary not only across cultures but also among individuals within a culture, depending on their personality and the specific context.

The distinction between idealized fantasy and learned skill has significant implications for mental health and well-being. The promotion of a simplistic, "just think positive" mantra can be harmful, as it can lead individuals to feel guilty or inadequate when they are unable to simply "think away" their problems. This can be particularly damaging for individuals struggling with clinical depression or anxiety, where negative thought patterns are a core symptom of their illness and cannot be overcome by sheer willpower alone. In contrast, a skills-based approach to positive thinking, as taught in therapies like CBT, empowers individuals with concrete tools for managing their thoughts and emotions. This approach acknowledges the reality of negative experiences and provides a constructive framework for dealing with them. It fosters a sense of agency and self-efficacy, which are crucial for long-term mental health. Furthermore, a skills-based approach can be adapted to different cultural contexts, as the core principles of cognitive restructuring and mindfulness can be tailored to align with culturally-specific values and beliefs.

6. Conclusion

The overwhelming empirical evidence necessitates a re-definition of cultural variation in thinking. Cultural differences should not be framed as fixed dispositions toward optimism or pessimism but rather as dynamic thinking styles that are sensitive to situational valence. The East Asian model, accounted for by the Lay Theory of Change, offers a powerful framework for understanding how a belief in cyclical change fosters a prudent and hopeful response to life's inevitable fluctuations. This contrasts sharply with the static Western expectation of stability and continuous self-enhancement.

The philosophical and empirical inquiry leads to a single conclusion: the cultural variance in positive thinking is fundamentally contingent upon the context to which an individual responds. This nuanced understanding prevents the over-

simplification of human cognition into cultural stereotypes and asserts that culture and situation interact dynamically to shape our psychological lives. For positive thinking to be beneficial, it must be applied not as an unwavering illusion, but as a constructive and realistic skill, adapted to the ever-changing circumstances of our world. Future research should continue to explore the interplay of culture, context, and individual differences in shaping cognitive strategies and their impact on well-being.

Abbreviations

CBT	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
LTC	Lay Theory of Change
PTSS	Positive Thinking Skills Scale

Author Contributions

Mohammed Zeinu Hassen is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



Mohammed Zeinu Hassen is a researcher and philosopher at Addis Ababa Science and Technology University. His work focuses on the intersection of culture, cognition, and philosophy. He investigates how different cultural frameworks, from Western individualism to Eastern holistic traditions, shape psychological processes like reasoning, attribution, and emotional experience. His research challenges static, universalist models of human psychology, arguing instead for a more dynamic and context-sensitive understanding. He is particularly interested in how cultural narratives about success, failure, and well-being influence both individual cognition and societal structures.

Research Field

Mohammed Zeinu Hassen: Cross-Cultural Psychology, Social Cognition, Cultural Philosophy, Positive Thinking, Dialectical Reasoning, Lay Theory of Change, Psychology of Well-being.