ABSTRACT. In a review of recent cross-cultural evidence on happiness and well-being, the authors identified substantial cultural variations in (1) cultural meanings of happiness, (2) motivations underlying happiness, and (3) predictors of happiness. Specifically, in North American cultural contexts, happiness tends to be defined in terms of personal achievement. Individuals engaging in these cultures are motivated to maximize the experience of positive affect. Moreover, happiness is best predicted by self-esteem. In contrast, in East Asian cultural contexts, happiness tends to be defined in terms of interpersonal connectedness. Individuals engaging in these cultures are motivated to maintain a balance between positive and negative affects. Moreover, happiness is best predicted by perceived embeddedness of the self in a social relationship. Directions for future research are discussed.

The present paper is concerned with cross-cultural variations and similarities of happiness and subjective well-being. In the contemporary literature, subjective well-being is typically defined as an overall cognitive appraisal of the quality of one’s own life (see e.g., Diener, 2000 for a review). Happiness is an emotional concomitant to this overall judgment. Defined in this general way, happiness is likely to be universal and more or less equally valued across different cultures (e.g., Ryan et al., 1996; Ryff and Keyes, 1995). Indeed, people everywhere are likely to prefer the desirable over the undesirable and the pleasant over the unpleasant (Diener, Diener and Diener, 1995; Michalos, 1991; Veenhoven, 1991). However, it is also likely that exactly what constitutes the good and the valuable varies substantially across cultures (Diener and Suh, 2000; Kitayama and Markus, 2000). As a consequence, we may expect considerable cross-cultural variations in meanings of happiness (i.e., what might constitute happiness), motivations underlying happiness (i.e., what people might try to do to achieve...
happiness), and predictors of happiness (i.e., what factors might predict happiness).

THEORY: CULTURE AND HAPPINESS

Cultural Perspective
In psychology, emotions have often been seen as universal and biologically determined (Ekman, 1992). More recently, however, a number of culturally oriented psychologists have emphasized the critical role of public meanings (folk theories and commonsense) and practices (daily routines and scripts) in shaping emotions (Benson, 2000; Bruner, 1990, 1996; Kitayama, 2002; Markus and Kitayama, 1991a; Shweder and Sullivan, 1993). These meanings and practices constitute local “ways of life”, which as a whole define a culture (Bruner, 1990).

These culturally oriented theorists have argued that emotions are not the direct outcome of physiological or neurological mechanisms. Rather, emotions are always situated and embedded in specific cultural contexts. Accordingly, they are fully saturated with cultural meanings (Kitayama et al., 2004). This analysis implies, for example, that what happiness means might vary considerably across cultures (Diener and Suh, 2000; Kitayama and Markus, 2000). Thus, people in different cultures might categorize quite different sorts of positive events and experiences as instances of happiness. Underlying this cross-culturally divergent construal and experience of emotion is a set of culturally shared ideas about personhood – namely, these about what is the self, what self one would hope to be, and what social relations one should have with other selves.

Happiness in East and West
Markus and Kitayama (1991a, 2004; Kitayama and Markus, 2000) have called ideas about personhood the cultural models or construals of self, and suggested that these models of self are implicated in all aspects of psychological processes evoked in social life including cognition, emotion, and motivation. Their analysis is informed by in-depth analyses of two broadly defined regions of the world, namely, European-American cultures and