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Self-esteem, readiness for self-improvement and life satisfaction in Indian and Polish female students

Abstract: *The study examines the question of how personal self-esteem, collective self-esteem and readiness for self-improvement are linked to satisfaction with life in women from countries differing with regard to level of collectivism. Our study participants were Polish (less collectivistic) and Indian (more collectivistic) female students. The obtained results indicate that personal self-esteem plays a very important role in satisfaction with life of women from the two countries. However, collective self-esteem is not directly related to satisfaction with life among women from the two cultures analyzed. Structural Equation Modeling showed that: a) in the Indian group readiness for self-improvement is more important for satisfaction with life than in the Polish group and it is significantly related to satisfaction with life through collectivistic self-esteem, b) the direct influence of both personal and collective self-esteem on satisfaction with life is more significant in the Polish group than in the Indian group.*

Key words: *life satisfaction, self-improvement across cultures, women's collective & personal self-esteem*

Introduction

A significant body of psychological research has been devoted to the analysis of correlates of well-being. Among different approaches to well-being we can distinguish 1) those that emphasize the role of individual personal qualities; 2) those that underline the importance of external factors, such as one's living conditions; or 3) those that are more focused on individual subjective appraisal of opportunities and resources (subjective well-being) (Veenhoven, 2000). In this paper, we aim at identifying the relationship between personal qualities such as self-esteem and readiness for self-improvement and global cognitive judgments of satisfaction with one's life (one of the cognitive components of subjective well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas and Smith, 1999) in two different cultures that differ with regard to the level of collectivism (Hofstede, 2001). Literature up to date demonstrates that self-evaluation plays an important role in maintaining one's overall subjective well-being and that there is a difference in the level of subjective well-being across cultures related to different types of self-view, i.e., more group-oriented

in collectivistic cultures vs. more individual-oriented in individualistic cultures (Heine and Lehman, 1997; Suh et al., 1998). Generally results obtained so far indicated that personal self-esteem (understood as the feeling of self-worth and self-respect derived from individual traits, abilities, skills; Rosenberg, 1965) is closely linked to one's subjective well-being (Chen, Cheung, Bond and Leung, 2006; Diener, 1994; Kwan, Bond and Singelis, 1997). However, the results are not uniform across cultures and show that the influence of personal self-esteem on well-being is stronger in individualistic cultures than in collectivistic cultures (cf. Diener, 1994; Chen et al., 2006). There are few studies demonstrating that collective self-esteem (the feeling of self-worth and self-respect derived from evaluations of one's social groups or identities; Luhtanen and Crocker, 1992) is related to well-being, and thus the influence of collective self-esteem on well-being is stronger in collectivistic cultures than in the individualistic ones (Oishi et al., 1999). The present study attempts to fill the gap in the existing cross-cultural research focused on the relationship between various aspects of self-esteem and one of the components of subjective well-being,

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namely satisfaction with life. In this paper, we focus on the relationship between two types of self-esteem: personal and collective and satisfaction with life in Poland and in India – two cultures differing with regard to levels of collectivism with Poland representing culture less collectivistic than India (Hofstede, 2001; Spector Cooper and Sparks, 2001).

Self-improvement is a basic motive for human development and that is why in many psychological theories it is regarded as a fundamental aspect of individual's well-being (Maslow, 1970; Ryan and Deci, 2000; Seligman, 2002). An exemplifying manifestation of self-improvement is readiness for self-improvement which is an intention to improve one's traits, abilities, skills and state of health (cf. Taylor, Neter and Wayment, 1995; Zawadzka, 2014). Self-improvement is often guided by social expectations visible within individual's group of reference, for example one's family. As such, self-improvement may be even more significant for one's subjective well-being in collectivistic cultures where meeting the demands of the group is of greater importance than in the individualistic context (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Thus, the present study also looks at the question of how readiness for self-improvement is linked to subjective well-being in cultures differing with regard to collectivism-individualism dimension (Hofstede, 2001).

The present research

In our study, we have compared results from two countries: Poland and India, where Poland is less collectivistic than India and India is less individualistic than Poland (Hofstede, 2001; Spector Cooper and Sparks, 2001). Integrating research by gender theorists (e.g., Gilligan, 1982) with the work on culture and the self Cross, Hardin and Gercek-Swing (2011) suggested that women are more likely to develop interdependent self-construal than men, whereas men are more prone to see themselves as separate from their close relationships, thus developing independent self-construal (Cross et al., 2011). Hence in our study we focus on women in order to investigate the role of self-perception and self-evaluation within satisfaction with life among individuals with the propensity to develop interdependent self-construals in two different cultures: Poland and India.

We present results of our exploratory study to answer the following questions: What are the correlates of cognitive component of subjective well-being – satisfaction with life in the two cultures? Which aspect of self-esteem: personal or collective, is more important for satisfaction with life in the two cultures? How is readiness for self-improvement related to satisfaction with life in the two cultures?

Individualism and collectivism: Poland vs. India

The two countries were selected since they both had undergone socioeconomic transition in the 1990s, after a period of political and economic isolation. Women's well-being is considered a good detector of substantial development and transformation in both countries, as gender

equality and women's quality of life measures are strongly correlated with the countries' overall economic and well-being indexes (cf. Glick et al., 2000). Economic and social transformation leading to the development of free market economy is visibly in progress in both Poland and India (e.g., Minkner, 2010; Zawisza, Luyt and Zawadzka, 2013). Currently, postgraduate students in both countries constitute the group that was born and brought up in the society that experiences rapid economic growth after 1990. Several reports concerning students' age group show that happiness ratings indicate that Poles might be happier than the citizens of India, but the differences between the two countries are gradually decreasing (World Happiness Report 2013; World Values Survey, 2010–2014). However the factors enhancing happiness ratings in two countries are different due to cross-cultural differences in values resulting from collectivism-individualism gap. The importance of collectivistic values, such as desire for parental pride or working for the benefit of the society, are considered more important among Indians than in the contemporary Polish society (World Values Survey, 2010–2014). Overall same reports indicate that Poles differ significantly from Indian citizens in their collectivistic values orientations, i.e., Poles are less oriented towards collectivistic values than Indian people. Also, Hofstede's research demonstrates that Poles and Indians differ in the degree to which individuals identify with the group (Hofstede, 2014; Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010; Spector et al., 2001). India is a more collectivistic country than Poland according to the results obtained on Hofstede's collectivism-individualism scale (India 48 and Poland 64 in individualism) (Hofstede, 2014). Individuals in collectivistic cultures are brought up in groups, families and clans and hence become their innate parts. As a result, the goals and wealth of the whole group is of major importance to the individual (Triandis, 1995; Hofstede, 2001). The dominant role is thus played by an interdependent self that is defined through the relations with others (cf. Markus and Kitayama, 1991). On the contrary, independence, self-fulfillment and uniqueness are the values of individualistic society (Hofstede, 2001). Although several studies indicate that in each culture there is a mixture of individualistic and collective elements (cf. Kolstad and Horpestad, 2009; Brewer and Chen, 2007), interdependent self-construal is still more salient in the collectivistic culture and independent self-construal is more visible in an individualistic context. Polish students are thus more individualistic than Indian students as they are focused on achievement and individual rights, and involved in relations based on rules of reciprocity. Indian students are representatives of more collectivistic cultures as they focus more on other people's needs, pay more attention to the aims of the group, and create larger communities.

To sum up, the characteristics presented above indicate that the two selected countries are undergoing economic and social transformation towards strengthening of free market economy and differ on the cultural dimensions of collectivism and individualism, which might influence the role of personal self-esteem, collective self-esteem and readiness for self-improvement in maintaining one's satisfaction with life.

Self-esteem, readiness for self-improvement and satisfaction with life in women from individualistic and collectivistic cultures

The need for positive self-regard is universal but its manifestation is realized within the frame of a given culture and its cultural norms (Kurman and Sriram, 2002). Frequently, many differences observed within self-esteem are largely an artifact of culturally non-sensitive ethnocentric methodologies (Heine and Lehman, 1997).

Self-esteem is an important predictor of subjective well-being in both individualistic and collectivistic cultures (e.g., Benet-Martinez and Karakitapoglu-Aygun, 2003; Diener and Diener, 1995; Kang, Shaver, Sue, Min and Jing, 2003; Kong, Zhao and You, 2013). However the results of cross-cultural research devoted to studying correlations between self-esteem and satisfaction with life demonstrate that self-esteem is a more powerful predictor of satisfaction with life in individualistic countries than in collectivistic countries (Diener and Diener, 1995). Research carried out in individualistic cultures indicates that self-esteem fosters good health and both life and financial success (Diener and Diener, 1995), whereas results obtained within collectivistic countries (Hong Kong and China) show that self-esteem is moderately linked to one's subjective well-being (Chen et al., 2006; Kwan et al., 1997).

Furthermore, other studies revealed that collective self-esteem may be considered a significant predictor of subjective well-being, especially in collectivistic countries (Crocker et al., 1994; Zhang and Leung, 2002). Zhang and Leung's study (1999, in Zhang and Leung, 2002) demonstrated strong relationships between individual self-esteem and satisfaction with life, but collective self-esteem was the strongest predictor of satisfaction with life. Zhang (2005) also revealed that, among the Chinese, collective self-esteem is a more powerful predictor of general life satisfaction and life domain satisfaction than the Big Five personality traits. The results of Kwan, Bond and Singelis's study show that the relationship between life satisfaction and independent self-construal (typical for individualistic cultures) is mediated by personal self-esteem but the relationship between life satisfaction, and interdependent self-construal (typical for collectivistic cultures) is mediated by relationship harmony (Kwan, Bond and Singelis 1997). In other words, 1) the more salient independent self-construal, the more important the role of personal self-esteem in maintaining life satisfaction and 2) the more dominant interdependent self-construal, the more important role is played by relationship harmony in fostering life satisfaction.

What is interesting, the results of previous studies show that clearly self-esteem has an opposite effect on subjective well-being in Polish and Indian women; Indian women's self-esteem is not significantly related with well-being (Diener and Diener, 1995) whereas Polish women's personal self-esteem is significantly linked with their subjective well-being (Wąsowicz-Kiryłło and Baran, 2013).

Following the results pertaining to cultural and gender influences on well-being, we have assumed in this study

that global cognitive judgments of satisfaction with one's life (one of the cognitive components of subjective well-being) (Diener, Suh, Lucas and Smith, 1999) among women from a more individualistic culture, Poland in this case, is more closely related to personal self-esteem than satisfaction with life of women from a more collectivistic culture, India (hypothesis 1). In view of the findings presented above, we have also predicted that collective self-esteem is more closely related to satisfaction with life of Indian women (brought up in a more collectivistic culture) than satisfaction with life of Polish women (brought up in a more individualistic culture than India) (hypothesis 2).

Theories springing from humanistic psychology assume that well-being results from self-actualization and personal development (Maslow, 1970; Ryan and Deci, 2000; Seligman, 2002), which reflects the idea of self-improvement. The universalist perspective suggests that self-improvement involves basic human motives, which coexist in the self-system and are prevalent across cultures (Gaertner, Sedikides and Cai, 2012). Similarly, internalization of collectivistic norms gives rise to self-effacement (e.g., criticism, averageness) and self-improvement motives, which aim at achieving cultural ideal of social harmony (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto and Norasakkunkit, 1997). Individuals from collectivistic countries are more self-critical, which manifests itself in lower self-esteem when compared to people from individualistic countries (Heine et al., 1999).

Individualistic and collectivistic cultures vary in the extent to which they emphasize the need for development of one's unique potential as compared with the fulfilment of one's obligations. In individualistic cultures, individuals are brought up to focus on their internal attributes (e.g., preferences, abilities), develop their full potential by fostering unique skills, and feel positive about themselves (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). As far as the differences are concerned, previous cross-cultural comparisons show that representatives of individualistic cultures have higher self-efficacy than individuals in collectivistic cultures (Klassen, 2004; Scholz, Dona, Sud and Schwarzer, 2002). Individualistic concept of well-being encompasses personal freedom and accountability (Lu and Gilmour, 2004). By contrast, collectivist cultures emphasize the role of social harmony and obligation to the group (Triandis, 1995) and are likely to define happiness differently (Lu and Gilmour, 2004; Suh and Koo, 2008). Hence, norms in collectivist cultures may be less supportive of self-improvement since humility is desired (Diener, Suh, Smith and Shao, 1995). As self-improvement constitutes basic principle of functioning in collectivistic societies (cf. Markus and Kitayama, 1991), in the present study we also assume that readiness for self-improvement may influence individual's self-esteem and, indirectly via individuals' self-esteem, it will influence life satisfaction of Indian women, brought up in more collectivistic country (hypothesis 3) but no such relationship between readiness for self-improvement, self-esteem and life satisfaction will be observed among Polish women, as representatives of more individualistic culture than India (hypothesis 4).

Method

Participants

141 female students, 64 Indian (age: $M = 23.53$ ($SD = 8.43$)) and 77 Polish (age: $M = 22.40$ ($SD = 9.16$)) were participants of our study. They were students of Faculty of Social Sciences at University of Delhi, India and Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Gdańsk, Poland. The average age of the Indian women was slightly higher than of the Polish ones, as both samples were comprised of postgraduate students, who start their postgraduate courses at different ages in both countries. The selection of participants was limited to female students because women in both countries have been experiencing the most significant social changes present in both countries following the socioeconomic transition of 1990s; women's empowerment and social change might be well reflected in postgraduate students' values since they were born and brought up during countries' rapid economic development. Additionally, conducting study on women, whose interdependent self is considered to be more salient regardless of the culture (Cross et al., 2011), allows us to limit the influence of the other possible variables on the examined relationship. Incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the analysis.

Materials and procedure

Self-improvement

SRSI Readiness for Self-improvement Scale (Zawadzka, 2014; Zawadzka and Szabowska-Walaszczyk, 2011) was used to measure the level of individual readiness for self-improvement. SRSI measures the manifestation of the motivation to self-improvement, the intention to make effort to improve one's characteristics, skills, health (cf. Taylor, Neter and Wayment, 1995; Zawadzka, 2014). The scale has satisfactory reliability and validity (see Zawadzka, 2014). It consists of 11 items which refer to two dimensions of readiness for self-improvement: readiness for self-improvement (RSI: *When I feel there is something wrong with me I try to change this, I strive for real improvement of my skills and abilities*) and care for one's health (RIH: *Healthy diet is important for me, I strive for real improvement of my health*). Respondents rated their answers on a 5-point scale. Owing to the scope of the study, we focused on RSI – readiness for self-improvement scale only. For the Indian women RSI scale was $\alpha = .64$, for Polish women RSI scale was $\alpha = .80$.

Personal Self-esteem

PSE Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) was used in our study. It consists of 10 items concerning self-esteem (e.g., *On the whole I am satisfied with myself, I feel that I have a number of good qualities*). Participants rated their answers using a 4-point scale. For Indian women PSE was $\alpha = .84$, and for Polish women PSE was $\alpha = .70$.

Collective Self-esteem Scale

CSE Collective Self-esteem Scale was also used in our study (Luhtanen and Crocker, 1992) as it constitutes

a measure of self-evaluation of social identity. The scale consists of 16 items referring to different aspects of collective self-esteem (CSE; e.g., *I am a worthy member of the social groups I belong to, Overall, my social groups are considered good by others, I often regret that I belong to some of the social groups I do, Overall, my group memberships have very little to do with how I feel about myself*). Participants rated their answers using a 7-point scale. Cronbach's alpha for CSE scale was: for Indian women $\alpha = .70$, for Polish women $\alpha = .81$.

Satisfaction with Life

The Satisfaction With Life Scale – SWLS was used in our study (Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin, 1985). The scale measures one of the components subjective well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas and Smith, 1999) and consists of five items referring to cognitive judgments of satisfaction with life (e.g., *In most ways my life is close to my ideal*) rated on a 5-point scale. Cronbach's Alpha for Indian women SWLS $\alpha = .70$, for Polish women SWLS $\alpha = .81$.

Procedure

The survey was carried out at the campuses of the University of Delhi and the University of Gdańsk. The participants were invited to a lecture hall and seated at separate desks, where they filled the questionnaires. The groups consisted of 20 to 40 persons at a time. The questionnaires were in Polish for the Polish group and in English for the group in India (English is the language of instruction during classes at University of Delhi).

Results

Table 1 and the Table 2 display descriptive statistics personal self-esteem (PSE), collective self-esteem (CSE), readiness for self-improvement (RSI) and satisfaction with life (SWLS) for the two surveyed groups and inter-correlations between personal self-esteem, collective self-esteem, readiness for self-improvement and satisfaction with life in the Polish group and in the Indian one. In the Polish sample, SWL was positively related with PSE ($r = .35, p < .01$) and PSE was negatively related with CSE ($r = -.23, p < .05$) (cf. tab. 2). In the Indian sample a positive correlation was noted between SWL and PSE ($r = .27, p < .05$) and RSI was positively related with the two self-esteem variables: PSE ($r = .31, p < .05$) and CSE ($r = .48, p < .001$) (cf. tab. 3). In order to compare the correlation coefficients in both samples Z- Fisher's test was used. The results demonstrated that the correlation between CSE and RSI ($Z = 2.70, p < .003, f = -.38$) differed significantly in both groups: Polish and Indian. The correlation between PSE and RSI also differed significantly in these groups, but it remained on the level of statistical tendency ($Z = 1.58, p < .06, f = -.13$). Other correlations were not statistically significant.

In order to test our hypothesis concerning the relationship between personal self-esteem (PSE), collective self-esteem (CSE), readiness for self-improvement (RSI) and satisfaction with life (SWLS), we built a Structural Equation Model using AMOS. The goodness of fit

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables in the Polish group

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
CSE	4.54	0.82			
PSE	2.82	0.49	-.23*		
SWL	3.23	0.81	n.s.	.35**	
RSI	3.70	0.74	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.

Note. $n = 77$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

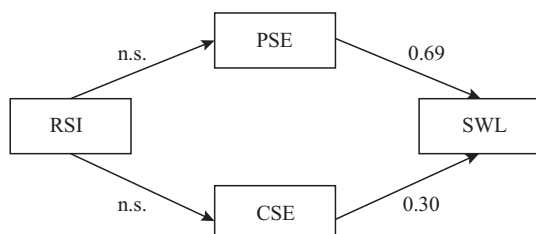
Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables in the Indian group

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
CSE	4.37	0.90			
PSE	2.89	0.50	n.s.		
SWL	3.48	1.14	n.s.	.27*	
RSI	3.84	0.49	.48***	.31*	n.s.

Note. $n = 64$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

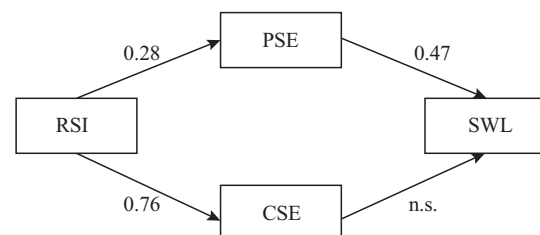
for the SEM indicated that the final model provided a satisfactory fit to data ($\chi^2(4, N = 141) = 5.825, p = 0.213$; $CMIN/DF = 1.456$; $GFI = .98$, $NFI = 0.89$; $CFI = 0.96$; $RMSEA = 0.057$). The final model is presented in Figure 1 (Polish group) and Figure 2 (Indian group).

In the Polish group both personal self-esteem ($\beta = 0.69, p < .001$) and collective self-esteem ($\beta = 0.30, p < .002$) affected individual's satisfaction with life. Self-improvement had no impact on collective self-esteem ($\beta = 0.16$ n.s.) or personal self-esteem ($\beta = 0.13$ n.s.) (cf. fig. 1).

Figure 1. Structural equation model demonstrating relations between personal self-esteem, collective self-esteem, self-improvement and satisfaction with life in the Polish group (unstandardized estimates)

In the Indian group no empirical support was found for the assumption that collective self-esteem affects life satisfaction ($\beta = 0.20$ n.s.), but the relationship between personal self-esteem and life satisfaction was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.47, p < .05$). In this group readiness for self-improvement was positively related to both collective self-esteem ($\beta = 0.76, p < .001$) and personal self-esteem

($\beta = 0.28, p < .002$), however the latter to a less extent. Readiness for self-improvement had an implicit effect on life satisfaction through its impact on both collective and personal self-esteem. The total unstandardized indirect effect of readiness for self-improvement on life satisfaction was 0.29, and it was manifested mainly through collective self-esteem. When readiness for self-improvement increased by 1 standard deviation, life satisfaction increased by 0.29 standard deviation (cf. fig. 2).

Figure 2. Structural equation model demonstrating relations between personal self-esteem, collective self-esteem, self-improvement and life satisfaction in the Indian group (unstandardized estimates)

The analysis of critical ratios for differences between the parameters in the Polish and in the Indian group demonstrated only one significant difference which refers to the path between self-improvement and collective self-esteem in the Polish and in the Indian group (-2.56).

Discussion

The results presented above show that in both groups personal self-esteem was significantly related to subjective well-being, i.e., the higher personal self-esteem, the higher subjective well-being. Hence, hypothesis 1 was not confirmed. Nevertheless our results confirmed the significant relationship between personal self-esteem and satisfaction with life (as one of the components of subjective well-being) in the individualistic culture (Polish women) (Diener and Diener, 1995; Wąsowicz-Kiryłło and Baran, 2013), the results concerning the relationship between PSE and SWL obtained in the collectivistic culture (Indian women) stand in opposition to the results of previous research (e.g., Chen et al., 2006 and Kwan et al., 1997) indicating that the effect of personal self-esteem on satisfaction with life is stronger in individualistic cultures than in collectivistic cultures. The reason for this difference may be related to the fact that personal self-esteem may be more important for educated Indian (collectivistic) women's satisfaction with life, who are a generation born and brought up during the period of social change in India following socioeconomic transition in 1990s.

The second hypothesis (H2) was not confirmed. Here one of the plausible explanations can be related to the fact that self-esteem was not closely linked with satisfaction with life in the Indian group than in the Polish one. What is more, collective self-esteem was not significantly linked with satisfaction with life in the Indian group. Again, this

stands in opposition to the previous results of research which indicated that collective self-esteem is positively linked with subjective well-being in collectivistic cultures (Crocker et al., 1994; Zang and Leung, 2002). What is interesting, previous studies demonstrated that the influence of collective self-esteem on well-being is weaker in females than in males. These results may support the idea that the role collectivistic self-esteem plays in subjective well-being is different in women from collectivistic cultures, which is in line with other lines of research showing that self-esteem comes from different sources for men and for women (Josephs, Markus and Tafarodi, 1992).

Hypothesis 3 and 4 found confirmation in our results. The Structural Equation Model supports the assumption that self-improvement is more important for subjective well-being in women from the collectivistic culture than from the individualistic one. The results showed that readiness for self-improvement influences satisfaction with life (as one of the components of subjective well-being) implicitly through personal self-esteem and collective self-esteem (the latter to a higher extent) only in the Indian group; higher scores among Indian women in the RSI were collated with higher collective self-esteem and higher satisfaction with life. Also, other studies showed that the value which individualistic cultures place on self-improvement and personal agency triggers individual efforts to become more satisfied, whereas in collectivistic cultures the avoidance of self-focus and individual goals interfere with the pursuit of enhanced well-being (cf. Boehm, Lyubomirsky and Sheldon, 2011). The results of our study also showed that personal self-esteem and collectivistic self-esteem were negatively related with each other in the Polish sample. This may suggest that if Polish female students value themselves more they value the groups they belong to less. However, in studies conducted on American (more individualistic) samples, personal self-esteem was positively linked with collective self-esteem (cf. Luthanen and Crocker, 1992). Consequently, further investigation which would explain such discrepancies is required.

Several limitations of the present study must be mentioned. Firstly, the study is of explanatory nature and the samples are small, thus complementary research on larger samples of women (including women from different educational backgrounds) from individualistic and collectivistic cultures is needed to expand the generalizability of the results for women from these two cultures, differing even more from each other with regard to collectivism-individualism dimension than Poland and India. Secondly, the study does not include the analysis of the causal roles of PSE, CSE and RSI in SWB. Future research on a larger sample is necessary to resolve this limitation. Also, considering the above-cited studies on gender differences in the sources of well-being, it would be interesting to expand the research and conduct a study on men from individualistic and collectivistic cultures in order to examine how personal and collective self-esteem and self-improvement are related to men's well-being in the two cultures. Despite the listed limitations, the nature of the relationship between self-esteem (personal and collective),

readiness for self-improvement and satisfaction with life (as one of the components of individual's subjective well-being) in women differs depending on whether the women are rooted in a more individualistic culture (Polish) or more collectivistic culture (Indian), which confirms our assumptions.

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