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True-self-as-guide lay theory endorsement across five countries

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ABSTRACT

A widespread lay theory in the United States suggests that the best way to make decisions is to follow who you “really are”, referred to as the “true-self-as-guide” (TSAG) lay theory of decision making. In this paper, we explore whether people from four less-WEIRD (i.e., Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) countries also explicitly endorse the TSAG lay theory, whether individual differences in horizontal/vertical individualist/collectivist mindsets correlate with TSAG endorsement, and whether TSAG endorsement predicts well-being. Participants were recruited from US, China, India, Singapore, and South Korea (total N=654). Results revealed TSAG lay theories was high across all countries, that horizontal mindsets were more relevant to TSAG endorsement than individualism/collectivism, and that TSAG endorsement predicted well-being in a non US-context.

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Introduction

People frequently use the term *true self* to refer to their beliefs about who they “really are deep down.” They frequently differentiate this true self from more external aspects of the self (e.g., the behavioral or actual self), temporally distant aspects of the self (e.g., past, future, possible selves), and aspirational aspects of the self (e.g., the ideal self). They also seem to place a great deal of importance on their true self, with most people explicitly endorsing a “true-self-as-guide” (TSAG) lay theory that suggests it is important to follow one’s true self when making decisions (Schlegel et al., 2013). Past research reveals that people endorse the TSAG lay theory at a significantly higher rate than lay theories that refer to other self-aspects and other popular decision-making strategies (e.g., following intuition, getting advice from others). From this perspective, most lay people believe it is

imperative to follow one's true self in order to have a good life. Past work reveals that this lay belief has downstream consequences for well-being and decision satisfaction (Kim et al., 2021; Rivera et al., 2019).

However, all of the work on TSAG lay theories have focused on U.S. samples. Thus, the question remains open whether TSAG lay theories are as widely endorsed and consequential in other countries. This question is particularly important given that beliefs about the structure of the self vary widely across different cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The current research will explore whether TSAG lay theories are widely endorsed in samples from multiple countries outside the U.S. We also use individual difference measures of individualism and collectivism mind-sets to examine whether TSAG endorsement is consistent with either or both of these mind-sets. Finally, we also explore whether TSAG endorsement predicts well-being among participants from a non-U.S. country.

TSAG lay theories and why they matter

People make decisions all the time. Part of making a decision (especially a major decision) is deciding *how* to make that decision. People may want to prioritize rationality or consult close others for advice. There is no single answer to the best way to make a decision or what decision-making strategy is most likely to yield personally satisfying decisions. Yet, there seems to be a fair amount of agreement among lay people that following one's true self is likely to lead to a personally satisfying decision. Indeed, in previous research, Schlegel et al. (2013) explicitly tested for the presence of TSAG lay theories in a sample from the U.S. Specifically, they asked participants to rate how likely they thought 12 different decision-making strategies (e.g., following the true self, rational processing) were to lead to personally satisfying decisions. They found evidence that a TSAG lay theory of decision-making was highly endorsed both in absolute sense (with means above the midpoint and less than 4% of the sample indicating disagreement with a TSAG lay theory) and in a relative sense (with TSAG lay theories endorsed at a higher rate than 9 of 11 other potential strategies and as equally high as the other 2, which were using the future self as a guide and rational processing).

Why does it matter if people endorse TSAG lay theories of decision-making? Some have argued that the widespread endorsement of TSAG lay theories helps explain why various forms of subjective authenticity consistently predict well-being (Rivera et al., 2019). Feelings of true self-knowledge and true self-expression are consistently linked to a variety of well-being indicators (Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Ryan et al., 2005; Smallenbroek et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2008). This is despite the fact that more "objective" measures of authenticity (i.e., cross-situational consistency and/or consistency with underlying traits) are, at best, inconsistent predictors of well-being (e.g., Baird et al., 2006; Magee et al., 2018; Sherman et al., 2012; Sutton, 2018). The link between subjective authenticity and well-being can be understood through a lay theory framework (Rivera et al., 2019). Specifically, the wide endorsement of TSAG lay theories helps people make sense of their lives and provides a meaning-making framework for understanding their decisions and their lives. A decision made by following the true self is a meaningful decision by its virtue of being tied to the true self because it suggests you have made your decision "the right way" (e.g., Baumeister, 1991). In this way, true selves provide

a language and framework for making sense of one's life (see, Rivera et al., 2019 for a complete argument as to why other widely endorsed lay theories may be less well situated to create meaning).

Consistent with this argument, work has shown that the meaning-making power of the true self is so robust that perceived use of the true self in decision-making enhances decision satisfaction even when there is no possible way for the true self to have influenced the decision itself (Kim et al., 2021). That is, the mere perception of linking a decision to the true self makes it feel more satisfying, even if that perception is illusory.

Given how consequential TSAG lay theories can be to meaning-making and well-being, it is important to understand whether this widespread endorsement is observed in contexts other than WEIRD (i.e., Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic; Henrich et al., 2010) American samples. As such, in order to better understand the prevalence of TSAG lay theories, we need to examine how lay people endorse decision-making strategies in other countries.

Cross-cultural perspectives on true selves

While there is not currently evidence that speaks to whether TSAG lay theories are explicitly endorsed in less WEIRD nations, there are a handful of studies that have examined other issues relevant to the true self in various cultural contexts. Specifically, studies have shown that people in a variety of nations exhibit a “good true self bias” (De Freitas et al., 2018; Strohminger et al., 2017) that is similar to what has been observed in Western countries. The good true self bias refers to a tendency to attribute positive changes in a person to the true self. That is, people tend to think someone has become more like their true self when they make a change toward morally good behavior (Bench et al., 2015; Newman et al., 2014). It seems that most people believe that “deep inside every individual there is a ‘true self’ motivating him or her to behave in ways that are virtuous” (Newman et al., 2014, p. 211). Evidence for the good true self bias has been observed in three non-U.S. contexts (Russia, Singapore, and Columbia) and even among those who explicitly endorse negative views of humans in general (i.e., misanthropes; De Freitas et al., 2018). The good true self bias is similar to the TSAG lay theory in the sense that both concern folk beliefs about this abstract and elusive construct known as the true self; however, they are about different things and differ in how explicit they are. The good true self bias reflects a relatively implicit belief about what true selves are made of (i.e. moral goodness), whereas the TSAG lay theory reflects an explicit belief about what true selves should be used for (i.e. making decision). Thus, while evidence for a good true self bias across nations does not necessarily mean that TSAG theories will be endorsed across nations, it does provide at least some evidence that there may be some similarities across nations when it comes to true-self beliefs.

Another piece of evidence relevant to true selves can be found in studies on the relationship between subjective authenticity and well-being in other countries. Subjective authenticity refers to a judgment people make about the extent to which they believe they are living in accord with their true self (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010). As noted previously, Rivera et al. (2019) have argued that one reason subjective authenticity predicts well-being so consistently is because of the widespread endorsement of TSAG lay theories. That is, to the extent that TSAG lay theories explicitly suggest people *should* follow their

true selves if they want to live a good life, it makes sense that a person's subjective judgment of the extent to which they are living up to this value would predict well-being. While the number of studies that have examined subjective authenticity outside of the U.S. is relatively small, they consistently find links to positive psychological well-being. For example, results from a Turkish university sample indicated that various forms of subjective authenticity predicted subjective vitality (Gocet Tekin & Satici, 2014). Evidence from Japan suggests that feelings of authenticity increase throughout the lifespan (as participants get older, they feel more authentic) and that authenticity throughout the lifespan relates to mental health outcomes such as feelings of stress and worthlessness (Ito et al., 2009). In other research, Ito and Kodama (2007) found that subjective authenticity was positively related to increased positive and decreased negative affect, regardless of individual differences in independent versus interdependent self-construal among Japanese university students. Much like the work on the good true self bias, the extant literature on subjective authenticity and well-being in non-U.S. samples also indirectly suggests that TSAG lay theories may be widely endorsed in other cultures as well.

Finally, a third type of indirect evidence relevant to this question is the link between psychological essentialism and true self beliefs. Emerging research suggests that beliefs in and about the true self may be a downstream consequence of the broader tendency to engage in psychological essentialism (Christy et al., 2019; De Freitas et al., 2017). Specifically, this work shows that (a) the features that people attribute to true selves demonstrate the same features typically attributed to essences (e.g., immutability, informativeness, inherence), (b) endorsement of belief in true selves correlates with individual differences in other essentialist tendencies, and (c) experimental manipulations of psychological essentialism impact levels of true self endorsement. Taken together, this suggests that the true self may be the term people use to understand their perceived self-essence, just as people explain other phenomena in the world in terms of underlying essences. This is relevant to the question of cross-national prevalence of TSAG lay beliefs because the psychological essentialism literature demonstrates that people across nations and cultures tend to essentialize (e.g., Atran et al., 2002; Errington, 1989; Gil-White, 2001). Indeed, Henrich et al. (2010) point to psychological essentialism as one of seven noteworthy psychological phenomena with evidence in favor of "universal patterns in human psychology" (p. 69). This is consistent with the argument that essentialism is an evolutionary adaptation of our cognitive system that is beneficial for our interactions with the world (Atran, 1998; Gil-White, 2001). For example, the tendency to essentialize categories is functional to the extent that it helps people generalize practical knowledge across members of a category (Gelman & Gelman, 2003). Thus, the tendency to endorse a belief that one should follow a true self may similarly generalize across nations. However, this evidence is indirect, we thus sought to directly examine levels of TSAG endorsement across different nations.

A collective orientation to the true self?

In the past work on TSAG, many people have pointed out the TSAG lay theory feels uniquely American in that it is a highly individualistic notion that likely wouldn't translate to less individualistic contexts (e.g., Singelis et al., 1995). People high in individualism tend to define the self primarily in terms of a person's internal characteristics, while those high

in collectivism tend to define the self primarily in terms of a person's relationships with others (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991). At first blush, the notion of a true self seems more closely aligned with the individualist/independent self-construal than the collectivist/interdependent self-construal.

However, we suspect that these different self-construals might lead to differences in the content of self-descriptors, rather than to differences in the functional role of a true self-concept. It may be possible, for example, to have a highly collective true self. Indeed, even individuals from U.S. samples (who tend to be high in independent self-construal) often list interdependent traits when describing who they really are (e.g., loyal, helpful, daughter, friend; Schlegel et al., 2011). There are a handful of studies that have indirectly examined this issue. For example, Kashima et al. (2004) found that "the Japanese conception of the person may be that there is a true self in every context" (p. 129). Thus, individuals from cultures that are higher in interdependence (and/or dialectical thinking) may believe situation-specific behavior can still reflect an essential self, regardless of the consistency of that behavior across situations (Cross et al., 2003; English & Chen, 2007; Kashima et al., 2004). For example, a situation-specific true self may still feel "deeply rooted" and unlikely to change over time. In this way, a collective true self may still be seen as important to follow/express and have the same functional consequences as an individualist true self.

True self and horizontal/vertical cultural orientations

While we believe that it is possible for TSAG lay theories to be consistent with both individualism and collectivism, it is also important to consider the distinction between horizontal and vertical cultural orientations. Triandis and colleagues (Singelis et al., 1995; Triandis, 1996, 2001; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998) formulated a more comprehensive individualism/collectivism framework by considering that some societies are *horizontal* (valuing equality) and others are *vertical* (valuing hierarchy). The resultant four-category typology of cultural orientations consists of vertical individualism (VI), horizontal individualism (HI), vertical collectivism (VC), and horizontal collectivism (HC). Specifically, members of the societies highly characterized as VI (e.g., U.S.) are primarily concerned about being superior to other people in terms of status and power and thus pursue personal achievement and competition. These individuals are more likely to agree with the statements such as "winning is everything" and "it is important to me that I do my job better than others do." In contrast, those of the societies highly characterized as HI (e.g., Norway) tend to consider themselves as equal to others in terms of status and instead pursue uniqueness and self-reliance. They are likely to agree with the statements such as "being unique individual is important to me" and "I rather depend on myself than on others." In the societies dominantly characterized as VC (e.g., South Korea), individuals are concerned about enhancing their in-group's status relative to other groups even at the cost of sacrificing one's own personal goals. Hence, they tend to strongly agree with the statements such as "it is important to me that I respect decisions made by my groups" and "family members should stick together, no matter what sacrifices are required." In contrast, individuals of the societies characterized as HC (e.g., Israel kibbutz) tend to value social harmony and cooperation and thus are more concerned about maintaining benevolent relationships

and achieving common goals with other in-group members. Hence, they are likely to agree with the statements such as “I feel good when I cooperate with others” and “to me, pleasure is spending time with others.”

These four distinct cultural orientations may have different implications for the endorsement of TSAG lay theories. Vertical cultural orientations seem to endorse cultural values and practices that are at odds with true self beliefs and TSAG lay theories. For instance, both VI and VC cultural contexts emphasize hierarchy and inequality that are inevitably pursued with extrinsic aspirations (e.g., social rewards, financial success, appearance), and thereby individuals are disengaged with intrinsic aspirations and self-concordant values that lead to understanding one’s authentic self (Kasser, 2002). With respect to lay theories for decision-making, vertical cultural orientations are more likely to urge individuals to follow external standards (e.g., norm) or introjected criteria (e.g., social respect) when making personally important decisions rather than listening to what their true self may call for. On the contrary, horizontal cultural orientations support cultural values and practices that are shared with true self beliefs and TSAG lay theories. For example, individuals in the HI societies pursue autonomous, self-directed life styles and express their unique personalities, which are essentially afforded by following one’s true self as guidance. For those in the HC societies, achieving social harmony and common goals in the absence of competition is the utmost value, which fosters individuals’ endorsement of prosociality and moral behavior that are often guided by one’s true self (Christy et al., 2016).

In the present study, we explore whether individual differences in all four cultural orientations predict TSAG lay theory endorsement. This will allow us to dig into potential additional nuances regarding TSAG lay theories that may relate to cultural orientations beyond individualism/collectivism. Indeed, we predicted that the horizontal/vertical dimension of cultural orientation may be more relevant than the individualism/collectivism dimension. Specifically, we predicted that HI and HC cultural orientations would be positively associated with TSAG lay theory endorsement, whereas VI and VC cultural orientations would be negatively associated with endorsement.

Current research

In the current research, we examined the presence of the TSAG lay theory in five different countries: the United States, China, India, Singapore, and South Korea. Though there was no direct evidence to base our hypotheses on, we predicted that across nations, the TSAG strategy would be highly ranked in a list of 12 different decision-making strategies. Given the potential tension between collective approaches to the self, we were particularly interested in examining TSAG endorsement within countries that have previously been shown to differ from the U.S. in self-construal. It is important to note, however, that we do not mean to equate these countries with particular cultural orientations. Indeed, there is much variability within countries and it is not appropriate to dichotomize countries as being either independent or interdependent (e.g., McSweeney, 2002). Rather, we see this study as an initial exploration of whether TSAG lay theories are “uniquely American.”

We also examined the relationship between TSAG lay theory endorsement and psychological well-being in our U.S. and South Korean samples (the decision to not test this in the other nations was based only on what data were available). We expected that across these two countries, TSAG would positively relate to well-being. This is based on evidence reviewed by

Rivera et al. (2019) suggesting that the TSAG lay theory provides a useful meaning-making framework that is likely to promote well-being. Given that we expected high levels of TSAG endorsement in both countries, we did not hypothesize that the size of this relationship would differ between countries. Again, we do not mean to equate either country here as wholly independent or interdependent, rather we wanted to conduct an initial exploration of whether the link between TSAG lay theories and well-being would replicate in at least one non-American sample from a country that is relatively less “WEIRD.”

We further examined whether individual differences in cultural orientations (in the form of horizontal-vertical individualism and collectivism) would correlate with the endorsement TSAG beliefs in the U.S. and South Korean samples. Specifically, we predicted that individual differences in HI and HC would be positively correlated with TSAG lay theory endorsement, whereas VI and VC cultural orientations would be negatively correlated with TSAG lay theory endorsement.

Method

Participants

We recruited a total of 654 participants from five nations: The United States ($n = 173$), China ($n = 170$), India ($n = 120$), Singapore ($n = 41$), and South Korea ($n = 150$; see, Table 1 for sample demographics). The samples consisted of undergraduate students from large public universities. All five samples were primarily composed of participants who identified as female (59.2%–68.8%), except for South Korea, which was 36.7% female. The average ages of the samples ranged from 19.89 to 23.89 years. Sample sizes were not determined a priori, but instead were based on lab resources. There were no particular stopping rules and no participants were excluded. Rather, each lab was simply asked to gather participants as they were able. The Singapore sample is quite small, however. Given that the goal of this paper is fairly descriptive and does not rely extensively on hypothesis testing procedures, we see this data as worthy of including, but specific results from this sample should be interpreted with caution.

Materials and procedure

Participants in all samples were asked to complete a questionnaire containing our primary measure of decision-making strategies. We also included several well-being measures (i.e., meaning in life, life satisfaction, and affect) and individualism-collectivism measure in our U.S. and South Korean samples. This decision was only due to the limitations on lab resources at different sites in the other countries. Finally, participants in all samples provided demographic information. Three of the samples completed

Table 1. Demographics of the samples.

| Country | <i>N</i> | Gender | | | | Age | |
|-------------|----------|--------|------|----------------------------|------------|----------|-----------|
| | | Female | Male | Female to male transgender | Unreported | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
| U.S. | 173 | 119 | 52 | 1 | 1 | 19.89 | 1.63 |
| China | 170 | 111 | 59 | – | – | 23.45 | 4.59 |
| India | 120 | 71 | 49 | – | – | 22.42 | 1.77 |
| Singapore | 41 | 25 | 16 | – | – | 22.29 | 1.66 |
| South Korea | 150 | 55 | 87 | – | 8 | 23.89 | 3.77 |

surveys in English (United States, India, and Singapore), and two others used already translated measures in their language when available (e.g., meaning in life) or translated by the team following the standard translation-back-translation procedures (China and South Korea).

Decision-making lay theories

To investigate how strongly TSAG lay theories are endorsed across our five samples, we used a self-report decision-making lay-theory measure that has been used in prior research (Schlegel et al., 2013). Specifically, participants were first asked to take some time to think about occasions they made important decisions and the various factors that may have influenced how satisfied they were with their decisions. We then presented participants with 36 items tapping into 12 distinct decision-making strategies (described below). Each item begins with the stem “people are more likely to make a personally satisfying decision if they . . .” and continues with one of the 36 strategies (e.g., follow who they really are). Participants rate their agreement with each item on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).¹

Seven of the 12 decision-making strategies consisted of multiple items: TSAG (5 items, e.g., “use their true self as a guide” and “following who they really are”); information from others (9 items, e.g., “do what’s popular” and “follow their friend’s advice”); rational processing (6 items, e.g., “use a ‘pros and cons’ list” and “take their time and weigh their options”); intuition (3 items, e.g., “follow their gut” and “rely on intuition”); religious (3 items, e.g., “use their religious beliefs as a guide” and “follow the advice of a religious leader [e.g., pastor, rabbi, priest]”); and considering effects on others (2 items, i.e., “consider how the decision will affect other people [e.g., family, friends]” and “consider the collective good of their family”). The remaining five categories were measured using single items: fate (i.e., “let fate decide”)²; ideal self (i.e., “consider who they ideally want to be”); past self (i.e., “use what they have done in the past as a guide”); future self (i.e., “consider who they want to become in the future”); actual self (i.e., “use their everyday behavior as a guide”); and ought self (i.e., “follow who they think they ought to be as a guide”). See, [Table 2](#) for composite scores of each decision-making strategy (full materials are available on OSF at https://osf.io/hqvbp/?view_only=ab78a7c3aab3415eb8e02d7591134af7)³

Well-being

To assess psychological well-being, we adopted three widely-used well-being indicators. First, we measured a global sense of meaning by using the 10-item Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ, Steger et al., 2006), which consists of the 5 items assessing presence of meaning (e.g., “I understand my life’s meaning”) and the other 5 assessing search for meaning (e.g., “I am always looking to find my life’s purpose”).⁴ Second, we used the 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) to measure life satisfaction. Example item includes “In most ways my life is close to my ideal.” Items of both MLQ and SWLS were rated on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Lastly, we measured affective well-being by using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS, Watson et al., 1988). Participants were presented with 20 words that describe a distinct emotion (10 positive, e.g., “interested”; 10 negative, e.g., “distressed”) and rated to what extent they generally experienced each emotion on a scale of 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5

Table 2. Descriptive statistics, internal reliabilities, and correlations for decision-making strategy importance ratings within each nation.

| Decision-making strategy | <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>α</i> | <i>r</i> |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------|------------------|
| U.S. | | | |
| Ideal self as guide | 5.84 (1.10) _{a,b} | N/A | .63*** |
| Future self as guide | 5.84 (1.10) _a | N/A | .62*** |
| True self as guide | 5.80 (0.89) _a | .84 | – |
| Rational thinking | 5.58 (0.72) _b | .80 | .66*** |
| Considering the effect on others | 5.23 (1.03) _c | .53 | .39*** |
| Past self as guide | 5.03 (1.34) _{c,d} | N/A | .32*** |
| Intuition | 4.79 (1.06) _d | .77 | .37*** |
| Religion | 4.79 (1.46) _d | .91 | .21** |
| Everyday self as guide | 4.70 (1.30) _d | N/A | .38*** |
| Ought self as guide | 4.57 (1.32) _d | N/A | .15 [†] |
| Information from others | 3.95 (0.90) _e | .82 | –.09 |
| Fate | 3.27 (1.45) _f | N/A | .14 [†] |
| China | | | |
| Ideal self as guide | 5.46 (1.14) _a | N/A | .62*** |
| True self as guide | 5.40 (0.99) _a | .83 | – |
| Future self as guide | 5.32 (1.17) _a | N/A | .71*** |
| Rational thinking | 5.31 (0.91) _a | .86 | .71*** |
| Considering the effect on others | 5.14 (1.03) _{a,b} | .70 | .45*** |
| Past self as guide | 4.85 (0.97) _{b,c} | N/A | .26** |
| Everyday self as guide | 4.61 (0.91) _c | N/A | .23** |
| Ought self as guide | 4.53 (1.30) _{c,d} | N/A | .31*** |
| Intuition | 4.22 (1.00) _d | .71 | .28*** |
| Information from others | 4.21 (0.72) _d | .79 | .07 |
| Religion | 3.52 (1.43) _e | .87 | –.01 |
| Fate | 3.24 (1.50) _e | N/A | –.26** |
| India | | | |
| Future self as guide | 6.33 (1.38) _a | N/A | .32*** |
| Considering the effect on others | 6.04 (1.14) _{a,b} | .57 | .48*** |
| True self as guide | 5.81 (0.95) _{b,c} | .56 | – |
| Ideal self as guide | 5.76 (1.41) _{b,c} | N/A | .19* |
| Rational thinking | 5.62 (0.85) _c | .49 | .54*** |
| Intuition | 4.95 (1.17) _d | .33 | .34*** |
| Ought self as guide | 4.80 (1.88) _{d,e} | N/A | .37*** |
| Information from others | 4.48 (0.86) _e | .54 | .16 [†] |
| Everyday self as guide | 4.27 (1.95) _{e,f} | N/A | .32*** |
| Past self as guide | 4.07 (2.32) _{e,f} | N/A | .15 [†] |
| Religion | 3.75 (1.85) _f | .77 | .02 |
| Fate | 3.45 (2.11) _f | N/A | –.25** |
| Singapore | | | |
| True self as guide | 4.30 (0.43) _a | .85 | – |
| Future self as guide | 4.15 (0.62) _{a,b} | N/A | .71*** |
| Ideal self as guide | 4.08 (0.73) _{a,b,c} | N/A | .58*** |
| Rational thinking | 3.81 (0.51) _{b,c,d} | .80 | .34* |
| Considering the effect on others | 3.65 (0.79) _{b,c,d,e} | .80 | .18 |
| Past self as guide | 3.65 (0.70) _{b,c,d,e} | N/A | .20 |
| Everyday self as guide | 3.55 (0.75) _{c,d,e} | N/A | .25 |
| Intuition | 3.50 (0.56) _{d,e} | .70 | .17 |
| Ought self as guide | 3.50 (0.72) _{d,e} | N/A | .31 [†] |
| Religion | 3.26 (0.88) _e | .92 | .22 |
| Information from others | 2.73 (0.49) _f | .78 | –.16 |
| Fate | 2.33 (0.92) _f | N/A | –.09 |
| South Korea | | | |
| Ideal self as guide | 5.80 (1.08) _a | N/A | .74*** |
| True self as guide | 5.66 (1.04) _{a,b} | .90 | – |
| Future self as guide | 5.66 (1.11) _{a,b} | N/A | .78*** |
| Ought self as guide | 5.43 (1.26) _b | N/A | .65*** |
| Rational thinking | 5.14 (0.90) _c | .76 | .65*** |
| Considering the effect on others | 4.84 (1.18) _{c,d,e} | .72 | .48*** |
| Everyday self as guide | 4.77 (1.13) _d | N/A | .38*** |

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

| Decision-making strategy | <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) | α | <i>r</i> |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|----------|----------|
| Intuition | 4.45 (1.20) _{d,e} | .79 | .41*** |
| Past self as guide | 4.43 (1.29) _e | N/A | .23** |
| Information from others | 3.72 (1.03) _f | .85 | .07 |
| Religion | 3.21 (1.58) _g | .86 | .01 |
| Fate | 2.85 (1.72) _g | N/A | .001 |

Note. N/A = not applicable. Within each nation, means that do not share a subscript differ statistically significantly from each other ($p < .05$, Bonferroni adjusted). Reported correlations indicate the ones between the true-self-as-guide and each of the other decision-making strategies within each nation.

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

(*extremely*). Their responses to each well-being indicator were averaged into composite scores (see, Table 3). Note that these measures were included only for the U.S. and South Korean samples only due to the limitations on lab resources in the other countries.

Cultural orientations

We used the 32-item horizontal-vertical individualism and collectivism scale to assess HI, VI, HC, and VC (Singelis et al., 1995; Triandis, 1996). Participants indicated the extent to which they endorse four cultural dimensions by rating their agreement with each item (8 items for HI, e.g., “I often do my own thing”; 8 items for VI, e.g., “Winning is everything”; 8 items for HC, e.g., “My happiness depends very much on the happiness of those around me”; 8 items for VC, e.g., “I usually sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of my group”) on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). We averaged responses to compute composite scores for each cultural dimension (see, Table 5). These measures were also only included for the U.S. and South Korean samples.⁵

Results

Decision-making lay theories rankings of importance

Descriptive statistics and reliabilities for decision-making lay theories are presented in Table 2 in descending order of importance as ranked by participants within each sample. For each sample, we also conducted pairwise comparisons to explore potential

Table 3. Descriptive statistics, internal reliabilities, and correlations coefficients for endorsement of TSAG lay theory and well-being indicators among U.S. and South Korean samples.

| Measure | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | α |
|-----------|------------------|------------------|--------|--------|---------|--------|----------|-----------|----------|
| 1. TS | – | .16 [†] | .18* | .05 | .36*** | .56*** | 5.66 | 1.04 | .90 |
| 2. SWL | .14 [†] | – | .62*** | .02 | .46*** | .32*** | 4.23 | 1.33 | .90 |
| 3. PA | .20** | .51*** | – | .21* | .45*** | .28** | 3.05 | 0.80 | .90 |
| 4. NA | –.03 | –.32*** | .10 | – | .03 | .17* | 2.68 | 0.89 | .90 |
| 5. POM | .06 | .57*** | .45*** | –.23** | – | .61*** | 4.60 | 1.10 | .81 |
| 6. SFM | .20** | –.21** | –.10 | .27*** | –.43*** | – | 5.25 | 0.99 | .87 |
| <i>M</i> | 5.80 | 4.77 | 3.30 | 2.13 | 4.93 | 4.82 | | | |
| <i>SD</i> | 0.89 | 1.33 | 0.78 | 0.73 | 1.40 | 1.34 | | | |
| α | .84 | .88 | .91 | .88 | .93 | .90 | | | |

Note. TS = true self; SWL = satisfaction with life; PA = positive affect; NA = negative affect; POM = presence of meaning; SFM = search for meaning. Values below the diagonal represent descriptive statistics, internal reliabilities, and correlation coefficients for U.S. sample, and values above the diagonal represent those for South Korean sample.

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

differences between decision-making lay theories. We applied standard Bonferroni procedure (e.g., Harris, 1975; Myers, 1979) via the software SPSS to circumvent the inflation of Type I error due to the large amount of comparisons. Specifically, for each individual comparison, SPSS produced adjusted p values by multiplying the original p value with the total amount of comparisons. The results (adjusted p values) are briefly presented in Table 2.

Consistent with Schlegel et al. (2013), TSAG was rated as one of the most important decision-making strategies (ranked only below considering one's ideal self and future self, which did not statistically differ) in the U.S. sample. The mean importance rating for TSAG ($M = 5.80$) was higher than the scale midpoint of 4, $t(171) = 26.60$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.03$, and the variability around this mean was low ($SD = 0.89$). Moreover, only 3.5% of the participants indicated they disagreed with TSAG as important for making satisfying decisions (as indicated by a score lower than the scale midpoint of 4, labeled as *neither agree nor disagree*). The majority of the participants (78.6%) had a score higher than 5, indicating a moderate to strong agreement.

Similar patterns emerged for the other four samples (see, Table 2). TSAG lay theory was rated as one of the top three important decision-making strategies across samples, and continued to be characterized by low variability around means that were higher than the scale midpoint. In Singapore, using the TSAG was ranked the most important strategy for making satisfying decisions. In both South Korea and China, using the TSAG was ranked the second most important strategy. In our Indian sample, using the TSAG was ranked third, and this was our only sample where "considering the effect on others" was ranked higher than using the TSAG. Moreover, within each of the four non-American samples, less than 6.6% (0% for Singapore) of participants indicated disagreement (i.e., ranked below the scale midpoint) with the notion that TSAG is an important strategy for making satisfying decisions; at least 55.1% of participants indicated moderate to strong agreement, with a score higher than 5 (out of 7) for South Korea, China, and India and higher than 4 (out of 5) for Singapore. It is also noteworthy that considering one's future self and one's ideal self as guides were both ranked in the top three in all samples but India (where ideal self was fourth). This is not surprising when you consider the extent to which these various self-concepts likely intersect and overlap.

Relationships between TSAG and other lay theories

Table 2 also shows the relationships between the various lay theories and TSAG endorsement. While we explore these patterns more fully in the General Discussion, we highlight a few patterns here. Specifically, the correlations between TSAG endorsement and "considering the effect on others" were uniformly positive, and were moderately strong in both the US ($r = .39$), and three of the four non-U.S. samples: China ($r = .45$), India ($r = .48$), and South Korea ($r = .48$). Similarly, the correlations between TSAG endorsement and ought self as guide were positive in China ($r = .31$) and India ($r = .37$), and particularly strong in South Korea ($r = .65$). Singapore was the only sample where these correlations were not significant ($r = .18$, $r = .31$ respectively). This indirectly suggests people do not necessarily see these more collectively-oriented decision-making strategies as at odd with following the true self.

The correlations between TSAG and rest of the strategies that involve the other selves (past, everyday, ideal, and future) are also worth noting. First, “considering ideal self” and “considering future self” were both significantly positively correlated with TSAG in all five nations. These correlations were strong (r 's ranging from .58 to .74 for ideal and .62 to .78 for future) in US, China, Singapore, and South Korea, but were weak to moderate correlations in India ($r = .19$ for ideal and $r = .32$ for future). “Considering the past self” was only somewhat to moderately correlated with TSAG in the US ($r = .32$), China ($r = .26$), and South Korea ($r = .23$), while past self was not correlated with TSAG in India ($r = .15$) and Singapore ($r = .20$). Finally, the “everyday self as guide” was again somewhat to moderately correlated to TSAG in the US ($r = .38$), China ($r = .23$), India ($r = .32$) and South Korea ($r = .38$), but uncorrelated in the Singapore sample ($r = .25$). Together, these correlations suggest that there may be a stronger overlap between TSAG and considerations of future and ideal selves, than everyday and past selves. However, we suspect the overlap is not so strong as to suggest that TSAG cannot be distinguished from these other self-concepts and corresponding lay theories; we expand on this suspicion further in the General Discussion.

We also note that the correlations between TSAG and both “rational thinking” and “following intuition” strategy endorsement were consistently positive in all samples. Rational thinking had a stronger link to TSAG than intuition in all samples, and the correlations were strong (r 's ranging from .54 to .71) in all samples except Singapore, where the correlation was more moderate ($r = .34$). The correlations between TSAG and intuition were more weak to moderate in size (r 's ranging from .28 to .41), in all samples except Singapore, where the correlation was not significant, though the pattern was in the same direction ($r = .17$).

Finally, we note three instances, “seeking information from others,” “religion” and “fate”, where lay theories were mostly unrelated to TSAG across all five samples. Seeking information was not significantly correlated with TSAG endorsement in any of the samples. Religion was not significantly correlated with TSAG endorsement in the Chinese ($r = -.01$), South Korean ($r = .01$), Indian ($r = .02$) and Singapore samples ($r = .22$). Religion was positively correlated with TSAG endorsement only in the U.S. sample ($r = .21$). Fate was not significantly correlated with TSAG endorsement in the U.S. ($r = .14$), South Korean ($r = .001$), and Singapore samples ($r = -.09$); however, fate was negatively correlated with TSAG endorsement in the Chinese ($r = -.26$) and Indian ($r = -.25$) samples.

Relationships between TSAG endorsement and well-being

Next, we examined the relationships between TSAG endorsement and well-being in the U.S. and South Korea samples (see, [Table 3](#) for bivariate correlations). In both samples, TSAG endorsement was positively associated positive affect and search for meaning, and the direction of the correlation between TSAG and life satisfaction in both samples was positive, though it did not reach significance. In the South Korean sample, TSAG endorsement was also positively correlated with presence of meaning. These correlations were small to moderate in size (r 's = .14 to .36), however the correlation between TSAG endorsement and search for meaning ($r = .56$) in the South Korean sample stood out as relatively strong. TSAG endorsement was uncorrelated with negative affect in both samples.

We further conducted regression analyses that included the potential moderation effect of country on the link between TSAG endorsement and well-being to examine whether the size of this relationship depended on country. As presented in Table 4, these regression analyses did not find evidence for such moderation effect of country except for the interaction predicting presence of meaning. Consistent with the correlations, TSAG endorsement was only a significant predictor of presence of meaning in the South Korean sample, $B = 0.38$, $SE = 0.10$, $t(310) = 3.74$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [0.18, 0.58], while it was not for the U.S. sample, $B = 0.09$, $SE = 0.11$, $t(310) = 0.81$, $p = .32$, 95% CI = [-0.12, 0.30]. This was surprising given that past work has consistently demonstrated that true self-knowledge is strongly tied to meaning-making among American samples (Schlegel et al., 2009, 2011). Nonetheless, the well-being analyses as a whole provides preliminary evidence that TSAG lay theory endorsement is consequential for well-being in both the United States and South Korea.

Relationships between lay theory endorsement and cultural orientations

Bivariate correlations among the endorsement of decision-making lay theories and individual differences on the four cultural dimensions between U.S. and South Korean samples are presented in Table 5. Of a particular interest, TSAG endorsement was

Table 4. Regression analyses predicting well-being measures by TSAG between U.S. and South Korean samples.

| Predictor | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | 95% CI |
|---|----------|-----------|----------|----------|------------------|
| Life satisfaction | | | | | |
| Constant | 4.23 | 0.11 | 38.53 | < .001 | [4.01, 4.44] |
| TSAG | 0.20 | 0.10 | 1.86 | .064 | [-0.01, 0.40] |
| Nation | 0.53 | 0.15 | 3.54 | < .001 | [0.23, 0.82] |
| TSAG × Nation | 0.02 | 0.15 | 0.12 | .903 | [-0.28, 0.32] |
| Model: $R^2 = .06$, $F(3, 312) = 7.02$, $p < .001$ | | | | | |
| Positive affect | | | | | |
| Constant | 3.05 | 0.06 | 47.21 | < .001 | [2.92, 3.17] |
| TSAG | 0.14 | 0.06 | 2.23 | .026 | [0.02, 0.26] |
| Nation | 0.24 | 0.09 | 2.80 | .006 | [0.07, 0.42] |
| TSAG × Nation | 0.04 | 0.09 | 0.43 | .669 | [-0.14, 0.22] |
| Model: $R^2 = .06$, $F(3, 311) = 7.12$, $p < .001$ | | | | | |
| Negative affect | | | | | |
| Constant | 2.66 | 0.07 | 39.61 | < .001 | [2.53, 2.80] |
| TSAG | 0.04 | 0.06 | 0.60 | .552 | [-0.09, 0.16] |
| Nation | -0.54 | 0.09 | -5.90 | < .001 | [-0.72, -0.36] |
| TSAG × Nation | -0.06 | 0.09 | -0.64 | .524 | [-0.25, 0.13] |
| Model: $R^2 = .10$, $F(3, 311) = 11.74$, $p < .001$ | | | | | |
| Presence of meaning | | | | | |
| Constant | 4.61 | 0.10 | 44.00 | < .001 | [4.41, 4.82] |
| TSAG | 0.38 | 0.10 | 3.74 | < .001 | [0.18, 0.58] |
| Nation | 0.31 | 0.14 | 2.20 | .028 | [0.03, 0.59] |
| TSAG × Nation | -0.29 | 0.15 | -1.97 | .05 | [-0.58, -0.0003] |
| Model: $R^2 = .06$, $F(3, 310) = 6.84$, $p < .001$ | | | | | |
| Search for meaning | | | | | |
| Constant | 5.27 | 0.09 | 56.01 | < .001 | [5.09, 5.46] |
| TSAG | 0.52 | 0.09 | 5.77 | < .001 | [0.34, 0.70] |
| Nation | -0.47 | 0.13 | -3.70 | < .001 | [-0.72, -0.22] |
| TSAG × Nation | -0.21 | 0.13 | -1.62 | .106 | [-0.47, 0.05] |
| Model: $R^2 = .15$, $F(3, 310) = 18.13$, $p < .001$ | | | | | |

Note. U.S. was coded as 1, and South Korea as 0.



Table 5. Descriptive statistics, internal reliabilities, and correlations coefficients for decision-making strategies and horizontal-vertical individualism and collectivism among U.S. and South Korean samples.

| Measure | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | M | SD | α |
|----------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|------|------|----------|
| 1. TS | – | .65*** | .41*** | .78*** | .74*** | .65*** | .38*** | .23** | .07 | .48*** | .01 | .001 | .56*** | .20* | .34*** | .22** | 5.66 | 1.04 | .90 |
| 2. RT | .66*** | – | .44*** | .63*** | .60*** | .61*** | .53*** | .49*** | .36*** | .52*** | .09 | .08 | .48*** | .28** | .36*** | .33*** | 5.14 | 0.90 | .77 |
| 3. IN | .37*** | .24** | – | .36*** | .38*** | .42*** | .45*** | .34*** | .35*** | .29*** | .33*** | .40*** | .44*** | .29*** | .33*** | .18* | 4.45 | 1.20 | .80 |
| 4. FS | .62*** | .50*** | .13† | – | .73*** | .66*** | .42*** | .21** | .06 | .47*** | –.01 | –.03 | .49*** | .18* | .26** | .23** | 5.66 | 1.11 | N/A |
| 5. IS | .63*** | .45*** | .31*** | .48*** | – | .62*** | .37*** | .18* | .13 | .49*** | –.02 | –.02 | .46*** | .25** | .28** | .24** | 5.80 | 1.08 | N/A |
| 6. OS | .15† | .20** | .09 | .19* | .24** | – | .49*** | .22** | .16* | .33*** | –.01 | –.03 | .44*** | .16† | .37*** | .25** | 5.43 | 1.26 | N/A |
| 7. ES | .38*** | .35*** | .24** | .23** | .19* | .08 | – | .55*** | .38*** | .22** | .16† | .22** | .32*** | .18* | .33*** | .28** | 4.77 | 1.13 | N/A |
| 8. PS | .32*** | .36*** | .13 | .20** | .22** | .11 | .49*** | – | .47*** | .29*** | .18* | .22** | .21* | .21* | .28** | .27** | 4.43 | 1.29 | N/A |
| 9. IO | –.09 | .10 | .21** | –.05 | –.08 | –.08 | .21** | .39*** | – | .55*** | .53*** | .54*** | .09 | .34*** | .49*** | .55*** | 3.72 | 1.03 | .87 |
| 10. CO | .39*** | .49*** | .22** | .30*** | .35*** | .31*** | .19* | .26** | .31*** | – | .24** | .21* | .13 | .27** | .40*** | .53*** | 4.84 | 1.18 | .73 |
| 11. RL | .21** | .21** | .08 | .11 | .04 | .18* | .09 | .14† | .28*** | .17* | – | .40*** | .19* | .28** | .19* | .24** | 3.21 | 1.58 | .87 |
| 12. FA | .14† | .04 | .37*** | –.07 | .09 | .09 | .21** | .24** | .39*** | .20* | .15† | – | .02 | .14 | .26** | .23** | 2.85 | 1.72 | N/A |
| 13. HI | .46*** | .37*** | .16* | .38*** | .39*** | .10 | .23** | .13† | –.05 | .23** | .04 | –.13 | – | .36*** | .38*** | .26** | 5.10 | 1.00 | .89 |
| 14. VI | .001 | .12 | .24** | –.03 | –.03 | .06 | –.08 | –.01 | .17* | .14† | .12 | .15† | .06 | – | .36*** | .51*** | 4.32 | 1.01 | .81 |
| 15. HC | .51*** | .42*** | .21** | .32*** | .34*** | .13† | .37*** | .25** | .12 | .38*** | .22** | .05 | .42*** | –.03 | – | .79*** | 4.59 | 0.95 | .84 |
| 16. VC | .31*** | .37*** | .15† | .26** | .13† | .28*** | .09 | .23** | .23** | .36*** | .27*** | .07 | .36*** | .17* | .56*** | – | 4.39 | 1.00 | .83 |
| M | 5.80 | 5.58 | 4.79 | 5.84 | 5.84 | 4.57 | 4.70 | 5.03 | 3.95 | 5.23 | 4.79 | 3.27 | 5.53 | 4.32 | 5.40 | 5.12 | | | |
| SD | 0.89 | 0.72 | 1.06 | 1.10 | 1.10 | 1.32 | 1.30 | 1.34 | 0.90 | 1.03 | 1.46 | 1.45 | 0.72 | 0.94 | 0.74 | 0.72 | | | |
| α | .84 | .80 | .77 | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | .82 | .53 | .91 | N/A | .80 | .68 | .79 | .77 | | | |

Note. TS = true self; RT = rational thinking; IN = intuition; FS = future self; IS = ideal self; OS = ought self; ES = everyday self; PS = past self; IO = information from others; CO = considering others; RL = religion; FA = fate; HI = horizontal individualism; VI = vertical individualism; HC = horizontal collectivism; VC = vertical collectivism; N/A = not applicable. Internal reliability for CO is a Spearman-Brown coefficient. Values below the diagonal represent descriptive statistics, internal reliabilities, and correlation coefficients for U.S. sample, and values above the diagonal represent those for South Korean sample.

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

positively correlated HI, HC, and, unexpectedly, VC in both U.S. and South Korean samples. VI was also positively correlated with TSAG endorsement in the South Korean sample, but these two variables were uncorrelated in the U.S. sample.

To better examine the relationships between the four cultural orientations and lay theory endorsements, we conducted multivariate regression analyses. Specifically, we regressed all four cultural dimensions on each lay theory endorsement to account for shared variance between the cultural orientations by using Mplus (version 8.0; Muthén & Muthén, 1998). The full results for these analyses can be found in Table 6. Of a particular importance, these results revealed that TSAG endorsement was significantly predicted by the horizontal cultural orientations in both samples, which is consistent with our predictions. While HC did not significantly predict TSAG endorsement in the South Korean sample ($p = .12$), it is worth noting that the direction of the relationship was still positive in this sample. Although we hypothesized the negative relationship between the vertical cultural orientations and TSAG endorsement, both VI and VC were not significantly associated with TSAG endorsement in both samples.

While we found similar patterns for cultural orientations and some of the lay theories endorsements across countries (e.g., rational thinking, intuition, and future self as guide), there were also interesting cultural differences. For example, VC significantly predicted the ought-self lay theory strategy in the U.S. sample, whereas HI and HC were significant predictors of the ought-self strategy in the South Korean sample. This suggests that considering one's own obligations and responsibilities when making important decisions seems closely associated with the cultural ideation of prioritizing group's success over personal goals for American people, while South Korean people tend to consider what they ought to be when pursuing self-reliance and cooperation.

General discussion

The results reported in this manuscript are the first attempt to assess how widely TSAG lay theories are endorsed in non-U.S. samples. While the results certainly fall short of any claims of universality given the limited number of nations sampled, the results do provide evidence that the popularity of TSAG lay theories is not strictly limited to the U.S. Indeed, in all four of the non-U.S. samples, TSAG was rated among the “top three” most highly endorsed decision-making strategies of the 12 lay theories that participants were asked about. Further, very few (less than 7%) of the participants in the non-American samples indicated any level of disagreement with the idea that following the true self is likely to lead to personally satisfying decisions.

While these results may seem somewhat surprising given that, on its face, true selves seem to represent a very individualist notion of the self, we theorized that more basic cognitive tendencies toward psychological essentialism (which appear to be relatively universal) may give rise to beliefs in self-essences that are consequential even among people with more collectivist self-construals. Consistent with this hypothesis, we found that individual differences in collectivism (both horizontal and vertical) positively correlated with TSAG endorsement in both the U.S. and South Korean samples, suggesting that collectivistic cultural orientations are not necessarily at odds with true-self beliefs. Individual differences in individualism (both horizontal and vertical) tended to also positively correlate with TSAG

Table 6. Multivariate regression analyses predicting decision-making lay theories by cultural orientations across U.S. and South Korean samples.

| Predictor | U.S. | | | | South Korea | | | |
|-----------|--------------------|-----------|---------|----------------|-------------------|-----------|---------|----------------|
| | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | β | 95% CI | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | β | 95% CI |
| TS | | | | | | | | |
| VI | -0.001 | 0.06 | -0.001 | [-0.12, 0.12] | -0.03 | 0.09 | -0.03 | [-0.21, 0.14] |
| VC | -0.02 | 0.10 | -0.02 | [-0.21, 0.17] | -0.02 | 0.13 | -0.02 | [-0.27, 0.24] |
| HI | 0.38*** | 0.09 | 0.31 | [0.21, 0.54] | 0.54*** | 0.08 | 0.51 | [0.38, 0.70] |
| HC | 0.47*** | 0.10 | 0.39 | [0.28, 0.66] | 0.20 | 0.13 | 0.18 | [-0.05, 0.46] |
| RT | | | | | | | | |
| VI | 0.07 | 0.05 | 0.09 | [-0.03, 0.17] | 0.03 | 0.08 | 0.04 | [-0.12, 0.19] |
| VC | 0.14 [†] | 0.08 | 0.14 | [-0.02, 0.30] | 0.15 | 0.12 | 0.16 | [-0.08, 0.38] |
| HI | 0.20** | 0.07 | 0.20 | [0.06, 0.34] | 0.36*** | 0.08 | 0.40 | [0.22, 0.51] |
| HC | 0.26** | 0.08 | 0.26 | [0.10, 0.42] | 0.08 | 0.12 | 0.08 | [-0.16, 0.31] |
| IN | | | | | | | | |
| VI | 0.28** | 0.08 | 0.25 | [0.12, 0.44] | 0.25* | 0.11 | 0.20 | [0.03, 0.46] |
| VC | -0.06 | 0.13 | -0.04 | [-0.32, 0.20] | -0.35* | 0.16 | -0.28 | [-0.67, -0.04] |
| HI | 0.11 | 0.12 | 0.07 | [-0.13, 0.34] | 0.37*** | 0.10 | 0.30 | [0.17, 0.57] |
| HC | 0.30* | 0.13 | 0.21 | [0.04, 0.56] | 0.50** | 0.16 | 0.38 | [0.18, 0.81] |
| FS | | | | | | | | |
| VI | -0.07 | 0.08 | -0.06 | [-0.23, 0.10] | -0.08 | 0.10 | -0.07 | [-0.28, 0.11] |
| VC | 0.13 | 0.13 | 0.08 | [-0.13, 0.39] | 0.22 | 0.15 | 0.19 | [-0.07, 0.51] |
| HI | 0.44*** | 0.12 | 0.29 | [0.20, 0.67] | 0.55*** | 0.09 | 0.49 | [0.37, 0.73] |
| HC | 0.22 [†] | 0.13 | 0.15 | [-0.03, 0.48] | -0.05 | 0.15 | -0.04 | [-0.34, 0.24] |
| IS | | | | | | | | |
| VI | -0.02 | 0.08 | -0.01 | [-0.18, 0.15] | 0.05 | 0.09 | 0.05 | [-0.14, 0.24] |
| VC | -0.21 | 0.13 | -0.14 | [-0.47, 0.04] | 0.08 | 0.14 | 0.07 | [-0.20, 0.35] |
| HI | 0.49*** | 0.12 | 0.32 | [0.26, 0.71] | 0.42*** | 0.09 | 0.40 | [0.25, 0.60] |
| HC | 0.42** | 0.13 | 0.28 | [0.17, 0.67] | 0.08 | 0.14 | 0.07 | [-0.20, 0.35] |
| OS | | | | | | | | |
| VI | 0.01 | 0.11 | 0.01 | [-0.20, 0.21] | -0.05 | 0.11 | -0.04 | [-0.28, 0.17] |
| VC | 0.56** | 0.17 | 0.30** | [0.22, 0.89] | -0.03 | 0.17 | -0.02 | [-0.36, 0.31] |
| HI | 0.002 | 0.15 | 0.001 | [-0.29, 0.30] | 0.46*** | 0.11 | 0.36 | [0.25, 0.68] |
| HC | -0.06 | 0.17 | -0.04 | [-0.39, 0.26] | 0.38* | 0.17 | 0.27 | [0.04, 0.71] |
| ES | | | | | | | | |
| VI | -0.07 | 0.10 | -0.05 | [-0.26, 0.13] | -0.02 | 0.11 | -0.02 | [-0.23, 0.19] |
| VC | -0.31 [†] | 0.16 | -0.17 | [-0.62, 0.001] | 0.12 | 0.16 | 0.10 | [-0.17, 0.43] |
| HI | 0.21 | 0.14 | 0.12 | [-0.06, 0.49] | 0.28** | 0.10 | 0.24 | [0.08, 0.48] |
| HC | 0.73*** | 0.16 | 0.41 | [0.42, 1.03] | 0.21 | 0.16 | 0.17 | [-0.10, 0.53] |
| PS | | | | | | | | |
| VI | -0.04 | 0.11 | -0.03 | [-0.25, 0.17] | 0.10 | 0.13 | 0.08 | [-0.15, 0.35] |
| VC | 0.26 | 0.17 | 0.14 | [-0.08, 0.59] | 0.14 | 0.19 | 0.10 | [-0.23, 0.51] |
| HI | 0.02 | 0.15 | 0.01 | [-0.28, 0.31] | 0.14 | 0.12 | 0.10 | [-0.10, 0.37] |
| HC | 0.31 [†] | 0.17 | 0.17 | [-0.02, 0.64] | 0.20 | 0.19 | 0.14 | [-0.18, 0.57] |
| IO | | | | | | | | |
| VI | 0.14 [†] | 0.07 | 0.15 | [-0.001, 0.28] | 0.15 [†] | 0.09 | 0.14 | [-0.02, 0.32] |
| VC | 0.28* | 0.12 | 0.23 | [0.06, 0.51] | 0.35** | 0.13 | 0.33 | [0.09, 0.60] |
| HI | -0.22* | 0.10 | -0.17 | [-0.42, -0.02] | -0.12 | 0.08 | -0.12 | [-0.29, 0.04] |
| HC | 0.09 | 0.11 | 0.07 | [-0.13, 0.31] | 0.26* | 0.13 | 0.23 | [0.003, 0.51] |
| CO | | | | | | | | |
| VI | 0.13 [†] | 0.08 | 0.12 | [-0.02, 0.28] | 0.01 | 0.10 | 0.01 | [-0.20, 0.21] |
| VC | 0.25* | 0.12 | 0.17 | [0.01, 0.49] | 0.68*** | 0.15 | 0.56 | [0.37, 0.98] |
| HI | 0.07 | 0.11 | 0.05 | [-0.15, 0.28] | 0.02 | 0.10 | 0.02 | [-0.17, 0.21] |
| HC | 0.38** | 0.12 | 0.27 | [0.14, 0.62] | -0.06 | 0.16 | -0.05 | [-0.36, 0.25] |
| RL | | | | | | | | |
| VI | 0.15 | 0.12 | 0.09 | [-0.08, 0.37] | 0.28 [†] | 0.15 | 0.18 | [-0.02, 0.58] |
| VC | 0.41* | 0.19 | 0.20 | [0.05, 0.77] | 0.23 | 0.23 | 0.15 | [-0.21, 0.68] |
| HI | -0.20 | 0.16 | -0.10 | [-0.52, 0.12] | 0.16 | 0.14 | 0.10 | [-0.12, 0.44] |
| HC | 0.30 [†] | 0.18 | 0.15 | [-0.06, 0.66] | -0.04 | 0.23 | -0.02 | [-0.49, 0.41] |
| FA | | | | | | | | |
| VI | 0.23* | 0.12 | 0.15 | [0.003, 0.46] | 0.14 | 0.17 | 0.08 | [-0.20, 0.47] |
| VC | 0.11 | 0.19 | 0.05 | [-0.26, 0.47] | 0.01 | 0.26 | 0.01 | [-0.49, 0.51] |
| HI | -0.40* | 0.17 | -0.20 | [-0.73, -0.08] | -0.18 | 0.16 | -0.10 | [-0.50, 0.14] |
| HC | 0.22 | 0.19 | 0.11 | [-0.14, 0.58] | 0.50 [†] | 0.26 | 0.27 | [-0.003, 1.00] |

Note. TS = true self; RT = rational thinking; IN = intuition; FS = future self; IS = ideal self; OS = ought self; ES = everyday self; PS = past self; IO = information from others; CO = considering others; RL = religion; FA = fate; HI = horizontal individualism; VI = vertical individualism; HC = horizontal collectivism; VC = vertical collectivism.

[†]*p* < .10. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

endorsement, but the correlations were not so large as to suggest TSAG endorsement is synonymous with individualism. More informatively, multivariate regression analyses that included all four cultural orientations (i.e., HI, HC, VI, and VC) revealed horizontal cultural orientations were more relevant to TSAG endorsement than individualism/collectivism per se. This is consistent with our theorizing that horizontal cultural orientations support cultural values and practices that are shared with TSAG lay theories (e.g., autonomous self-directed and cooperative life styles). We had hypothesized that vertical cultural orientations might pose the bigger “threat” to TSAG lay theories compared to collective orientations given their focus on extrinsic aspirations (e.g., seeking social respect and competition). This was not supported in our data as both VI and VC were either positively correlated or uncorrelated with TSAG endorsement at the bivariate level in both the U.S. and South Korean samples. Further, neither VI nor VC significantly predicted TSAG endorsement (though the direction was negative) in either country in the multivariate regressions.

Flexible true self conceptions

Another piece of evidence that relatively basic, universal cognitive tendencies toward psychological essentialism shaped TSAG beliefs comes from the correlations between individual differences in endorsement of the TSAG lay theory with other lay theory endorsement. Though we did not explicitly ask people how they construe their true self-concepts, these correlations provide some clues on how people think of their true selves as related to other lay theories. For example, the correlation between TSAG endorsement and “considering the effect on others” was uniformly positive. However, the strength of this correlation was particularly notable in three of the four non-American samples: China, India, and South Korea. This potentially suggests that as a country becomes more collective in orientation, the idea of following one’s true self is increasingly less “at odds” with considering how a decision impacts people close to you. Indeed, for people high in collectivism, these two decision-making strategies may become increasingly intertwined such that following the true self is analogous to considering the effect on others because others are a part of the true self. In similar vein, TSAG endorsement was positively correlated with ought-self endorsement, suggesting following the true self can be consistent with meeting obligations. This positive correlation was particularly strong in the South Korean sample, suggesting that the true self may be particularly tied to obligations in that context.

These patterns make theoretical sense in light of research demonstrating the “good true self bias” (De Freitas et al., 2018; Strohminger et al., 2017). People tacitly see the true selves as morally good (Newman et al., 2014) and there is evidence for this bias across cultures (De Freitas et al., 2018). Concerns for others’ welfare and fulfillment of societal obligations have been regarded as a key component of morally good behaviors (e.g., Graham et al., 2013; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004). In this sense, it may not be as surprising that people from various non-U.S. countries think of TSAG in ways that are overlapping with them thinking of the effect on others or the ought self. Differences between countries only affected the size (as opposed to the direction) of these correlations.

We observed three instances of lay theories that were mostly unrelated to TSAG lay theories (seeking information from others, fate, and religion). We speculate that issues like seeking information from others or fate are rather extraneous to being good and moral. As such, people may differ more substantially in how they view these issues as related to TSAG. The only exceptions were China and India, which evidenced significant negative correlations that were small to moderate in size between fate and TSAG, indirectly suggesting that endorsement of following fate may be more viewed as somewhat antithetical to TSAG endorsement in these samples. With regard to religion, religion was significantly positively correlated with TSAG endorsement in the U.S. but the relationship was only moderate in size, indirectly suggesting that considering religion and using one's TSAG may be seen as somewhat linked in the U.S. By comparison, religion was unrelated to TSAG in the other samples, suggesting more variability in how linked people see religion and TSAG in those samples.

Finally, previous work also finds people seem to perceive that they use similar levels of rational and intuitive processing when asked to consider their true self to make a decision (Kim et al., 2021). While intuition was consistently positively correlated with TSAG in all samples (average $r = .31$), rational thinking had a stronger link to TSAG (average $r = .58$). Further, following intuition was consistently ranked toward the bottom of the list of decision-making strategies (7th–9th position in every sample except India, where it is ranked 6th), while rational thinking was consistently ranked in the 4th or 5th position across samples. These patterns suggest that rational thinking might be more highly valued and more linked to the true self, but we suspect that equating following one's true self with either rational thinking or gut/intuition fails to capture the full lay understanding of what it means to follow the true self.

True selves vs. Other selves

Another question raised by the results is how distinguishable the TSAG lay theory is from lay theories involving other self-conceptions (ideal self, future self, past self, everyday self, ought self) and whether this differed across countries. The lay theories involving the ideal self and future self seemed to be the most closely related to the TSAG lay theory. Both of these were significantly positively correlated with TSAG in all five nations (average r s = .55 and .59, for ideal and future selves respectively) and both were rated as important as TSAG in all five nations (with the exception of the future self in India, which was rated as more important than TSAG). We suspect these relatively high correlations and ratings for perceived importance may be partly driven by overlap among these self-concepts. However, in both cases we suspect the overlap is not so strong as to suggest the self-concepts and corresponding lay theories cannot be distinguished.

With regard to the ideal self, it is worth noting that the perceived importance of the ideal self is consistent with evidence that behaving in ways that are consistent with one's ideal self predicts well-being in multiple cultures (Lynch et al., 2009). Though that paper did not examine the contents of true selves specifically, there is likely to be a large degree of overlap between true selves and ideal selves as in terms of content. Indeed, people in a variety of cultures believe their true selves are primarily composed of positive attributes (Strohinger et al., 2017) and, presumably, ideal selves are composed entirely of positive attributes for most people. We suspect that many of these positive ideal self attributes

overlap with the positive aspects of the true self-concept. However, we do not think that this means the ideal self is one in the same with the true self. While people tend to have overly positive true self-conceptions, some past work shows that people can generate undesirable features of their true self that are still meaningful to them when asked to do so (Schlegel et al., 2009). With regard to the lay theories, past work has shown that directions to follow the ideal self can produce decision satisfaction at levels as high as instructions to follow the true self, but these effects are not as consistent in strength as TSAG effects (Kim et al., 2021). Further, feelings of ideal self-knowledge do not tend to predict decision satisfaction, whereas feelings of true self-knowledge consistently do (Schlegel et al., 2013). This suggests that while ideal self as guide lay theories tend to be endorsed at a level as high as TSAG lay theories, there is still more “power” to the TSAG lay theory when it comes to promoting decision satisfaction and meaning. Finally, the average correlation between TSAG and ideal self as guide lay theories (average $r = .55$) is not so high to suggest that the two are indistinguishable, though they are also clearly not completely separable from each other.

With regard to future self as guide lay theories, we suspect that this overlap may come from the fact that the future self is still the true self. Indeed, research shows that the more a characteristic is believed to be a part of the true self, the more likely people are to think that it won't change over the next 30 years (Christy et al., 2019). Even so, the degree of correlation between the two lay theories (average $r = .59$) again suggests that future self and true self may not be one in the same. From this perspective, it does make sense that the future self will have to live with the consequence of one's decisions and should be considered as an extension of true self. We are not aware of any existing work that compares the future self as guide strategy to the TSAG strategy in terms of decision satisfaction, so more work is definitely needed to determine how “powerful” the future self as guide strategy is given how widely it was endorsed (as important, if not more important, than the true self in all five samples).

The other self-based decision-making strategies were less strongly related to the TSAG and tended to be rated as less important than TSAG. Considering the past self was always rated as less important than TSAG and was only somewhat correlated with TSAG (average $r = .23$). This is somewhat interesting given that the past self was presumably also the true self (considering the link to psychological essentialism previously established and suggest a high level of temporal stability to true selves). However, research also suggests people think they discover the true self over time (Schlegel et al., 2012) and that they are becoming more authentic over time (Seto & Schlegel, 2018), suggesting that the past self perhaps didn't know the true self yet, making it a less reliable guide to decision-making. Finally, the everyday self as guide (average $r = .31$) and ought self as guide strategies (average $r = .34$) were also less correlated with TSAG and consistently rated as less important than the TSAG than future and ideal self as guide strategies. However, there was a fair amount of variability across countries in the endorsement of the ought self as guide strategy (as discussed above), with ought self as guide rated as important as TSAG in South Korea.

Limitations

Of course, the current work is not without limitations. First and foremost, only a limited number of nations are represented in these samples. Further, within those nations, our participants were recruited from universities and some of our participants spoke English

as a second language. Thus, the participants may be more “WEIRD” than other members of their home countries. Indeed, people exists in myriad cultural contexts and there is no reason to think that one’s nationality was the most salient at the time of the survey. In this way, this work represents a very preliminary test of whether true self beliefs generalize across countries and cultural contexts. However, given that there is no previous data to speak to this issue, we think it is an important preliminary step.

Another limitation is that five of the twelve decision-making strategies were only assessed with single items as opposed to multiple items, which is less than ideal from a measurement perspective. We relied on the measure developed by Schlegel et al. (2013) in the first paper on TSAG decision making lay theories, however this measure has not undergone rigorous validation. It was designed to provide a descriptive sense of relative importance of decision-making strategies (much like we did here); however, more rigorous scale development work would certainly be useful for future work on this issue.

Finally, we collected measures of well-being and self-construal in only two out of the five samples; it would have been ideal to have this measure in all samples. For example, participants in our sample from Singapore gave TSAG the highest relative ranking compared to other samples and had the lowest rate of disagreement. It would be interesting and informative to have a deeper examination of the power of TSAG lay theory endorsement in this sample. Our work provides preliminary evidence for the *presence* of such lay theories across four non-American samples, but future research could begin to examine the *downstream consequences* of TSAG endorsement for well-being and decision-making across a wider array of contexts.

Concluding remark: True selves as potential shared hubs of meaning

The current studies shed light on the potential meaning-making strategies used in a variety of nations. We believe that true selves provide a powerful meaning-making framework that people use to make sense of their lives and why they do what they do. In this way, beliefs about the true self have the potential to influence people’s sense of meaning in life and well-being (Kim et al., 2021; Rivera et al., 2019). Consistent with the fact that TSAG lay theories were endorsed at a uniformly high level, individual differences in endorsement predicted multiple well-being indicators in both the United States and South Korea. Future work should continue to examine cross-national or cross-cultural differences in the ways people may construe of their true self-concepts and how they may use them to make sense of their lives.

Notes

1. Participants in Singapore completed the same questionnaire on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).
2. Schlegel et al. (2013) originally grouped this item with two other items (e.g., “look for a sign from the universe”) under the composite “supernatural sources.” Because these two items were not included in all five samples, we only report data of the single item measure across samples to maintain consistency.
3. To ensure the equivalence of measures across cultural groups, we conducted a series of measurement invariance tests for the decision-making lay theories measure. Given our focus on the endorsement of the TSAG lay theory relative to other decision-making strategies

within each country, we tested configural and metric invariances of measurement. Tests revealed several potentially non-invariant items for the information from others and rational thinking decision-making strategies (partial metric invariance was supported). However, excluding these items from the analyses did not change the overall findings (specific results are available in the online supplemental materials). Therefore, we report the results based on the all items. Mplus outcomes of the measurement invariance tests are available on OSF.

4. Search for meaning is not typically considered an indicator of well-being as its relationship with other well-being indicators tends to be moderated by other factors (Park et al., 2010; Steger et al., 2008). However, we included it here given the link between TSAG lay theories and meaning-making.
5. As for the decision-making strategy measure, we tested the measurement invariances of the horizontal-vertical individualism and collectivism scale and other well-being measures between the U.S. and South Korean samples. Tests revealed a few potentially non-invariant items for the measures (partial metric invariance was supported); however, excluding those items from the analyses did not change the overall patterns (specific results are available on the online supplemental materials). Thus, we report the results with all the items included. Mplus outcomes of these measurement invariance tests are also available on OSF.

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