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Positive coping as mediator between self-control and life satisfaction: Evidence from two  
Chinese samples

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### Abstract

Previous work has found that self-control is positively associated with life satisfaction. The current study aimed to replicate this relation and extend this line of research by examining the mediating effect of coping in the Chinese context. Five hundred and twenty-five university students (Sample 1) and two hundred ninety-four employees (Sample 2) participated in the study completing self-report measures that assessed self-control, coping, and life satisfaction. Results of both samples provided converging evidence that self-control was positively related to life satisfaction and that this relation was partially mediated by positive coping. In conclusion, using more positive ways to cope partly explains *how* people high in self-control are more satisfied with life. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: self-control; life satisfaction; well-being; coping; Chinese.

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Recently, a growing literature has documented that people high in self-control report more life satisfaction or happiness (Cheung, Gillebaart, Kroese, & De Ridder, 2014; Hofmann, Luhmann, Fisher, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2014; Ouyang, Zhu, Fan, Tan, & Zhong, 2015; Ronen, Hamama, Rosenbaum, & Mishely-Yarlap, 2016).

There is evidence that the influence of self-related variables on life satisfaction appear to be stronger in individualistic than in collectivistic culture (Diener & Diener, 1995; Park & Huebner, 2005). Unlike other self-related variables such as self-esteem, self-control is considered to be particularly important to collectivistic culture (Fox & Calkins, 2003; Seeley & Gardner, 2003). China is the largest collectivistic country in the world where self-control is highly valued and people who grow up in the Chinese context are taught to control themselves since they are at early age (Leung & Fan, 1996; Rubin et al., 2006). This indicates that self-control should be important to Chinese people's life outcomes (e.g., life satisfaction). However, the link of self-control and life satisfaction has mainly been examined in Western sample, and only few studies (Ouyang et al., 2015) have supported this relation in a sample of Chinese university students. The scarcity of research into this association in the Chinese context suggests more investigation in diverse sample is highly needed. Thus, the first goal of the current study was to test this link in two different Chinese samples.

Life satisfaction is vulnerable to stress and how people cope with stress relates to their life satisfaction (Miller, Brody, & Summerton, 1988). Coping refer to "one's cognitive and behavioral efforts to deal with the internal and external demands of the person-environment transaction which is appraised as taxing or exceeding the individual's resources" (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986). Empirical research has revealed various forms of coping

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strategies (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). Some coping strategies (e.g., seeking help, solving the problem) are positive whereas others (e.g., substance use, avoidance) are negative in nature<sup>1</sup>. Hence, coping has been considered to consist of two broad dimensions --- positive and negative coping (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998; Tao, Dong, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Pancer, 2000; Xie, 1998). Positive coping can be characterized by an approach-oriented style and problem-focused efforts and is related to personal adjustment and growth; whereas negative coping is featured by an avoidant-oriented style and is related to higher levels of dysfunctional problems (Tao et al., 2000).

Self-control is seen as a facilitating factor of coping since it involves both down-regulation of undesirable thoughts, emotions, and behaviors and the mobilization of their desirable counterparts (Finkenauer, Engels, & Baumeister, 2005). The levels of self-control have been linked with individual differences in coping. A number of studies have found that people with high self-control use more positive coping whereas those low in self-control, on the contrary, use more negative ways to cope (Boals, vanDellen, & Banks, 2011; Englert, Betrams, & Dickhäuser, 2011; Muraven, Collins, Shiffman, & Paty, 2005; Wills, Sandy, & Shinar, 1999; Wills, Walker, Mendoza, & Ainette, 2006). As stated above, how people cope with stress is related to their life satisfaction. Some studies (Liu, Li, Ling, & Cai, 2016; Wang & Ming, 2008; Yu, Li, Wang, Zhao, Li, & Xia, 2013; Wei, 2015) have used an indigenously developed coping scale (i.e., the Simplified Coping Style Questionnaire, SCSQ) to examine the relation between positive and negative coping and life satisfaction

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<sup>1</sup> As proposed by one reviewer, some forms of avoidant-oriented coping may still be considered healthy when situations are short-term and cannot be changed. It should be noted that the terms “positive coping” and “negative coping” mentioned in the present research refer to the positivity/negativity of certain form(s) of coping in nature and the role of context is not taken into consideration in this study.

among Chinese, finding that positive coping is consistently related to more life satisfaction whereas only partial evidence suggests negative coping is related to less satisfaction.

Although the relation of negative coping and life satisfaction in the Chinese context is inconsistent, these findings suggest that individuals high in self-control are prone to use more positive and less negative ways to cope, which in turn increases their life satisfaction. This implies that coping (especially positive coping) would serve as a consistent mediator in the “self-control-life satisfaction” link. The second aim of the current research was to test this idea.

In the present study, we investigated the relation between self-control and life satisfaction as well as the mediating effect of coping in the Chinese context. In order to enhance the generalizability of the findings, two different samples (i.e., university students and employees) were used. In addition, sex and socioeconomic status (SES) was included as covariate because life satisfaction is found to be influenced by these demographic variables (for a review, see Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2009). In sum, we hypothesized that: (1) self-control was positively related to life satisfaction; and (2) positive coping mediated the association between self-control and life satisfaction. However, we did not have prediction about whether negative coping was a mediator due to inconsistent findings.

## **Method**

### **Participants and procedures**

The current research consisted of two samples. Sample 1 was 525 Chinese undergraduates (206 males, 319 females;  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.06$  years,  $SD = .97$ ) recruited from Guangzhou, a developed city in southern China. Participants provided their consent before

completing self-report measures in the lab. Voluntary participation and anonymity were highlighted.

Sample 2 was 294 full-time employees (103 males, 191 females;  $M_{\text{age}} = 28.36$  years,  $SD = 6.30$ ) recruited via an online advertisement. They were from various regions of China and different categories of profession. They provided their consent prior to answering self-report measures online to enter a drawing for 100 RMB (approximately 15 U.S. Dollars). Anonymity was emphasized.

## Measures

*Self-control.* Tangney et al.'s (2004) *Brief Self-Control Scale* was utilized to assess participants' levels of self-control. This scale consists of 13 items rated on a five-point scale (from "1 = not like me at all" to "5 = very much like me"). A higher score indicates better self-control. This scale has been used in different Chinese samples, showing good psychometric properties (e.g., Situ, Li, & Dou, 2015). In the current study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .77 and .81 for sample 1 and 2, respectively.

*Coping.* The *Simplified Coping Style Questionnaire* was used to measure participants' positive and negative coping by asking them how often they would like to use certain form of strategy to cope with stress. This is an indigenous scale developed in China (Xie, 1998). It consists of 20 items, 12 items of which belong to positive coping (e.g., seeking other's help) and 8 items of which belong to negative coping (e.g., using substance). All items are rated on a four-point scale (from "0 = never use" to "3 = frequently use"); a higher score indicates that people more frequently use positive or negative coping strategies. This scale has shown good psychometric properties in Chinese population (e.g., Xie, 1998). Regarding sample 1, the

Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .82 and .69 for positive and negative coping, respectively. With respect to sample 2, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .79 and .70 for positive and negative coping, respectively.

*Life satisfaction.* The Chinese version of the Diener and colleagues' (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) *Satisfaction With Life Scale*<sup>2</sup> was used to assess participants' life satisfaction. It consists of 5 items rated on a seven-point scale (from "1 = strongly disagree" to "7 = strongly agree"). A higher score indicates more satisfaction with life. This scale has shown good psychometric properties in Chinese population (e.g., Kong, Zhao, & You, 2012). In the current study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .84 and .87 for sample 1 and 2, respectively.

*Socioeconomic status (SES).* Family SES of sample 1 was assessed in terms of their parents' education and occupation in line with Hollingshead (1975)'s index of social status. Four indexes (i.e., father's education level and occupation; mother's education level and occupation) were transformed into  $z$  scores and averaged, with a higher score indicating higher family SES. Regarding sample 2, participants' own SES was assessed in terms of their education level and annual income. These two indicators were transformed into  $z$  scores and averaged. A higher score represents higher SES.

## **Data analyses**

SPSS 18.0 was used to analyze the data. First, descriptive statistics were performed to eyeball the levels of participants' self-control, coping, and life satisfaction. Second, correlation analyses were carried out to capture the associations among self-control, coping, life satisfaction, and SES. The correlation coefficient of .10, .30, and .50 represents small, medium, and large effect size, respectively (Cohen, 1992). Last, mediation analyses were

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<sup>2</sup> The Chinese version of the SWLS can be obtained at <http://internal.psychology.illinois.edu/~ediener/SWLS.html>

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conducted using PROCESS recommended by Hayes (2013). Both total effect model and indirect effect model were provided. In the total effect model, demographic variables and self-control were included in the model; whereas in the indirect effect model, positive and negative coping were added so that one can observe the changes in the relation of self-control and life satisfaction as well as the explained variance. We drew 5000 bootstrapping sample and used 95% confidence interval to judge the significance of mediation. A significant mediating effect was justified if the 95% confidence interval excluded 0.

### **Results**

Means and standard deviations were displayed in Table 1. Pearson correlation analyses were carried out and the results were displayed in Table 2. Across both samples, self-control was positively related to life satisfaction. Self-control was positively and negatively related to positive and negative coping, respectively. Positive coping was positively related to life satisfaction whereas the relation of negative coping and life satisfaction was not significant. In addition, SES was found to be positively associated with life satisfaction as well.

[INSERT TABLE 1 & 2 ABOUT HERE]

Mediation analyses were conducted to examine the mediating effect of coping between self-control and life satisfaction using PROCESS (model 4). In these analyses, self-control and life satisfaction served as independent and dependent variable, respectively. Positive and negative coping were the two mediators and demographic variables (i.e., sex and SES) were treated as covariates. Results were displayed in Table 3.

[INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]



Regarding sample 1 (Figure 1), the results showed that after controlling sex and family SES, self-control was positively related to life satisfaction ( $B = 2.62$ ,  $S.E. = .49$ ,  $t = 5.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ). After positive and negative coping were included in the model, the association between self-control and life satisfaction decreased but such relation was still significant ( $B = 2.34$ ,  $S.E. = .51$ ,  $t = 4.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Results of bootstrapping revealed that the mediating effect of positive coping was significant (Estimate = .28,  $S.E. = .12$ , 95% CI = [.08, .57]), but the mediating effect of negative coping was not significant (Estimate = -.01,  $S.E. = .11$ , 95% CI = [-.23, .19]).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

With respect to sample 2, after controlling sex and SES, self-control was significantly related to life satisfaction ( $B = 2.68$ ,  $S.E. = .64$ ,  $t = 4.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Inclusion of positive and negative coping reduced the association between self-control and life satisfaction but did not change the significance ( $B = 2.22$ ,  $S.E. = .70$ ,  $t = 3.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Results of bootstrapping indicated that the mediating effect of positive coping was significant (Estimate = .74,  $S.E. = .26$ , 95% CI = [.33, 1.38]), whereas the mediating effect of negative coping was not significant (Estimate = -.28,  $S.E. = .24$ , 95% CI = [-.85, .12]).

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

### **Discussion**

The current research sought to investigate the relation between self-control and life satisfaction and the mediating effect of coping in the Chinese context. Findings across two different samples provided converging evidence that self-control was positively related to life satisfaction and that this link was partially mediated by positive coping.

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A recent research has supported a positive relation of self-control and life satisfaction among Chinese university students (Ouyang et al., 2015). The present study confirmed this relation among both university students and employees, which highlights the importance of self-control in characterizing Chinese people's well-being. It should be noted that although the correlations among self-control, coping, and life satisfaction were significant, the effect sizes were generally small according to Cohen's (1992) standard.

Beyond the direct relation, we further found that positive coping partially mediated the link of self-control and life satisfaction. This indicates that self-control is not only directly related to life satisfaction, but it also contributes to more life satisfaction in part through directing individuals to use more positive ways to cope with stress. This may be because that positive coping increases personal growth (Yu et al., 2013) which is considered an important source of life satisfaction (Bauer & McAdams, 2004), thus adding to their life satisfaction. The concrete reason why negative coping is not a significant mediator is currently unknown and further research is needed. In addition, the mediating effects of positive coping found in the present study were partial, suggesting that there are multiple factors that could account for the relation of self-control and life satisfaction.

This study bears three implications for future research and practice. First, although the relation of self-control and life satisfaction is consistent, its underlying mechanism is still less commonly explored. Therefore, it would be worthwhile for future research to continue investigating other possible mediators of this link. Second, parallel research has supported a positive relation of self-control and life satisfaction in both individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Future research may employ cross-cultural design to examine whether this link is

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moderated by cultures as both life satisfaction and self-control are considered to vary in different cultures (Leung & Fan, 1996; Lu et al., 2001; Seeley & Gardner, 2003). Last, the finding that positive coping partially mediates the link of self-control and life satisfaction provides practitioners a way to promote Chinese adults' life satisfaction, namely by teaching them to use positive ways to cope with stress.

Given that the measures of self-control, coping, and life satisfaction were self-report, future studies using multiple approaches are desirable. Nevertheless, this research supports the importance of self-control in individual life satisfaction for both university students and adults in the Chinese context. Moreover, this study provides early evidence that the relation between self-control and life satisfaction can be partly explained by positive coping, which to some extent deepens our understanding of *how* people high in self-control have more life satisfaction.

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Table 1 Means and standard deviations of self-control, coping style, life satisfaction, and SES

	Sample 1 ( <i>N</i> = 525)		Sample 2 ( <i>N</i> = 294)	
	M	SD	M	SD
1 self-control	2.93	.53	3.27	.55
2 positive coping	24.88	5.49	35.02	5.49
3 negative coping	9.48	3.80	17.28	3.94
4 life satisfaction	19.37	6.16	19.23	6.46
5 SES	.00	.76	.00	.82

Note: SES of sample 1 and 2 refers to family SES and individual SES, respectively.

Table 2 Correlation of self-control, coping style, life satisfaction, and SES

	1	2	3	4	5
1 self-control	-	.32**	-.28**	.26**	.07
2 positive coping	.20**	-	.18**	.33**	.10
3 negative coping	-.20**	.07	-	.08	.01
4 life satisfaction	.24**	.17**	-.03	-	.26**
5 SES	.08	.13**	.01	.14**	-

Note: SES of sample 1 and 2 refers to family SES and individual SES, respectively.

Correlation coefficients on the below and above diagonal are for sample 1 (*N* = 525) and 2 (*N* = 294), respectively. \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 3 Examination of the mediating effect of coping

		Total effect model				Indirect effect model			
		B	S.E.	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	B	S.E.	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Sample 1 ( <i>N</i> = 525)	Sex	-.07	.54	-.13	.893	-.32	.54	-.59	.553
	Family SES	1.02	.34	2.96	.003	.91	.35	2.65	.008
	Self-control	2.62	.49	5.33	< .001	2.34	.51	4.60	< .001
	Positive coping					.13	.05	2.70	.007
	Negative coping					.01	.07	.09	.928
	R <sup>2</sup>	.072				.085			
	ΔR <sup>2</sup>	.072				.013			
Sample 2 ( <i>N</i> = 294)	Sex	2.70	.73	3.71	< .001	2.24	.72	3.13	.002
	SES	1.87	.43	4.40	< .001	1.73	.41	4.18	< .001
	Self-control	2.68	.64	4.18	< .001	2.22	.70	3.16	.002
	Positive coping					.24	.07	3.58	< .001
	Negative coping					.14	.09	1.44	.150
	R <sup>2</sup>	.165				.218			
	ΔR <sup>2</sup>	.165				.053			

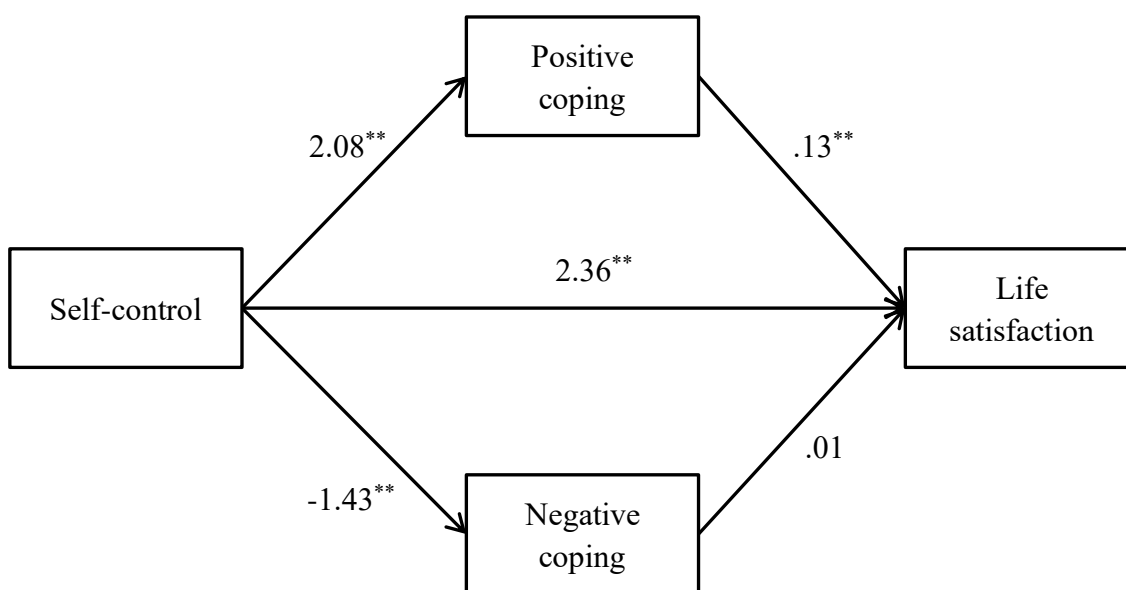


Figure 1 Mediation of coping between self-control and life satisfaction of sample 1  
 Note: Sex and family SES are controlled but not shown. Values are unstandardized. \*\*  $p < .01$ .

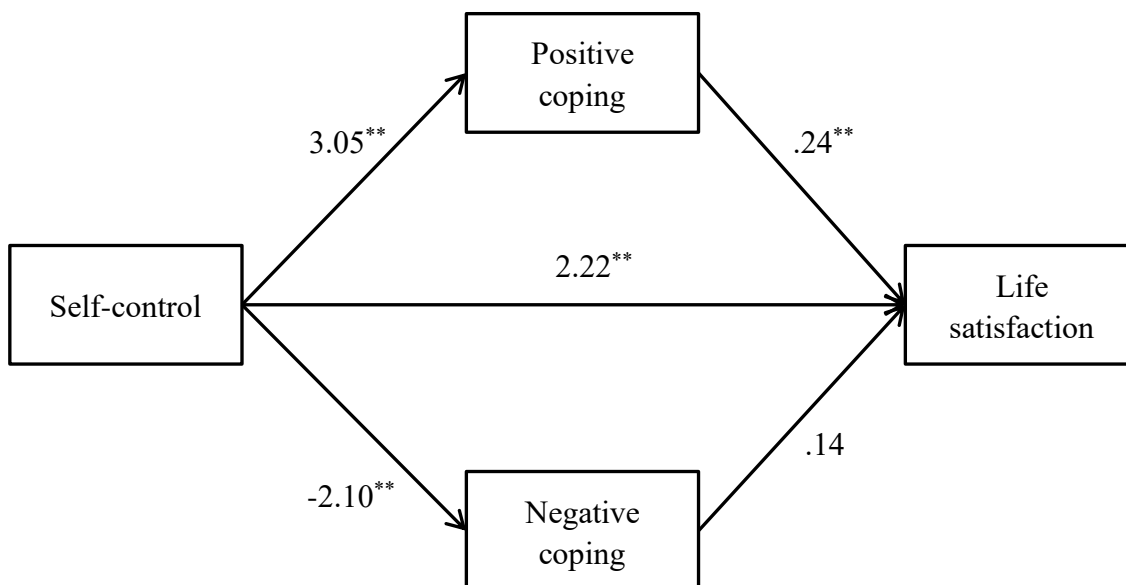


Figure 2 Mediation of coping between self-control and life satisfaction of sample 2  
 Note: Sex and SES are controlled but not shown. Values are unstandardized. \*\*  $p < .01$ .