Most people want to feel good. What people actually do to feel good, however, varies considerably. For example, some people surf, while other people sunbathe. Differences in people’s behavioral choices may be in part due to differences in affect valuation [or the affective states that people value and would ideally like to feel]. People who surf may value excitement, while those who sunbathe may value calmness. Surprisingly, little research has been conducted on affect valuation.

The notion of affect valuation could potentially account for inconsistencies between the psychological and anthropological literatures. On one hand, empirical studies in psychology suggest that affective experience has a high degree of heritability, and therefore, is biologically influenced. On the other hand, ethnographic accounts in anthropology suggest that affective experience is culturally constructed. However, a review of these literatures indicates that psychologists and anthropologists may focus on different, but related, aspects of affect. While most psychologists emphasize experienced (“real”) affect, most anthropologists emphasize valued (“ideal”) affect. Affect valuation theory proposes that: 1) “real” affect differs from “ideal” affect; 2) while personality traits may primarily influence “real” affect, cultural factors may primarily influence “ideal” affect; and 3) “ideal” affect predicts engagement in mood-enhancing behaviors (e.g., leisure activities, aesthetic preferences, substance use) as well as or better than “real” affect.

To test our theoretical predictions, my colleague Brian Knutson and I developed a reliable and valid measure of affect valuation (Affect Valuation Index, Tsai and Knutson, under review). In studies using the AVI, we have primarily focused on individuals oriented to American and East Asian cultures, because we hypothesize that cultures that emphasize being unique and standing out (i.e., American culture) value high arousal positive emotions such as excitement, whereas cultures that emphasize being like others and fitting in (i.e., East Asian culture) value low arousal positive emotions such as calmness.

Consistent with these predictions, we have observed that European Americans value excitement and other high arousal positive emotions, whereas East Asians (Beijing and Hong Kong Chinese) and East Asian Americans value calm and other low arousal positive emotions (These data were collected in collaboration with Helene Fung and Xiulan Zhang). Our findings also suggest that people want to feel better than they actually do; that personality traits (neuroticism and extraversion) account for greater variance in “real” affect than “ideal” affect, while cultural variables (self-construal, values, cultural orientation) account for greater variance in “ideal” affect than “real” affect; and that cultural variation in “ideal” affect predicts preference behavior. Currently, my students and I are examining whether developmental differences in affect valuation exist and whether affect valuation can be manipulated in the lab.

In my talk at the APS Annual Convention in Chicago, I will describe our theory of affect valuation and its empirical support in greater detail. In addition, I will discuss how this research advances our current understanding of emotion as well as its implications for assessing well-being and treating mental
disorders across cultures.