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Subjective Well-Being Across Cultures

Eunkook M. Suh
University of California, Irvine, esuh@yonsei.ac.kr

Shigehiro Oishi
University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, soishi@virginia.edu

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Abstract

All individuals strive to be happy. How they pursue this ultimate human goal, however, seems to vary in interesting ways across cultures. Three key findings have emerged from recent scientific research: 1) individualist cultures are happier than collectivists, 2) psychological attributes characterizing the self (e.g., self-esteem, self-consistency) are more relevant to the happiness of Western individualists than to the happiness of collectivists, and 3) the self-judgment of happiness is anchored on different types of cues and experiences across cultures.

Introduction

Have you ever thought about how happy you are with your life? "Of course!" might be the immediate reaction of people who have lived most of their lives in highly individualist Western cultures. In fact, the more inquisitive ones might wonder why anyone would even bother to ask such an obvious question. They have a point. Most Western cultural members are highly familiar, if not obsessed, with the notion of happiness. In the West, happiness is a common topic of conversation, the promise of commercial advertisements, and the ultimate goal of many people's lives. The idea that happiness is the most fulfilling and meaningful goal of human existence is more or less taken for granted in Western cultures, a belief that traces back as far as to the Greek philosophers.

Although the general statement that all human beings strive to be happy is true, intriguing findings emerge when researchers scrutinize happiness in more detail across cultures. Ed Diener and colleagues, for instance, have asked Chinese college students the same question mentioned above (how often do you think about happiness?). Quite interestingly, roughly 1 out of 10 of these highly educated Chinese respondents said that they have "never" thought about how happy they are about their lives. American college students, on the other hand, typically reply that they think about happiness several times a week. Even though happiness is a universally cherished goal, the degree to which it is imprinted in a person's mind seems to vary across cultures. There is much more to the story. In this chapter, some of the latest findings from the rapidly growing field of culture and subjective well-being are introduced. Additional sources on this topic can be found in Diener and Suh (1999, 2000) and Diener, Oishi, and Lucas (2003).

Subjective Well-Being

In order to conduct scientific research, first, it is imperative to have a working definition of happiness. A widely used term in the field of psychology is subjective well-being (SWB; for review, see Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Subjective well-being includes three components: 1) life satisfaction-a cognitive evaluation of one's overall life, 2) the presence of positive emotional experiences, and 3) the absence of negative emotional experiences. Thus, a person is described as enjoying a high level of SWB if she is satisfied with her life, frequently experiences positive emotions (such as joy, affection), and seldom feels negative emotions (such as anxiety, sadness). One hallmark of SWB is that it is judged from the individual's own perspective. Thus, in SWB, a person's ***subjective*** perception about her own well-being is of paramount importance, which is shaped in complex ways by cultural factors.

Some Cultures are Happier than Others

There are substantial differences in the mean levels of SWB reported by different cultural members. Table 1 summarizes life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect means across nations. The data come from a sample that consisted of more than six thousand

college students from 43 nations (for more details, see Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). The mean life satisfaction ratings, on a 7-point scale, ranged from 3.3 (China) to 5.4 (Netherlands) in this sample. Nations not only differ in how much SWB they actually experience, but they also have different opinions on the ideal levels of SWB (the right columns under "Norm"). Brazilians (6.2 on a 7-point scale), for example, think it is very desirable to experience positive emotions, whereas the Chinese (4.5) show comparably less enthusiasm for the idea of feeling positive emotions. One notable finding is that, across nations, the norms for positive affect correlate significantly with the level of positive affect experienced in everyday life. For instance, students in nations that report high mean levels of positive affect (high PA experience) also tend to think it is very desirable to experience positive emotions (high PA norm). Such a relation between actual experience and norm does not exist for negative affect, although the exact reasons are unclear at present.

Why do cultural differences in SWB occur? Traditionally, many scholars have pointed out the fact that happier nations are simply wealthier. No doubt, there is a strong association between income (e.g., GNP) and SWB level across nations. However, this "richer = happier" argument is incomplete. One thorny issue is that rich nations are not only economically better off, but they also possess various non-materialistic characteristics that contribute to SWB (e.g., more stable, democratic government, more human rights). Hence, it is not completely clear whether the link between national wealth and SWB is caused by material affluence per se, or by other positive qualities afforded by wealthy societies. Second, there are clusters of nations that challenge the income explanation. The SWB reports of relatively affluent East Asian nations are among the lowest in the world (Japan, being a prime example), whereas individuals in some Latin American nations (e.g., Puerto Rico) report SWB much higher than their economic standings suggest. Finally, but very importantly, after a certain income level, economic factors lose their predictive power. Once a nation becomes rich enough to fulfill most people's basic needs (food, shelter), further economic prosperity does not guarantee further increase of SWB. More and more countries around the globe are surpassing this "threshold" level of income (GNP of roughly $10,000), which means pure economic models will have limited success in predicting national differences in SWB in coming years.

Individualism, Collectivism, and Subjective Well-Being

Variables at the level of entire cultures have recently offered important complementary perspectives on national differences in SWB. One cultural dimension related strongly to SWB is individualism/collectivism. In highly individualist cultures (e.g., U. S., Western/Northern Europe), each individual's right, freedom, and unique feelings are emphasized over the expectations and needs of an in-group, such as family. In more collectivist societies (e.g., East Asia, Central/South America), the goals and needs of a significant in-group tend to take priority over the thoughts, values, and preferences of an individual. Theoretically, there are costs as well as benefits associated with personal freedom. In individualist cultures (high freedom), people freely choose personal goals and

lifestyles, but because of the lack of strong social support, adverse life events might have severe negative consequences (such as suicide). In collectivist cultures, on the other hand, strong social support may buffer stressful events, but the drawback is that there is less freedom to pursue personally rewarding goals.

Table 1. Subjective Well-Being: Mean and Norm Across Nations

	Actual Experience			Norms		
Nation	LS	PA	NA	LS	PA	NA
China	3.3	2.6	2.4	4.0	4.5	3.8
Lithuania	3.7	3.6	2.8	5.5	5.8	3.1
Korea	3.8	3.8	2.9	5.0	5.2	3.9
Turkey	3.8	4.2	3.4	5.3	5.4	3.0
Hong Kong	3.9	3.2	2.8	5.1	5.3	2.9
Bahrain	4.0	4.0	3.2	4.7	5.4	3.8
Ghana	4.0	3.8	2.7	5.1	5.4	2.7
Taiwan	4.0	3.8	2.5	5.8	5.5	2.7
Japan	4.0	3.6	2.8	5.1	5.2	3.5
Greece	4.1	3.9	3.0	5.8	5.7	2.7
Estonia	4.2	3.8	2.4	5.6	5.3	2.9
Nepal	4.2	3.9	2.6	4.8	5.1	3.5
South Africa	4.2	3.9	3.0	5.7	5.7	2.8
Guam	4.3	3.8	3.4	5.3	5.6	4.3
Nigeria	4.3	4.2	2.5	5.1	5.6	2.6
Italy	4.3	4.2	3.2	5.9	5.5	2.9
Brazil	4.3	4.2	2.8	5.8	6.2	2.3
Indonesia	4.4	3.8	2.6	5.3	5.8	3.1
Egypt	4.4	4.0	2.8	6.1	6.3	2.3
India	4.4	3.7	2.9	5.1	5.4	2.9
Spain	4.5	4.0	2.8	6.2	6.0	2.7
Argentina	4.5	4.1	2.8	5.5	5.9	3.0
Singapore	4.5	3.8	2.6	5.7	5.6	2.8
Hungary	4.5	3.8	2.8	6.0	5.6	3.5
Pakistan	4.5	4.0	2.9	5.5	5.6	2.7
Portugal	4.6	4.0	2.8	5.9	6.0	2.3
Australia	4.6	3.9	2.6	6.2	5.5	2.7
Germany	4.6	4.0	2.8	5.8	5.4	3.3
Peru	4.7	4.5	2.8	5.8	6.0	3.0
Finland	4.7	4.1	2.5	5.9	5.2	2.9
Thailand	4.7	4.3	2.9	4.9	5.2	3.1
USA	4.7	4.1	2.8	5.8	5.5	2.9
Austria	4.9	4.0	2.5	5.9	5.4	3.0
Slovenia	4.9	4.9	2.9	5.8	5.6	2.8
Denmark	5.0	3.9	2.5	5.8	5.3	3.1
Puerto Rico	5.1	4.7	3.0	6.1	6.0	2.6
Norway	5.1	4.0	2.4	6.1	5.2	2.7
Colombia	5.3	4.6	3.1	6.2	5.8	2.8
Netherlands	5.4	4.4	2.3	6.0	5.7	3.1

Actual Experience
LS = Life Satisfaction; mean response for the 7-point Satisfaction With Life Scale items (Diener, xxxx, 1985).
PA = Positive Affect; mean frequency of experiencing positive emotions (1 = "never" to 7 = "always").
NA = Negative Affect; mean frequency of experiencing negative emotions (1 = "never" to 7 = "always").
Norm
LS = Life Satisfaction; *ideal* level for the 7-point Satisfaction With Life Scale items.
PA = Positive Affect; norms for experiencing positive emotions (1 = "extremely inappropriate" to 7 = "extremely appropriate").
NA = Negative Affect; norms for experiencing negative emotions (1 = "extremely inappropriate" to 7 = "extremely appropriate").

Although there seems to be a tradeoff associated with personal freedom, in study after study researchers have found that individualist cultural members are happier than collectivist cultural members (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995). Why? Again, a popular explanation is that individualist nations are richer than collectivist nations, implying that differences in objective life conditions affecting their inhabitants account for this cultural difference. As mentioned earlier, however, there are too many affluent collectivist nations (Japan, Hong Kong) that go against this simple economic interpretation. Also, according to Diener et al., when a nation's degree of individualism is statistically controlled, income no longer predicts SWB. There clearly seem to be other reasons, besides income, that contribute to the high SWB of individualist cultures. What are they?

The answer cannot be simple, but several possibilities are worth considering (see Suh, 2000). First, when it comes to happiness, it might be more critical to have a high sense of personal choice and freedom than to have a reliable social safety net during difficult times. After all, bad life events happen only occasionally, whereas personal goals constantly affect the quality of daily experience. Another possibility is that the desire to be happy might be stronger in individualist than in collectivist cultures. In individualist cultures where much personal freedom and opportunities are available, each person is highly accountable for his happiness. Being unhappy, in such a cultural context, is indirectly admitting that one has not been able to make the most out of his life opportunities, talents, and capabilities. In many collectivist East Asian cultures, on the other hand, people are believed to have only limited control over happiness. Various factors beyond personal control, such as luck or family background, are thought to play significant roles in determining the ultimate happiness of an individual. Because the responsibility to be happy is more squarely on the person's shoulder in individualist than in collectivist cultures, it is possible that people try harder to be happy in the former culture. Being more eager to be happy, individualists might organize their lives in ways that would give them the best chance to be happy. Furthermore, when making evaluations or reports about their lives, individualists may try more, both consciously and unconsciously, to put a positive spin into them.

Although quite speculative, there is also the possibility that people living in individualist cultures might find it easier to "think" they are happier than people in collectivistic cultures. Everybody has unique strengths in certain domains. For instance, John might drive a golf ball over 300 yards, whereas Chris might make an excellent pasta dish. As long as John and Chris think that athletic talent and culinary skill, respectively, is the most worthy personal quality, they will both feel good about themselves. That is, one effective way to feel positive about the self is to base self-worth on a domain in which the person excels at. By the same token, it is easier for people to think they are happy if they are freely allowed to base their happiness on domains/experiences they feel particularly good about (e.g., "because I have a great girlfriend," "because I like my job"). The amount of flexibility exercised in the selection of happiness standards, however, seems to vary across cultures.

A defining spirit of individualism is that it greatly respects and even encourages the thoughts and opinions of each single individual. Therefore, in individualist cultures, each

person's unique, self-tailored standard or reasons for happiness are highly respected by others. "If John says he is happy because of X (whatever the private reason may be), he is a happy man" is how individualist cultural members typically react to a person who declares to be happy. In collectivist cultures, however, the types of achievements that are worthy of personal happiness are more often decided by the ingroup or the society, rather than by each individual. For instance, many Korean teenagers believe there is only one specific achievement that would make them and others truly happy-getting an admission to a top university. These socially established qualifications of happiness are very specific and concrete, which means many people who do not meet this condition are bound to feel dissatisfied and unhappy. Because of this restricted personal freedom in the selection of happiness standards, collectivists may find it more difficult than individualists justify their happiness.

In sum, when it comes to SWB, having a great deal of personal freedom might be very important. In individualist cultures where there is much personal freedom, people have a better chance to choose and invest their time in personally rewarding life projects, evaluate their happiness using more self-flattering standards, and try harder to view their lives in a positive angle. These ideas need to be tested rigorously with much more empirical data. Nevertheless, they offer intriguing insights and promising research directions for those who ask, "which cultures are happy and why?"

Correlates of Happiness

Cultures not only differ in mean levels of SWB, they also tend to base happiness on somewhat different experiences. In the past when SWB research was conducted primarily among North American participants, many researchers assumed that high self-esteem was the single most important ingredient of happiness. After all, what could be more important to happiness than having a positive self-view, that is, high self-esteem? Many Westerners might be surprised to learn, however, that the term ***self-esteem*** does not even exist in some cultures (for instance, in the Japanese, Chinese, or Korean language). We might wish to ask the question again: Is self-esteem equally critical for happiness across cultures? The answer is no, according to recent findings (Diener & Diener, 1995; Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1997). Self-esteem relates strongly with SWB in individualistic cultures, but the link becomes considerably weaker in collectivist cultures. Among female college students in India, for instance, Diener and Diener failed to find any significant association between self-esteem and SWB.

Another psychological condition traditionally viewed as very important for SWB is the possession of a consistent self-identity. All individuals think, feel, and behave somewhat differently in different social contexts (for example, when with a boyfriend versus when with a boss). Nevertheless, prominent Western psychologists have repeatedly asserted that, in order to achieve high levels of mental health, a person needs to maintain a consistent self-view across situations. This idea fits well with the dynamics of individualist cultures, where the inner self is believed to be the primary source of personal meaning and guidance. Because the self plays such a vital role in everyday life, it becomes necessary to build and

maintain a self-system that is well-organized and consistent. In collectivist cultures, however, the utmost concern of everyday life is maintaining a smooth, harmonious relationship with other people. In order to achieve this goal of interpersonal harmony, the self needs to be highly sensitive to social cues, and in many cases, adjust the self according to the needs and expectations of other people. In other words, the self is required to be quite flexible across social situations in cultures where values promoting harmony (e.g., modesty, obedience) often overshadow the importance of consistency.

Suh (2002) recently examined the consistency of Korean and American students' self-views in relation to their SWB. As predicted, the self-views of the Koreans were indeed significantly more flexible across social contexts than those of the Americans. Also, as suspected, the degree of identity consistency predicted individual's SWB level significantly better in the American than the Korean sample. The key point claimed in classic theories seems to be right-people with more consistent identity tend to enjoy higher levels of SWB. However, the classic theories might have overestimated the intrinsic psychological importance of self-consistency. In short, maintaining a consistent self-view, similar to the case of self-esteem, does not seem to be as important to SWB as mainstream psychology theories have traditionally assumed.

Yet another important psychological condition in SWB is concerned with motivation. A recent longitudinal study in the U.S. has shown, for instance, that individuals who were pursuing their goals for fun and enjoyment became happier over time when they attained their goals, whereas individuals who were pursuing their goals to please others did not become happier over time, even when they attained their goals (Sheldon & Kasser, 1998; see Ryan & Deci, 2000, for a review). Interestingly, a recent study found that Asian Americans and Japanese who were pursuing their goals to make others happy became happier over time when they attained their goals, whereas those who were pursuing their goals for fun and enjoyment did not become happier over time, even when they achieved their goals (Oishi & Diener, 2001). Using an experience sampling method (i.e., participants were beeped at random moments and completed surveys multiple times per day), Asakawa and Csikszentmihalyi (1998) found that Asian-American students were happy when they were engaging in an activity that was related to important future goals (e.g., academic achievement). On the other hand, Caucasian students were happy when they were engaging in an activity that was important to them at that moment. Furthermore, Caucasian students tended to be less happy when they were engaging in an activity that was related to important future goals. These findings suggest that (a) there are cultural variations in motivation to be happy "now" versus "in the future, " and (b) pathways to happiness seem to vary across cultures, depending on socially desirable forms of motivation.

Judgment of Life Satisfaction

Another interesting pattern of cultural difference emerges when people make judgments about their life satisfaction. Evaluating whether one's life as a whole is satisfying requires much cognitive effort. Theoretically, a person might think of all relevant life domains, figure

out how well each domain is going, and then mentally combine the evaluations into a numeric response. Rarely do individuals go through this exhaustive process. Rather, they take a mental shortcut. The most common shortcut is to rely on a specific cue or a piece of information that seems to best sum up one's overall life state.

How is this magic cue selected? It is usually chosen from a pool of self-defining cues that are chronically salient to the individual. Culture enters the picture here by determining the types of self-relevant information that are constantly present in the person's mind. In individualist cultures, internal attributes (e.g., emotions) are the key building blocks of the self and are thus easily brought to the person's attention. In collectivist cultures, social elements of the self (e.g., other people's evaluation, social norms) are more chronically salient to the individual. This cultural difference leads to a relatively straightforward prediction: Individualists might base their life satisfaction judgments heavily on their emotions, whereas collectivists might evaluate their lives frequently on the basis of normative information. This is precisely what Suh, Diener, Oishi, and Triandis (1998) found in two large international samples. The more individualist the nation, the more strongly were the life satisfaction judgments based on internal emotions. Basically, individualist cultural members seemed to adopt the logic that "if I am feeling good these days, it must mean my overall life is quite satisfying." Collectivists were less likely to follow such reasoning when evaluating their lives. In addition to emotions, collectivist cultural members tend to pay considerable amount of attention to social cues (e.g., whether significant others approve the way they live) during their life satisfaction judgments.

Conclusion

Ever since people acquired the ability to communicate with others, happiness is likely to have been a topic of debate and discussion. This very ancient concept has only recently begun to be studied through scientific means. Some of the major findings that have emerged from the young field of SWB and culture are: 1) people who inhabit individualistic cultures are happier than those who live in collectivistic societies, 2) psychological attributes characterizing the self (e.g., self-esteem, self-consistency) are more relevant to the happiness of Western individualists than to the happiness of collectivists, and 3) the self-evaluation of happiness is anchored on different types of cues and experiences across cultures. Although those who study SWB across cultures firmly believe that culture plays a pivotal role in shaping human happiness, uncomfortably little is known about the details of this important human experience that seems to make such a difference in the lives of people. A challenging, but a very exciting future lies ahead.

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About the Authors

Eunkook Suh is currently an associate professor in the Department of Psychology, Yonsei University, Seoul, South Korea.
E-mail: esuh@yonsei.ac.kr
Webpage: http://web.yonsei.ac.kr/suh/suh.html
Shigehiro Oishi is an associate professor in the Department of Psychology, University of Virginia in Charlottesville

E-mail: soishi@virginia.edu
Webpage: http://people.virginia.edu/~so5x/vita%20only%20shige%20oishi3.htm

Eunkook (Mark) Suh and Shigehiro Oishi both obtained their Ph. D. degrees in Personality and Social Psychology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Both werestudents of Dr. Ed Diener at Illinois; every March, the three regularly argued projecting college basketball games.

Questions for Discussion

1. How can we test whether people in individualistic cultures are truly happier than those in collectivistic cultures? What kind of evidence would be most crucial?
2. Will a Japanese female become happier if she moves from Japan to North America? Why or why not? Would it make any difference if it was a male who moved? Also, if an American moved to Korea, would this person be less happy than when he was in the U.S.? If this person became less happy in Korea, how do we know the change is due to "culture"? What are other alternative explanations for the change?
3. Why is desirability of negative emotion not related to the frequency of actual negative emotional experiences (cf. desirability of positive emotion was related to the actual frequency of positive emotion)?
4. According to Table 1, Americans experience more PA than Chinese and Taiwanese, but also experience more NA than Chinese and Taiwanese, as well. Which cultural group-Americans or East Asians-seem more "emotional"? What implication does this have on SWB?
5. Besides the ones discussed in this paper, what other psychological or geopolitical factors might be responsible for national differences in the mean level of happiness and correlates of happiness?
6. Identify other factors or research perspectives in cross-cultural psychology that may be helpful in understanding international differences in subjective well-being.