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Cross-cultural Study on Students' Life Satisfaction: A Pilot Study on the Sense of 'Happiness' in Finland, Bhutan, and Japan

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*The volume of happiness studies has been increasing over the last decade. This overlaps with human-centered development policy starting in the 1990s. However, most studies have focused on either college students and beyond or adults, and only a limited number of studies have explored younger cohorts, especially in cross-cultural perspectives. Since 'happiness', and 'well-being' are generally considered to be subjective, it is essential to highlight children's and adolescent's perspectives on happiness, especially with regard to school. This study examined Finland, Bhutan, and Japan for the following reasons. Finland was chosen because the students in the country achieved the highest scores in the 2006 PISA, and the educational system in this country has received wide attention. Bhutan was selected because it is famous for its Gross Happiness Index, invented by the Fourth King. Finally, Japan was selected for comparison because of the well-known academic pressure and competition that has led to *Ijime*. The results from this study indicated that while the friend facet posits more universality across the three countries, the self and family facets posited some cultural variation.*

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In social science studies, perhaps happiness, well-being, or quality of life studies are the areas that have the largest volume of research. For instance, one of the largest collections of such studies is *the World Database of Happiness* (<http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/>), 'an ongoing register of scientific research on the subjective enjoyment of life', run by Veenhoven, a Professor at Erasmus University Rotterdam. This website holds over more than 5,500 articles from over 130 countries. Another major source is *World Value Survey* (<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>) managed by the University of Michigan, which also enables access to on-line data on world value surveys since the 1990s. It is also worth noting that studies on happiness, subjective well-being and quality of life studies have been increasing since 2000. For instance, the number of papers in these three fields published after 2000 outnumbers the number published during 1969-1999 in ECONLIT literature. This is not limited to economic related literature. *Journal of Happiness Studies* (2000-), which aims to examine subjective well-being, began publishing in November 2000. Along with *Social Indicators Research* (1974-), another major journal that studies happiness, subjective well-being (SWB) and life satisfaction, and quality of life (QOL), these two journals are known as two of the most predominant journals on happiness studies.

While a wide range of previous studies have explored descriptive aspects of happiness and well-being, as well as how to scale happiness and life satisfaction

across nations (c.f. Oishi, et al., 2007; Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2006; Veenhoven & Hagerty, 2006), in the field of happiness studies, socio-cultural variations have garnered much attention because what constitutes happiness and well-being is subjective (Oishi, 2000; Arrindell & Veenhoven, 2002; Kusago, 2007). In this concept, happiness and well-being cannot presuppose universality; thus, cultural variations should be taken into consideration. Oishi, for instance, poses a critique to the two models of well-being (self-determination model of well-being and multidimensional model of psychological well-being) provided by Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser, and Deci (1996) and Ryff and Keyes (1995) (Oishi, 2000). According to Oishi, the former posits that ‘intrinsic goals’ (c.f. personal goals) will provide satisfaction to a person, and the latter argues that purpose in life and positive relations with other people determines one’s happiness and well-being (p. 88). While these two models assume ‘universality of self-regard’ (p. 89), Oishi introduces *the goal as moderator model* which posits that what constitutes happiness should rest on needs and values that may differ across cultures. After examining about 7,000 college students in 39 countries, Oishi has found cultural variations; he argues that ‘autonomy’ was more significantly positively related to life satisfaction in many ‘individualistic’ nations such as the U.S., Australia, Germany and Finland, while ‘relationship-orientation’ was positively associated with life satisfaction in collectivist nations such as China, and Taiwan.

Some studies have explored gender roles. For instance, Arrindell and Veenhoven (2002) found that people living in feminine nations where social roles for both genders are similar (c.f. Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands), their happy life expectancy (HLE) is higher than those masculine cultures where men were more expected to be assertive, ambitious and competitive than women. Overall, in the study of happiness, it has become popular to explore socio-cultural differences. However, most studies have focused on older adolescents (college students and above) or adults, and secondary and lower school-aged children have remained relatively unexplored, especially in cross-national perspectives.

For this, Gilman, Huebner, and Laughlin (2000) explain that one of the reasons for the ‘dearth of research’ for younger people is because of lack of data except for one study called *Multidimensional Student Life Satisfaction Scale* (MSLSS) by Huebner in 1994 (Gilman et al., 2000) that enables researchers to investigate children’s life satisfaction in terms of family, friends, school, living environment and self. Since school-aged children are expected to spend a large amount of time at school, it is essential to explore how children rate their school life.

Therefore, this pilot study examines three different countries, Finland, Bhutan, and Japan. These countries were selected because Finland marked one of the best academic records in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Bhutan became famous for its Gross National Happiness (GNH). Japan is also selected as a comparison country, as it has often experienced educational reform and policy changes over the last several years. It should also be noted that Finland is an individualist nation according to Oishi, and Bhutan and Japan are referred to as collectivist nations (Oishi, 2000). Thus, students in each country might show different happiness levels depending on each facet of the questionnaire.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study examines students' life satisfaction utilizing part of the 'Multidimensional Student Life Satisfaction Scale' (MSLSS) created by Huebner. The study asks students' life satisfaction in terms of family, friends, school, living environment, and self. More concretely, the research questions are as follows:

- How do students in each country evaluate their happiness in terms of family, friends, school, living environment, self?
- Are any cultural differences observed?

As noted, Finland marked quite well in PISA 2006 (1st ranks for mathematical literacy and scientific literacy tests, and 2nd rank for reading literacy), so are the Finnish students happy? Finnish children claimed one of the top ranks in the recent UNICEF children and adolescent comprehensive well-being study in 21 OECD countries in which Japanese students indicated a high rate of 'loneliness' in one of the questionnaires (UNICEF, 2007). Another previous study (Akiba, 2005) has also found that extreme academic pressure and competition have lead to *ijime*, or bullying.

Bhutan, on the other hand, has become famous for its high rank according to the Gross National Happiness (GNH), originally created during the 1980s by the Fourth King with the goal of building a better world (Denman & Namgyel, 2008). The Gross National Happiness (GNH) is composed of four pillars: 1) equitable socio-economic development, 2) environmental conservation, 3) cultural preservation and 4) good governance. The Bhutanese Constitution states that the Government of Bhutan shall 'promote conditions that will enable the pursuit of Gross National Happiness' (Article 9; 2nd principle, downloadable from <http://www.constitution.bt/>). Thus, development projects in this country have progressed based on the GNH's development four pillars, and the country established the *Centre for Bhutan Study* to enhance happiness studies in Bhutan and beyond. Similarly at the school level, *Values Education*, 'development of right thought and action' to learn compassion, integrity, respect, responsibility, and loyalty, has been encouraged by the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, Bhutan, 2007, p. 10). Influenced by the GNH as well as *Values Education*, elements of the GNH, Bhutanese students might indicate a higher level of happiness in terms of student life satisfaction survey.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Buddhism-oriented Bhutanese Gross National Happiness concept, which is based on 'valuing sustainability over materialism and development of culture that fosters a leaning society' (Denman & Namgyel, 2008, p. 479), can also be viewed as a somewhat similar concept to social capital or social connectedness framework. 'Social capital' is described as follows:

[T]he set of resources that inhere in family relations and in community social organization that are useful for the cognitive or social development of a child or young person (Coleman, 1990, p. 300).

Social capital is a norm of the social network that is needed value for growth in children, as it affects a child's cognitive and non-cognitive development, including well-being (Park, 2008; Neri & Ville, 2008). Since Bhutanese people are based on a 'collective society as nation-culture' in which the key to happiness is 'to be found in the satisfaction of non-material needs and emotional and spiritual growth' (Denman & Namgyel, 2008, p. 479), students may indicate a higher satisfaction level than students in Finland, which is referred to as 'individualistic' country. Average satisfaction rates for Bhutanese students maybe higher than those of Japanese students who generally are famous for academic pressure (Akiba, 2001) especially when the country is indicating a decline in life satisfaction since the early 2000s shown in the Cabinet's *Survey of Lifestyles and Needs* (Kusago, 2007).

DATA COLLECTIONS AND METHODS

Data utilized in this pilot study is an adjusted version of the Multi-dimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Survey (MSLSS). The MSLSS data was designed to model a 'multi-contextual profile of children's life satisfaction' and assess their overall life satisfaction. The MSLSS has demonstrated high rates of reliability, yielding alpha coefficients of 0.9-0.77 (Gilman et al., 2000, p. 138). Therefore, utilizing this form can be considered valid. Due to time restrictions, the author utilized a shorter version of the questionnaire asking 18 questions choosing from each dimension (family, 3 items; friends, 4 items; school, 4 items; living environment, 4 items; and self, 3 items (see appendix). Following the guideline by Huebner, the original designer of the form, responses are given on a 6-point likert scale: *strongly agree, moderately agree, mildly agree, mildly disagree, moderately disagree, and strongly disagree*. In addition to positively-keyed items, the form also included four negatively-keyed items, which seems to have confused some students who were not used to this type of questions, especially in Bhutan.

The questionnaires were conducted in English in Finland and Bhutan, whereas in Japan the questionnaire was conducted in Japanese. We observed that some students in Bhutan in particular are not used to this kind of evaluation survey, so some students did not understand some of the terms, such as 'evaluated'. The questionnaire forms were recoded after they were collected.

Another limitation of our study is inconsistency of the objective students. For instance, in Finland, we conducted our survey at a summer school for high school students. Students were between 16-19 years old, and we were able to obtain 24 valid answer forms ($N_m=9$, $N_f=13$, missing $N=2$). In Bhutan, we visited two public junior high schools; one in Timphu, the capital of Bhutan, and the other in Paro, and collected 143 valid questionnaire forms from 8th and 9th grade students ($N_m=51$, $N_f=70$, gender missing $N=22$). In Japan, the questionnaire form was given at a private male-only junior high school, and 106 valid forms from 8th grade students were obtained. The average ages for the Finland and Bhutan students were 17.3 years old and 15.3 years old, respectively. Therefore, the students' age varied by country.

After the questionnaire forms were collected, they were analyzed with several statistical analysis methods: summary statistics, t-test, correlation, reliability analysis and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA).

FINDINGS

Reliability

Reliability analysis was first conducted for each dimension of the questionnaire. Reliability ranged from 0.863-0.407 for Finland, 0.674-0.256 for Bhutan and 0.852-0.618 for Japan. The low rate for Bhutan seems to be attributable to the negatively-keyed questions that were not necessarily answered appropriately.

Correlation

The results from three countries indicate some differences in the correlation matrix. In Finland, considered an 'individualist' country in which autonomy is important, *self* facets have the highest correlations with *living environment* ($r=0.617, p<0.01$), *family* ($r=0.558, p<0.01$), and *friends* ($r=0.493, p<0.01$). On the other hand, in Bhutan, considered a collectivist country or relationship-oriented country, *school* facets were critical as it was positively associated with all other facets; *self* ($r=0.302, p<0.001$), *family* ($r=0.294, p<0.001$), *living environment* ($r=0.285, p<0.01$), and *friends* ($r=0.235, p<0.01$). In other word, those who indicated positive reactions to *school* facets also showed positive responses to other facets. Conversely, it is worth noting that among Japanese students a positive correlation was found between *school* and *friends* ($r=0.640, p<0.01$) and *self* ($r=0.382, p<0.01$), but not with other facets such as *family* or *living environment*. This also reflects cultural difference where physical and psychological distance from school to home is quite close, whereas for Japanese students who commute to this private school, family and living environment could be physically and psychologically separated from their school.

Gender difference

According to the results of the independent t-test from Finland, only Q16 ('I like myself') indicated gender difference. Male students' results are statistically significantly higher than that of female students ($Mm=5.33, Mf=4.38, t=2.24, df=20, p<0.05$). Similarly in Bhutan, only one question, Q11 ('learn a lot at school'), indicated gender difference. Female students showed a slightly but significantly higher score ($Mf=5.78$) than that of male students ($Mm=5.43, t=2.179, df=116, p<0.05$).

Comparison of the three countries (Analysis of Variance)

Bhutanese students have overall higher scores than Finnish or Japanese students in family, school, and self items. But the results from each category seem to posit some cultural differences. First in regard to the family facet, Bhutanese students generally had significantly higher scores than Japanese students (c.f. Q2: 'members of my family talk nicely to one another'). This may be due to Bhutanese social capital or family connectedness that has been fostered as part of GNH. On the contrary, although there are slight but significant differences, the *friends* facet posits some universality. For each item, Q4 'I have enough friends' and Q5 'I have a lot of fun with my friends', the ranking was in the order Finland, Bhutan, and Japan; however, the mean difference is just 0.72 for Q4 and 0.67 for Q5. Further, for the negatively-keyed question Q7 'My friends are mean to me', Japanese students ranked the highest,

followed by Finnish students, implying that nearly all Japanese students answered that their friends are NOT mean to them. This seems to reflect a cultural aspect that Japanese tend to answer more positively to negatively-keyed questions (c.f. to ask ‘are you unhappy?’) rather than to positively-keyed questions (c.f. to ask ‘are you happy?’).

For the school dimension, once again Bhutanese students had significantly higher scores than Finnish or Japanese students. For instance, for Q8 ‘I look forward to going to school’, Finnish students had a significantly lower score than Bhutanese students. This also indicates that better academic performance scaled by PISA does not necessarily reflect Finnish student satisfaction with their school.

Last, but not least, the *self* facet reveals some cultural differences. For Q16 ‘I am a nice person’ and Q17, ‘Most people like me’, Finnish students gave significantly higher scores (Question 16 $M=4.75$ and Question 17 $M=4.88$, $p<0.05$) than Japanese students (Question 16 $M=3.67$ and Question 17 $M=3.40$, respectively, $p<0.05$). As noted, Finland is categorized as one of the individualist nations where autonomy and self confidence are important (Oishi, 2000). Thus, this result also reflects this cultural influence. Similarly, while Japanese students’ rating to Q17 ‘Most people like me’ was the lowest among all the other 17 items, Japanese cultural reservations should be taken into consideration; the answer would have been quite different if some negatively-keyed questions were added to this category.

SUMMARY AND AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The most culturally universal facet from this study was the friend facet, for which scores were consistently high across the three countries. Perhaps for this adolescent cohort group aged 13-18 years old, friends are an important component for happiness and quality of life. Conversely, the least culturally universal facet was *self*, followed by *Family*. Bhutanese cultural influence or the social capital concept was observed in their higher rating to family-related questions. Also, the influence of Japanese cultural reservation was reflected in its student’s answer. Negatively-keyed questions should be added to the *Self* facet in order to evaluate this effect more appropriately.

Because Finnish students in this study were high school students attending a summer school, in order to obtain similar student cohort groups, another survey is needed at regular junior high schools. In the same vein, the Japanese survey has to be conducted at public schools where both male and female students attend. Finally, while this study employed a shorter version of the MSLSS study, the full version might yield more comprehensive insights on student life satisfaction.

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Appendix



Students' Life Satisfaction Questionnaire

We would like to know how you have found your life during the past couple of months. Please think about how your life has been and circle the number (from 1 to 6) next to each statement that indicates the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement. This is not a test and your responses will be treated anonymously.

- Circle 1 if you **STONGLY DISAGREE** with the sentence;
 Circle 2 if you **MODERATELY DISAGREE** with the sentence;
 Circle 3 if you **MILDLY DISAGREE** with the sentence
 Circle 4 if you **MILDLY AGREE** with the sentence
 Circle 5 if you **MODERATELY AGREE** with the sentence

Circle 6 if you **STRONGLY AGREE** with the sentence

- | | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. My family gets along well together. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 2. Members of my family talk nicely to one another. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 3. I enjoy being at home with my family. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 4. I have enough friends. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 5. I have a lot of fun with my friends. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 6. My friends are great. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 7. My friends are mean to me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 8. I look forward to going to school. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 9. I feel bad at school. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 10. School is interesting. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 11. I learn a lot at school. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 12. I wish I lived somewhere else. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 13. I like my neighborhood. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 14. I wish I lived in a different house. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 15. There are lots of fun things to do where I live. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 16. I like myself. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 17. I am a nice person. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 18. Most people like me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

Please circle which applies to you;

Are you Male or Female? Male Female

Which grade are you in? high school 1st year 2nd year 3rd year others

Your Age? () years old