Biswas-Diener, R. (2022). Wellbeing research needs more cultural approaches. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, *12*(4), 20-26. https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v12i4.1965

ARTICLE

Wellbeing research needs more cultural approaches

Robert Biswas-Diener

Abstract: There is a long-standing tradition in social science research on wellbeing, in which scientists create national rankings of happiness. Traditionally, Nordic countries such as Sweden and Denmark tend to top these lists. Such rankings are interesting as dinner table conversation and they are perennially reported on by the media. They also reflect a specific mindset about wellbeing research. Namely, that cross-cultural comparisons are interesting, that they are possible to make, and that nations can serve as reasonable proxies for culture. Although there is an element of truth to all three suppositions, there are also legitimate limitations to them. This article argues that positive psychology and wellbeing researchers should adopt a cultural as well as a cross-cultural perspective. This requires increasing sophistication in A) the understanding of culture itself, B) the methods for investigating it, and C) the complexities of cultural research. Examples and recommendations are provided.

Keywords: culture, cross-cultural psychology, cultural psychology, wellbeing

1. Understanding culture

In the modern era, arguably few phenomena are as valued or sought after as happiness. Indeed, the everyday understanding of culture tends to focus on its most conspicuous aspects: dress, language, religion, and food. Psychologists, by contrast, tend to think about culture in terms of invisible constructs that are socialized. One example is the approach centered around the sense of self in relation to others, such as Triandis' (1995) dimensions of i*ndividualism* and *collectivism*, and Kitiyama and Markus' (1994) *interdependent self*. Another example can be found in distinguishing between internal and external views of the self, such as cultures of *face*, *honor*, and *dignity* (Kim, Cohen & Au, 2010). These approaches are so well-established that they can be the go-to modes for research comparisons, and this is especially the case with individualism-collectivism. Although these approaches have led to large bodies of research and many insights into culture, there is much yet to learn.

It may be advantageous for wellbeing researchers to reflect more broadly on what, exactly, culture is. Biswas-Diener and Thin (2021) draw on cultural anthropology to suggest that there are three distinct ways view culture:

1. *Progressive cultivation*—In English, there is a tradition of using the word "cultured" to suggest refinement through education. The distinction between "high art" and "street art" is an example of progressive cultivation. Because of its links to formal education, this understanding of culture has become conflated with social class and has, historically, been the basis of prejudice and colonial attitudes toward those who are "uncultured."
2. *Ways of life*—This understanding of culture refers to distinct patterns of belief and

Robert Biswas-Diener
Positive Acorn
robert@positiveacorn.com

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behavior that are shared among members of a group. There is an assumption in this approach that there are geographical and ethnic distinctions in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. This is the primary approach to culture adopted by wellbeing researchers.

3. *Shared learning/Enculturation*--- Whereas "ways of life" is a noun, enculturation is a verb. This approach to culture emphasizes the dynamic processes of learning local norms. Examples include parents modeling appropriate emotional expression, immigrants adopting local styles of dress, and new employees learning the corporate culture.

Wellbeing researchers will primarily be concerned with culture as a way of life and as an enculturated process of learning. Distinguishing between these two approaches can benefit wellbeing science. The ways of life approach is particularly suited to making wellbeing comparisons across cultures while enculturation is well-suited to understanding wellbeing as a process.

This distinction in non-trivial in that it can help bridge debates within the research literature. For example, researchers repeatedly find—in the *ways of life* approach—that individualists report higher happiness than do collectivists (egs., Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995; Hofstede, 2001). Many explanations have been offered for this finding, including norms for emotional experience and expression (Diener, Suh, Smith & Shao (1995) and autonomy (Diener and Diener, 1995). Despite a large body of evidence pointing to the wellbeing benefits of individualism, critics have argued that many programs of research on the topic do not adequately account for cultural distinctiveness. For example, Heine and colleagues suggest that, in Japan, the educational system emphasizes an enculturation process, *hansei* (self-reflection with an eye on improving past performance). Wellbeing in this context, then, might not be best measured by general life satisfaction or the experience of positive emotions. Instead, processes related to continuous self-improvement, such as effort and perseverance, might be overlooked in wellbeing metrics. Measuring subjective experience such as satisfaction alongside culturally appropriate processes such as duty or self-improvement might, ultimately, paint a more robust and inclusive portrait of wellbeing.

2. Cultural and cross-cultural wellbeing studies

Cross-cultural psychology is principally concerned with making comparisons across cultures in an effort to investigate universals and differences. To do so, researchers employ standard measures—often quantitative surveys—to establish a common unit of measurement. For example, my colleagues and I employed surveys, memory measures, peer reports, and experience sampling to better understand the experience of emotion in Japan, India, and the United States (Scollon, Diener, Oishi & Biswas-Diener, 2004). Although we used quantitative measures of universal emotional experience, we were also sensitive to the presence of indigenous emotional experience. Therefore, alongside measures of joy, worry, and guilt, we included local emotions such as *shitashima* (in our Japanese sample) and *sukhi* (in our Indian sample). Using hierarchical cluster analysis, we found that the indigenous emotions grouped with their expected pleasant or unpleasant universal emotional counterparts. In the end, this methodological approach allowed us to better understand differences in the experience of emotion. We discovered, for instance, that Hispanic-Americans experienced more frequent and more intense positive emotions than did their Asian-American counterparts. What's more, participants in our Japanese sample recalled significantly more negative emotion than did members of the other samples. Despite the limitations of the study, such as employing student samples, this study is a good example of exploratory research upon which future wellbeing researchers can build. By providing initial evidence for cultural differences in the experience and recall of emotion, future researchers can ask more pointed and more sophisticated questions. Thus, cross-cultural psychology is valuable in creating a broad foundation for understanding cultural universals and relative differences.

Cultural psychology, by contrast, seeks to evaluate a phenomenon within a culture—to understand local definitions, manifestations, and variability, without regard for comparisons to other cultures (Adamopolous & Lonner, 2001). An example of this can be seen in the research by Dzokoto (2020), who investigated local theory of mind in Ghanaian Akan-speakers. Dzokoto used qualitative interviews, folkloric analysis of local proverbs, and linguistic analysis to identify common local themes in theory of mind. Across these analyses, she found 4 themes related to understanding the nature of the mind. These are: A) planning—the mind is used for planning and problem-solving, B) moral valence—the mind can gravitate toward good or bad intentions, C) porosity—the mind can be porous, merging with other selves or the cosmos, and D) physical manifestations of the mind such as feeling hot or trembling. Dzokoto’s research is inclusive in that it allows her local informants to dictate the definition and understanding of the concepts of interest. Although it qualitative, it provides insights that can direct future research including cross-cultural comparisons. Future wellbeing researchers, for instance, might be interested in investigating the physical sensations associated with wellbeing and how these might differ across cultures. Thus, cultural approaches provide additional insights into local culture and can be a springboard for cross-cultural comparisons. Thin (2018) summarizes this distinction by saying that cross-cultural approaches are used by wellbeing researchers to answer the question “how happy are people?” while cultural approaches are used to answer the question “how are people happy?”

Beside the conceptual distinctiveness of cultural and cross-cultural psychology, they also tend to differ in research methodology. Cross-cultural comparisons are more readily made through the use of standard quantitative measures and this requires relatively large samples to obtain adequate statistical power. This means that cross-cultural investigations of wellbeing often employ frameworks and measures created in Western societies and use the convenience sampling of college students or large international surveys that use relatively few items. For instance, Diener and Diener (1995), recruited more than 13 thousand college students from more than 30 nations to investigate the relationship between individualism and life satisfaction. The use of college students, in this instance, allows for quasi-experimental control of important variables such as income and education but it also limits the generalizability of these results. Cultural psychology, by contrast, is more likely to employ interviews or other qualitative approaches. Cultural psychology is also more likely to have a multidisciplinary focus, bridging topics such as anthropology, religious studies, folkloric studies, women’s studies, and sociology.

Although these two traditions of research have distinctive goals and methods, they can be combined. An example of this can be found in Biswas-Diener and Diener’s (2001) investigation of wellbeing among people living in impoverished conditions in Kolkata, India. To prepare to collect data with this difficult-to-access and highly sensitive population, the researchers conducted preliminary investigations to better understand the cultural context. This included a one-month trip to India for this specific purpose. During this trip, the researchers conducted interviews in two cities with people from a wide range of backgrounds (taxi drivers, domestic workers, postal employees, etc.). We asked about definitions and ideals of happiness, and about the relative importance of relationships, income, and other variables that might correlate with wellbeing.

These interviews provided the context to help us make better decisions about our measurement strategy. For instance, we initially wanted to inquire about satisfaction with various material resources such as income, food, and housing. After better understanding the cultural context of India, however, we decided to add a question about satisfaction with privacy and another about crowding. The people in our samples were relatively dissatisfied with their privacy, and we replicated this by using cross-cultural comparisons with samples of other groups of homeless and impoverished people (Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2005). In addition, we discovered that among "pavement dwellers" (those living on sidewalks and railway platforms), crowding predicted life satisfaction, but in the opposite of the expected direction. That is, the more people a person shared their plot of sidewalk with others, the higher was their life satisfaction. It is possible that the social benefits of living with friends and family can buffer one against the dire effects of poverty. We would not have thought to include such measures and so would not have derived these results, had we not integrated a cultural component into our quantitative research.

3. The Complexities of Cultural Research in Wellbeing

For wellbeing researchers proposing to undertake investigations with a more cultural orientation, several issues should be considered. The considerations are, of course, too numerous to discuss here. I will avoid general commentary on qualitative methods and similar discussions that can easily be found elsewhere. Instead, I will focus on four issues specific to the cultural study of wellbeing:

1. *Ideal wellbei*ng—Any investigation of wellbeing should consider the addition of data collection on local definitions and understandings of wellbeing. Collecting qualitative data on this topic allows researchers to add items alongside established measures to expand the scope of the study and include more sensitivity to cultural contexts. One common way of soliciting such information is to ask participants about their understanding of "ideal wellbeing." One example of this is using the "free listing" technique in which participants freely list answers to "what makes you happy?" (Reyes- Garcia, 2012). In a free listing of happiness among the Tsimame' (Brazilian Amazon), Reyes-Garcia found that 69% of her informants mentioned spending time with family. We might expect something similar with almost any cultural sample. Reyes-Garcia also found that 40% of her informants mentioned drinking *shocdye'* (beer) which is an important aspect of their social and religious fabric. This unusual local finding highlights the importance attending to rituals and behavior as an important and often overlooked aspect of wellbeing. Another method to get at ideals of wellbeing is to have people envision an ideal citizen in their society (one who has a good quality of life and who is well-respected). Then, ask the participant to describe the happiness of that person in terms of "what that ideal person might experience" and "what other people might notice about their happiness."
2. *Happiness processes*—Global judgments of life and reports of emotional experience are, by far, the most common means of measuring wellbeing (egs, Jebb, Morrison, Tay & Diener, 2020; Kim-Pietro, Diener, Tamir, Scollon & Diener, 2005). Although these measures are well-established, there have been many other aspects of wellbeing that have been largely overlooked by researchers. For example, doing one's duty, experiencing a sense of belonging, feeling that one is improving, enjoying respect, and feeling "in harmony" are all concepts that might be of interest to wellbeing

researchers. Joshanloo (2019) offers an interesting example of this by looking at the fragility of happiness, the potential of suffering to be transformative, and other processes that typically escape the attention of wellbeing researchers. Although there are studies that employ alternative concepts, they are relatively rare, and too rarely used in conjunction with life satisfaction or other more common measures.

3. *Academic imperialism*—It is not controversial to suggest that wellbeing researchers in general, and those with a cultural interest specifically, are motivated, in part, by curiosity and also a desire to uncover potentially helpful insights. Even so, the vast majority of research is housed in more affluent societies. This results in Western, affluent researchers collecting data from (sometimes) disenfranchised populations. The resulting publications provide benefit to the researcher, the university, and the field of psychology more immediately than they have a downstream positive effect on the populations of interest themselves. This, at its worst, can be seen as widening the knowledge and benefit gap between groups. In one example of an effort to combat this trend, Biswas-Diener and Diener (2001) held public lectures on the results of wellbeing research with people living in a slum area in which they were collecting data. The lecture was held after the data was collected so as not to influence it, and there was a facilitated discussion about the potential local uses of this knowledge. In addition, we worked with local non-profits to funnel participant compensation in ways that might benefit the community as a whole. Wellbeing researchers need to broadly consider how they compensate their participants across cultures, with individual payment as only a single option for doing so.
4. *Finding an Outlet for Publication*—In wellbeing studies in general, and in positive psychology specifically, there is a preference for quantitative analyses. Even when qualitative methods are used, they are often better respected when they are treated quantitatively. Subscribers to top-tier journals in psychology will note that there are relatively few qualitative-only publications. Another potential obstacle to publishing cultural wellbeing research is its inherently interdisciplinary nature. Reviewers sometimes request a clear theoretical basis for a study and this is not always a good fit for descriptive studies of the type that cultural investigations typically are. Culturally inclusive research on wellbeing requires journals, such as the *International Journal of Wellbeing*, that take a favorable view of such approaches.

4. Concluding notes on cultural research of wellbeing

There are increasing calls within wellbeing studies to have more inclusive measures (Lambert, et al., 2020). Unfortunately, such efforts are hampered by a relative lack of emphasis on cultural approaches to research. Ultimately, cultural approaches to studying wellbeing are an act of humility. Although we have made clear advances in our understanding of measurement and methods, we may have rushed to closure on frameworks for understanding wellbeing. To fully understand this concept, we need to listen better to lay beliefs about wellbeing. Cultural approaches to investigating wellbeing is also an area of terrific promise. It provides opportunities to collaborate with a wider range of colleagues, to establish psychology in regions where it is not well-established, and to greatly expand our understanding of wellbeing.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

Authors

Robert Biswas-Diener
Positive Acorn
robert@positiveacorn.com

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to acknowledge Nadezhda Lyubchik for her contributions to this article.

Publishing Timeline

Received 30 September 2021
Revised version received 12 January 2022
Accepted 20 February 2022
Published 1 November 2022

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