Predictors of Subjective Well-Being Across Cultures

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Abstract:

We provide an overview of well-documented factors that predict and explain national and cultural differences in happiness. A brief history of the culture and happiness research is offered, followed by a literature summary on how cultural variations in happiness is related with objective life conditions, lay cultural beliefs of happiness, emotion patterns, characteristics of the self, and excessive concerns of social evaluation in East Asian cultures. We also briefly comment on findings from the culture-person fit research, and introduce recent biological and ecological papers that may point to new research directions for the culture and happiness field.

Keywords: subjective well-being, culture, self, emotion

Culture, as famously remarked by Durkheim (1895), is in many ways like "air." It permeates our mind and has a profound influence on our beliefs, feelings, values, and concerns about tomorrow. Yet, like air, culture rarely enters into our consciousness. It shapes our mind so thoroughly and naturally that being aware of its omnipresent influence on our mind is usually difficult.

This "invisible" culture started to draw the attention of subjective well-being (SWB) researchers in the early 1990s, the period that roughly overlapped with the publication of landmark papers on culture and self (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). Important empirical foundations were laid, raising excitement and justifications for the study of culture and happiness. For instance, significant mean differences in happiness found between nations could not be attributed to simple methodological artifacts (Diener, Suh, Smith, & Shao, 1995), and longstanding determinants of happiness found in Western samples, such as self-esteem, were surprisingly weak predictors in non-Western samples (Diener & Diener, 1995). An edited volume (Diener & Suh, 2000), an *Annual Review of Psychology* article (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003), and a special issue of the *Journal of Happiness Studies* (Suh & Oishi, 2004) were devoted exclusively to the topic of culture and SWB. These works, in a sense, sprayed color to the once invisible culture, carving an exciting new niche in happiness research.

Now, most researchers find it quite obvious that culture plays a critical role in shaping virtually every aspect of happiness—how happiness itself is conceptualized, which life experiences are prioritized, how they are combined into an overall happiness judgment, preferred type of happiness state (low versus high arousal), to name a few. In addition to the development of more sophisticated research questions, lately, an unprecedented amount of large international datasets released by research organizations (e.g., Gallup, World Values Survey) have become available for happiness researchers. Thanks to these changes, cultural and national difference has now become a vibrant research field in happiness.

Given the huge volume of accumulated studies, our review of this topic is inevitably selective. While trying to maintain a balance between classic and recent research, this chapter focuses more on well-replicated cultural predictors of SWB that have been particularly informative for happiness researchers. We also suggest possible future directions for the culture and SWB research to expand, including more systematic consideration of ecological and biological factors.

Objective Conditions

One ongoing debate on cultural/national differences in happiness is whether growth in national wealth leads to increase in happiness. The spark of this debate dates back to Easterlin (1974), who proposed that while wealthier nations are generally happier than poorer nations, national income does not directly translate into more happiness after a certain point (see Easterlin, McVey, Switek, Sawangfa, & Zweig, 2010, for a review). In contrast, some researchers have shown opposing evidence that economic growth and happiness do go together. For instance, Deaton (2008) found from the Gallup World Poll that highest levels of well-being are found in Western European countries (especially Scandinavia), North America, Australia, and New Zealand, countries characterized as having many desirable objective conditions, such as wealth, good education, and political stability (e.g., for national differences, see Diener, Kahneman, & Helliwell, 2010; Diener & Suh, 1999; Hagerty & Veenhoven, 2003; Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2016).

In response to this debate, recent studies that analyzed the Gallup World Poll data have suggested that economic conditions are correlated discriminately with SWB measures. That is, some type of objective measures correlate with some types of SWB but not with others. Across 132 countries, economic conditions (such as national income and public resources) were positively associated with the cognitive evaluation of one's life, but only weakly associated with emotional well-being (Diener, Ng, Harter, & Arora, 2010). In other words, people living in wealthier nations "think" they are happy, but not necessarily "feel" more positive emotions than those in poorer nations. A follow-up study even found that for the same level of personal income, people living in richer countries felt angry and worried more frequently (Tay, Morrison, & Diener, 2014). Overall, emotional well-being was largely predicted by personal factors rather than societal conditions. Positive feelings were dependent on psychosocial factors, such as social support, respect, and autonomy. Negative feelings were explained by both societal and personal factors (Diener et al., 2010; Ng & Diener, 2014; Tay & Diener, 2011).

Some researchers argue that both the volume of national wealth and the psychological factors that accompany it matters (see Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2015; Diener, Tay, & Oishi, 2013; Oishi & Schimmack, 2010). For instance, Oishi & Kesebir (2015) found that economic growth prompts increase in happiness when income is evenly distributed, but not when income inequality is high. They speculate that heightened sense of unfairness and social comparison may be the reason behind this phenomenon (see also Eksi & Kaya, 2017; Schröder, 2017). It is also found that progressive taxation is positively associated with SWB of nations (Oishi, Schimmack, & Diener, 2012).

However, it should be also noted that economic indices might shadow the effects of various positive social qualities on happiness that correlate with national wealth. It has been found in some dataset that national affluence raises happiness only through its effect on freedom, individualism, or democracy (Dorn, Fischer, Kirchgässner, & Sousa-Poza, 2007; Fischer & Boer, 2011; Inglehart, Foa, Peterson, & Welzel, 2008), prompting the need to "unpackage" wealth and find what precise elements of economic affluence contribute to the SWB of nations.

Lay Beliefs of Happiness

What is happiness, and what are the ingredients of it? The popular answer held by the average person varies much by culture. For instance, the definitions of happiness from dictionaries of 30 countries showed that some cultures focused more on external conditions or fortune, whereas others put more emphasis on positive internal feelings (Oishi, Graham, Kesebir, & Galinha, 2013).

Lay beliefs about happiness are often contrasted between collectivistic and individualistic samples. For example, when asked to indicate important criteria of a good and worthy life, Chinese focused on external and practical components, such as wealth and social status, whereas European Canadians chose more internal and private concerns, such as the self's positive impact on the world (Bonn & Tafarodi, 2013). There are also variations in the sense of agency. A thematic analysis revealed that collectivistic South Africans described happiness more on a societal level, such as social harmony and family ties, while Germans defined happiness more on a personal level, such as personal freedom and pleasure (Pflug, 2009). Similarly, Japanese people associated happiness with social balance, whereas Americans associated it with personal accomplishments and hedonic pleasure (Uchida & Kitayama, 2009).

Although cultural difference in lay beliefs of happiness has been examined by a wide array of studies, one common methodological weakness is that most of the responses are obtained through a structured questionnaire format. The questionnaire items in many cases are pre-selected by the researcher in reference to existing theories or well-established empirical findings. Merely given the option of either agreeing or disagreeing with questionnaire items, participants have little room to express their spontaneous beliefs about happiness. Consequently, by design, such studies tend to obtain theory-confirming results about happiness beliefs rather than novel insights.

To overcome this limit, in one recent study (Shin, Suh, Eom, & Kim, 2017), Korean and American participants are asked to write three words that immediately come to their minds when they think of "happiness." Regardless of cultural background, individuals who mentioned more words related with social relationships or relational concepts (friendship, love) were happier than others. However, interesting cultural differences were also found at a more detailed level. For instance, the most commonly associated word with happiness in Korea was "family" (13% of all responses), whereas affective states or expressions, such as "smile," and "laugh" topped the list (11% of responses) in the US. The most central type of relationship linked with happiness also differed. Whereas ascribed, in-group relationships (family) were nominated prominently in Korea, American respondents more often linked self-chosen social connections (romantic partner, friend) with happiness. Although social experiences are believed to be commonly important in both cultures, the type of relationships through which this need is fulfilled seems to show cultural variation.

Besides different beliefs on the content of happiness, cultures also vary in how desirable they think happiness is. In the US, for instance, people generally hold a glowing view of a "happy" person. A happy person, compared to a less happy person, is viewed not only to be more desirable, but even more likely to go to heaven by Americans (King & Napa, 1998). However, not all cultures are as enthusiastic about happiness. In some cultures, people are ambivalent about being overly happy, because happiness is believed to be followed by unhappiness at the end (Ji, Nisbett, & Su, 2001).

Also, the common Western belief that happiness is an inalienable right and a product of an individual's action appears less strongly among those brought up in East Asian or Islamic cultures (Lu & Gilmour, 2006; Joshanloo, 2013). Reflective of this contrasting cultural attitude, it has been suggested that Western cultural members might implicitly feel a certain degree of "pressure to be happy" (Suh, 2000), whereas some degree of "aversion to happiness" may exist in non-Western cultures (Joshanloo & Weijers, 2014).

Cross-cultural stereotypes about a "happy" person align with this difference. Choi, Suh, & Shin (2017) asked respondents from 45 nations to imagine overhearing a person who claims to be extremely happy and satisfied with life. Then, they were asked to guess how well various positive (e.g., warm, moral) and negative (e.g., arrogant, selfish) personality traits might characterize this self-proclaimed happy person. As expected, culturally held stereotypes about a happy person's character differed considerably across cultures. Although this stereotype was highly positive in cultures that report high levels of happiness (e.g., US, South America), in certain regions, people were underwhelmed about the happy person. For instance, in Japan, a nation that reports low happiness in comparison to its economic level, people believed that the imaginary happy person is more likely to possess negative (e.g., selfish, shallow) than positive personality traits. Across countries, how positively people thought about a happy person (indexed by subtracting the estimated likelihood of possessing negative from positive traits) significantly predicted the actual happiness level of each nation. This correlation remained even after controlling for relevant factors, such as emotion norms, resentment towards expressing happiness, individualism, and gross domestic product (GDP).

Most recently, an interesting argument has been proposed as to why cultures vary in their desirability judgments about happiness. Koh and her colleagues (2017) claim that one factor that sets apart cultures that strongly value happiness from those that value it less is the level of pathogen threat historically present in the environment. The high social nature of a happy person, although it has various positive assets in low pathogen regions, may inadvertently increase the chance of bringing infectious diseases through active social interactions. In high pathogen regions, people might have been reinforced to de-value traits or emotions (happiness) associated with exploration and contact of strangers. This hypothesis was not only supported in laboratory experiments, but interestingly, even predicted the voting pattern of nations in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly meeting regarding an international happiness resolution (adopting happiness as a national guide for policy). As predicted, UN member states that sponsored this resolution had a significantly lower level of pathogen than non-sponsoring states.

Studying lay beliefs of happiness across cultures goes beyond gratifying academic curiosity. Certain beliefs held by the person about happiness, and how much she values it actually make a difference in how happy she is. For instance, people's belief on whether the total amount of happiness they will experience in life is predetermined and "fixed" or "infinite" leads to divergent habits and choices related with happiness. Importantly, the fixed-amount theorists were significantly less happy with their lives (Koo & Suh, 2006), controlling for personality factors. There is also the finding that in countries where positive emotions are highly valued, people report higher life satisfaction and experience more positive emotions (Bastian, Kuppens, De Roover, & Diener, 2014).

Emotion

A defining aspect of emotional well-being is the relative frequency of positive over negative affect (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999), which has led to a heavy focus on the affective dimension of valence (positive or negative) in happiness research. Thanks to cross-cultural research, psychologists now recognize that there are other dimensions of positive affect that are relevant for understanding happiness (Tsai, 2007). For instance, Euro-Canadians highly value high activation positive affect (HAP), such as excitement and elation, whereas Chinese and Japanese value low activation positive affect (LAP), such as calmness and serenity (Ruby, Falk, Heine, Villa, & Silberstein, 2012).

This cultural variation in ideal positive affect causes a difference in the link between positive emotion and happiness. Researchers found that the discrepancies between ideal and actual HAP led to poor mental health for European Americans and Asian Americans, but not for Hong Kong Chinese (Tsai, Knutson, & Fung, 2006). By contrast, discrepancies between ideal and actual LAP led to poor mental health for Asian Americans and Hong Kong Chinese, but not European Americans.

In addition to valence and arousal, Kitayama and colleagues (e.g., Kitayama & Markus, 2000; Kitayama & Park, 2007) suggest that the happiness of Japanese and Americans also relate differently with another pole of positive emotion—Japanese centered more on socially engaged (feelings of closeness to others, friendly feelings) emotions, whereas Americans rely more on socially disengaged (pride and feelings of superiority) emotions. Related to this difference, it is reasoned that the pursuit of happiness itself may lead to different outcomes between cultures. According to Ford et al. (2015), motivation to pursue happiness predicted lower well-being in the US, whereas it predicted higher well-being in Russia and East Asia. The authors attribute this difference to the possibility that collectivistic cultural members tend to pursue happiness in more socially engaging ways than individualistic cultural members.

Cultures also differ in their beliefs about the relation between positive and negative affect. In general, East Asians have a more dialectic view than Western cultural members; therefore, they are more likely to believe that events or experiences that seemingly contradict can co-occur (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). As a result, European Americans tend to have fewer mixed emotional experiences (feeling bad and good at the same time) than East Asians (e.g., Miyamoto, Uchida, & Ellsworth, 2010; Shiota, Campos, Gonzaga, Keltner, & Peng, 2010), a pattern mediated by dialectical beliefs (Spencer-Rodgers, Peng, & Wang, 2010). Some have employed this dialectic script to explain cultural differences in emotion regulation, such as the dampening or savoring of positive emotions (Miyamoto & Ma, 2011) or why people try to maximize positive emotion and minimize negative emotion more strongly in one culture than another (Sims et al., 2015).

Another widely replicated finding concerns cultural difference in the use of affect in overall judgments of happiness (Kuppens, Realo, & Diener, 2008; Schimmack, Radhakrishnan, Oishi, Dzokoto, & Ahadi, 2002; Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). The "affect-as-information" theory (Schwarz & Clore, 1983) has suggested that people use their momentary mood as a heuristic cue for making various evaluative judgements, including life satisfaction. Research has found that this phenomenon occurs more reliably among individuals who chronically view themselves as an independent being than those who construe themselves as an interdependent person.

This pattern is found between cultures as well as within a culture as function of one's self-view. For instance, when Americans are primed of the relational aspects of self, they tend to base their life satisfaction judgment quite heavily on others' evaluations of their lives (the typical collectivistic pattern); conversely, Koreans primed on their unique aspects of the self shifted their attention to inner emotions (individualistic pattern) during life satisfaction judgment (Suh, Diener, & Updegraff, 2008). Thus, the type of information used in constructing global self-judgments of happiness seem to systematically differ between cultures, depending on whether the autonomous, unique aspects of the self versus the fundamentally socially embedded nature of the self are stressed. This difference is also observed with implicit measures. In an association-judgment task, European Americans who were satisfied with their lives associated happiness with more positive emotion words, but this pattern was not found for Koreans and Asian Americans (Koo & Oishi, 2009).

Emotion norms that have implications for both the experience and expression of happiness also vary between cultures. In general, in non-Western cultures, positive emotions (happiness) are valued less, whereas negative emotions are believed to have important functional values, compared to highly individualistic cultures, (e.g., Eid & Diener, 2001; Joshanloo et al., 2014; Oishi et al., 2013). Although national differences in SWB are not completely explained by difference in emotion norms, researchers need to be aware of their influence. For instance, according to a recent finding by Sheldon et al. (2017), Russians (compared to Americans) reported a greater inhibition in the expression of happiness to strangers. Interestingly, the greater happiness inhibition to strangers was unrelated with the experienced happiness of Russians, but negatively predicted the happiness level of American samples (see also, Soto, Perez, Kim,

Lee, & Minnick, 2011). In this study, the self-reported SWB level between the two cultural groups did not differ, suggesting that the size of the discrepancy between experience and overt expressions of happiness may differ across countries.

Importance of the Self: High Esteem, Consistency, and Clarity

Cultures also differ in how important the self is for SWB (for review, see Suh, 2000). Having a positive belief about one's overall self seems to matter more for the happiness of individualist than collectivist cultural members. Following Diener and Diener's (1995) groundbreaking paper on cultural difference in self-esteem and life satisfaction, studies have repeatedly found that self-esteem is a stronger predictor of happiness in Western than Asian cultures (Uchida, Kitayama, Mesquita, Reyes, & Morling, 2008; Yuki, Sato, Takemura, & Oishi, 2013). It appears that the positive aspects of the internal self strongly determine the person's overall happiness in the West, whereas the relational tone between the self and other significant selves (e.g., family) seem to be more salient for the well-being of collectivist cultural members. One of the first empirical demonstrations of this difference was by Kwan, Bond, and Singelis (1997), who found that compared to the US, the relative importance of relationship harmony to self-esteem was greater in Hong Kong.

Having a clear, and consistent idea of oneself also seems to matter more in individualistic than collectivistic cultures. People who have an inconsistent self-concept across social situations have lower life satisfaction and affective well-being, but this relationship is weaker in collectivistic cultures, where being flexible to situational demands is highly appreciated by others (Bleidorn & Ködding, 2013; Church et al., 2014; English & Chen, 2011). For instance, Suh (2002) found that Koreans are less consistent in rating their personality across social roles, and this degree of inconsistency had a smaller association with SWB, compared to North Americans. In Korea, a more important predictor of SWB than consistency was how individuals believed their life was evaluated by significant others (perceived social appraisal). In a similar vein, Oishi, Diener, Scollon, and Biswas-Diener (2004) found that the within-person variability of affect across situations (e.g., the effect of being with a romantic partner versus stranger on positive affect) was greater among Japanese and Hispanic students than European Americans. Also, it is found that the relationship between clarity of one's feelings (being able to describe one's feelings accurately) and SWB was stronger in more individualistic countries (Lischetzke, Eid, & Diener, 2012).

Broadly speaking, happiness in collectivist cultures seem to depend less on private and personal aspects of the self, but more on relational and even distal societal factors. This might be because the inner self seems to be a more pivotal anchor of psychological experience in individualistic than collectivistic cultures (Suh, 2000). Conversely, how well one's family, group or country might be doing might matter more for collectivists. A study by Morrison, Tay, and Diener (2011) illustrates this point. Although personal factors are prime predictors of happiness in Western countries, they found that the overlap between satisfaction with one's country (national satisfaction) and personal satisfaction becomes larger in collectivist nations.

Concern for Social Approval and Conflict

If the inner state of the self is a crucial predictor of happiness in the West, how the self's exterior layer is evaluated and recognized by others is critical for the happiness of East Asians. This is because East Asians and other collectivist cultural members, chronically vigilant of their value as a social member, are far more likely to adopt a third-person perspective about themselves than European Americans (Cohen & Gunz, 2002). How I am "seen" by others are in many cases more important to a collectivist person than how the world subjectively appears to her. Such thinking extends to various realms of life, and creates several cultural variations in link to happiness.

For one, the "good life" is visualized somewhat differently. For instance, the individual's perceived social image predicts life satisfaction beyond the effects of emotions and personal achievement in India and Pakistan, but not among White British and European Americans (Rodriguez Mosquera & Imada, 2013). In comparison of how the good life is viewed by mainland Chinese and European Canadians, Bonn and Tafarodi (2013) conclude that one of the key difference is the "focus of concerns"—tending towards either inner/personal versus socially defined goods. The Chinese sample, for instance, was more likely to emphasize security, wealth, and social success (status) in their visions of a desirable life than the European Canadians. The latter group focused on less concrete and practical factors, such as meeting one's inner potential.

Since being acknowledged by others is easier when the person possesses something easily visible or quantifiable, collectivistic cultural members put much effort to embellish the external aspects of the self.

This explains why money is strongly believed to be critical for happiness, even in highly affluent East Asian societies. In one study, Singaporeans, but not Americans, expected that a person with a higher income would be more likely to have a high-quality life than a person with lower income (Wirtz & Scollon, 2012). Compared to the US, extrinsic goods (e.g., money, physical appearance) are stressed more by Koreans, a pattern that partly explains the happiness difference between the two countries (Koo & Suh, 2015). In a similar line, objective social status (education) is more strongly associated with happiness among Japanese than Americans, whereas subjective social status is more strongly associated with happiness among Americans than Japan (Curhan et al., 2014). The authors' interpretation is that the Japanese trust objective markers that others can see more, while Americans trusted their own judgments.

Using a more common psychological term, the contingency of self-worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001) seems to differ between cultures. It is found that between Eastern and Western cultures, other's approval contingency of self-worth (CSW) is notably different, which mediates the happiness difference between Taiwan and US samples (Liu, Chiu, & Chang, 2017). It suggests the possibility that East Asian's self-judgments of happiness could be more prone to fluctuations, depending on the tone of social feedback. This appears to be the case. In one study, Korean and American college students were asked to describe a recent pleasant event and rate how happy they felt during the experience (Choi, 2013). Several weeks later, the participants rated once again how happy they felt about the same event they wrote earlier, after receiving bogus feedback that other people either agreed (also thought the event was fun) or disagreed (thought the event was rather boring) with them. Interestingly, the Koreans' evaluations of the self-nominated happy event changed as a function of others' approval or disapproval, whereas Americans did not. It implies that even the hedonic evaluation of a highly personal experience is affected by other's evaluation in collectivistic Asian cultures.

A flipside of this heightened social sensitivity is that East Asians are much more concerned about potential damages to their social image than Western cultural members. As such, some active and promotive social gestures that benefit happiness are less pursued, in fear that they may instigate negative reactions. A good example is, contrary to what might be expected from cultural stereotypes, East Asians are in general *less* likely to seek social support from others than European Americans (Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008). This is because Asians are more concerned about the negative relational consequences of help seeking, such as stressing the support provider or being viewed as an incompetent person. One recent cross-cultural paper finds a highly similar pattern occurring in the link between capitalization and happiness (Choi, Oishi, Shin, & Suh, in press). Koreans, compared to Americans, were more hesitant to celebrate positive events (capitalization attempts) with others because of possible relational costs (e.g., being seen as immature, inappropriate).

The East Asians' excessive concern of other's view might be a key psychological reason for why their happiness level is lower than expected by economic indices (Suh, 2007; Suh & Koo, 2008). It may be the common underlying cause of several interrelated phenomena that are known to be detrimental for happiness: a) being more focused on external, materialistic aspects of happiness, b) not being able to create and use idiosyncratic standards for self-judgment, which is an essential strategy for maintaining self-enhancing views (cf. Dunning & McElwee, 1995), c) being oriented more towards preventive than promotive decisions in everyday life.

Culture-Person Fit Issue

One popular conceptual framework employed in explaining happiness across cultures is the culture-fit, or the culture-person matching hypothesis. The key idea is that, other things equal, the person is happier when her personal characteristics (personality, value, emotion) resembles the dominant practices or values of the residing culture.

Because cultures differ in emotion norms, the degree to which an individual's emotion experience pattern fits with the social norm could matter (cf. Gruber, Mauss, & Tamir, 2011). Using an implicit measure of cultural fit of emotions, De Leersnyder, Mesquita, Kim, Eom, and Choi (2014) recently found across US, Belgium, and Korea that individual's level of emotion fit with the culture's average emotion profile across social contexts (e.g., with family, friends) predicted relational well-being.

Fulmer et al. (2010) found that the relationship between an individual's personality and SWB is also strengthened when the individual's personality matches the common personality type in the culture. In a society where extraverts were prevalent, culture boosted the positive effect of extraversion on happiness. Furthermore, researchers showed that while civic virtue is usually positively associated with happiness, virtuous individuals were not happier than selfish individuals in cultures where transgressions are common and easily justified (Stavrova, Schlösser, & Fetchenhauer, 2013). A similar pattern has been examined in the domain of personal and national religiosity (Diener, Tay, & Myers, 2011).

Despite the popularity of the culture-person fit idea, strong versions of this argument may lead to cultural relativism, possibly undermining the pan-cultural, universal elements of human happiness. Few would recommend a person who lives in a highly totalitarian society, for the sake of culture-person fit, to give up personal autonomy as a strategy for increasing happiness. In fact, there are findings that challenge the fit notion. According to the fit theory, the happier Koreans should be the ones whose personal values align with strong collectivistic ideals. This was not the case (Kim, 2012). Even in Korea, individuals who valued autonomy and enjoyed typical individualistic experiences (e.g., feeling unique) were happier than the more culturally fitting counterparts, especially among the affluent group.

Newcomers: Ecological and Biological Factors

Thus far, this chapter has reviewed cultural differences in predictors of happiness mainly using the framework of individualism and collectivism. However, this dichotomous cultural contrast offers little insight to why the different regions of the world came to adopt certain cultural values in the first place. Before concluding, it is worth a brief overview of some emergent findings relevant with happiness that explore the role of ecological and biological factors. This approach might offer some fundamental insight about the origins of cultural variation, and how SWB is related to such non-psychological factors.

As for ecological factors, a group of scientists claim that the historic prevalence of pathogens in the local environment leads to the emergence of individualism and collectivism (Fincher, Thornhill, Murray, & Schaller, 2008; Murray & Schaller, 2010). The claim is that central features of collectivism, such as strong in-group favoritism or conformity, developed as a group-level psychological response to inhibit the transmission of pathogens. This parasite-stress is claimed to increase in-group assortative sociality, which is culturally expressed in the form of strong family ties (Fincher & Thornhill, 2012). As mentioned, in line with this argument, Koh et al. (2017) found through a series of studies that happy individuals are viewed less positively in high pathogen regions, presumably because the behavioral features associated with happiness (e.g., risk-taking, novelty seeking) increase the spread of disease.

Another ecological factor that may influence perceptions of happiness is resource scarcity. Being somewhat complacent and optimistic about one's surrounding is more acceptable when the environment is safe and resource is abundant. However, this free-spirited attitude may become problematic when an immediate change or improvement of the situation is required, as when food or other crucial survival resources need to be replenished. Probably for this reason, a recent study finds that resource scarcity leads to a more negative perception of a happy person (Shin & Suh, 2017).

Climate has also been associated with well-being (Rehdanz & Maddison, 2005). Harsh climates (hot summers and cold winters) negatively predict SWB. In an analysis of 58 countries, Fischer and Van de Vliert (2011) showed that demanding climates predict ill-being in poor nations but not in wealthy nations, because resources buffer the negative effects of climate. Coming from a more evolutionary angle, Li & Kanazawa (2016) found that population density is negatively correlated with life satisfaction. The authors explain that when group size and population density becomes higher than what was common in our ancestral environment, people are likely to be stressed out more easily.

One of the latest newcomers to the study of culture and happiness are recent work on genes. In one study, researchers reported that people in collectivistic cultures are more likely to carry short allele of the 5-HTTLPR than individualist cultural members (Chiao & Blizinsky, 2010). Interestingly, a culture-gene coevolution was found. That is, the frequency of short allele carriers lowered the prevalence of affective disorders, and increased collectivism mediated this relationship. Another recent study reports that national percentages of people with high positive affect were correlated with the national prevalence of the rs324420 A allele in the FAAH gene (Minkov & Bond, 2017). Although most of the current findings on genetic and ecological factors are highly tentative, they shed light on a host of new factors that were once completely outside the attention span of happiness researchers.

Conclusion

Although cultural variations clearly exist, we would like to simultaneously stress that there are undeniably universal aspects of well-being. So far, research has not yet found any single country in which happiness correlates in a reverse direction with well-known predictors of happiness—income, extraversion, positive affect, etc. Even in collectivist cultures where inner emotions seem to play a less defining role in happiness, for instance, the correlational direction is similar to other countries. Hence, appreciating the cultural variance in happiness is important, but not to the extent of obscuring the universal aspects of human well-being.

One of the most pressing research needs is gaining a more in-depth understanding of how and why

the culture-specific beliefs and practices of happiness arise. This would require researchers to go beyond cataloguing surface differences between regions, and make creative, theory-driven speculations on what underlying adaptive functions the different cultural contours of happiness might serve. Culture is created by humans, who are not exceptions to the basic evolutionary principles (Hill & Buss, 2008). Basic evolutionary needs, such as safety or social belongingness, are pursued in a widely different manner by two individuals who differ in personality, values, and habits. Likewise, the different cultural shades of happiness, influenced by ecological constraints and historical factors, might merely be different scenes seen from multiple paths. They are all likely headed toward a common destination—securing essential needs for survival and reproduction (social respect, belongingness, resource).

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