Personal Happiness in Relation to Culture

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Abstract

Studies have reported that happiness is meaningfully related to cultural factors such as collectivism and individualism (I/C) and can vary between I/C countries [1]. Not only can country's I/C orientation effect the levels of happiness, but also personal preference for a particular cultural orientation. However, the relationship between happiness, country's orientation, and personal cultural orientation has not been clearly described. Therefore, the current study examined if an individual would be more likely to experience happiness when individual's individual and collectivism orientation matched with society by comparing an individualistic country (the U.S.) and collectivistic country (India).

Method: 120 American sample and 132 Indian sample were collected through Amazon Mechanical Turk. All of the participants took four surveys: Demographic, Individualism and Collectivism Scale, Orientation to Happiness, and Revised Life Orientation Test.

Results: Both personal tendencies predicted personal happiness, yet personal tendency of individualism predicted personal happiness more strongly with the U.S. sample. On the other hand, personal tendency of collectivism predicted personal happiness with the Indian sample while personal tendency of individualism did not. Also, personal levels of optimism were controlled with both samples, but it was not related to personal happiness with Indian sample.

Conclusions: The results showed there were meaningful associations between cultural personal tendencies and personal happiness with the U.S. sample and the Indian sample.

Keywords: Personal Happiness; Collectivism; Individualism; Demographic

Introduction

Over the last few decades, positive dimensions of human's state of being such as happiness, life satisfaction, subjective well-being, and quality of life have been the subject of much research [1-4]. Joshanloo and Weijers [5] claim that interest with personal happiness has increased around the world. In fact, Western culture and psychological research considers happiness as one of the most important values that people desire and that meaningfully contributes to individual levels of life satisfaction [5,6]. However, levels of happiness are thought to differ among culture and individuals [7]. Researchers have suggested that personal happiness is emphasized in individualistic cultures more so than in collectivistic cultures [5]. Therefore, culture has been thought to influence one's perception of happiness and could potentially be a meaningful predictor of level of happiness across nations [8]. The current study will examine the relationship between culture, personal cultural tendency, and personal level of happiness in two countries: India and the U.S.

Happiness

While happiness is a concept that can vary by definition across generations, cultures, places, and languages, Peterson, Park, and Seligman [9] created integrated various ways to attain happiness into three orientations: life of pleasure, life of engagement, and life of mean-

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ing. Perspective of life of pleasure and meaning has been strongly supported to attain happiness historically. The ideas originated from hedonic and eudemonic principles and further developed. The inclusive of life of engagement, the single theoretical framework has been created. Those three researchers have claimed that these three orientations of happiness are unique and independent constructs. Therefore, the three variables are recognizable and separately associated with life happiness although all of them can be pursued at the same time.

Life of pleasure

The life of pleasure that derived from hedonic principle, is the idea of maximizing pleasure and minimizing physical and psychological pain [2,3,8,9]. The idea of life of pleasure originated between 435-366 BCE by Arietuppus [9]. Having pleasurable activities and expanding the experience of pleasure are thought to contribute to a good life, good health, social engagement, and success [8]. The hedonic perspective is equivalent to happiness with the positive emotional state, which bring desired satisfaction. Therefore, increasing one's pleasant moments through the fulfillment of one's desires has been considered the path to happiness [10]. It has been supported by Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson [11] study that maximizing pleasure by writing down three good things that happens each day increased level of happiness in individuals. In fact, it helps to manage the well-being of humans; therefore, numerous interventions focus on increasing pleasure activities [8].

Life of meaning

A life of meaning is derived from the eudemonic principle and has been acknowledged to influence personal happiness [8]. Life of meaning refers to the idea that each individual can find meaning and value in his or her life and can live according to this meaning. The principle of meaning suggests that people should build what is best within themselves and then use their skills for themselves and their society [9]. One can have a meaningful life when one feels connected to something that is larger than themselves and goal oriented. Having a sense of meaning in life increases levels of optimism, happiness, and positive emotional states [12]. Having meaning in life is not only critically correlated with psychological well-being and good mental health, but also creates a negative effect on health when it is missing [8]. Meaningfulness of one's life has strong negative associations with depression, anxiety, interpersonal sensitivity and paranoia ideation. Therefore, lack of meaning in life could result in psychological problems [13].

Life of engagement

The last component of happiness, life of engagement, is to have flow experience that is created by Csikszentmihalyi [14] and emphasizes losing one's self by engaging in activities that are enjoyed. Flow experience and frequency of experience have been shown to associate with the good life [8]. During flow, all the attention is focused on the activity and time can pass quickly. However, it is important that one's skills and the challenging level of the activity matches to create flow experience [12]. Flow is distinguishable from pleasure because flow is considered senseless at the moment of the activities while pleasure is prominent feelings of moment. Therefore, how people might experience flow is pleasurable; however, the pleasure feeling is not necessarily noticed during the flow [9]. Flow states uses positive resources of individuals such as talents, skills, and interests; therefore, life of engagement lead to increase personal happiness [15]. The advantages of having a life of engagement include commitment, success, happiness and endurance in variety of domains throughout life [16].

Orientations to happiness

In sum, research has supported three facets of happiness. These facets are life of pleasure, life of engagement, and life of meaning. The pleasure variable involves pleasant and encouraging experiences. The meaning variable appears when one is connected to greater good. The engagement variable results when the sense of self in lost in activities. Previous research by Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park and Seligman [17] found out that all three of the components of happiness are individually correlated with life satisfaction. More precisely, all these three categories are strong predictors of subjective well-being beyond sociodemographic variables [8].

Culture and Happiness

A concern raised in this field is whether these facets of happiness can generalize across cultures and nations [8]. Culture could affect definition of happiness and levels of personal happiness. For example, a study conducted by Peterson et al [17] compared the happiness levels from Swiss and United States samples and found that the three orientations of happiness had identical ratings for the two samples with life of pleasure explained the least variance in all three orientations of happiness.

Culture influences what individuals desire to feel [18] and what they actually feel [19]. Even though life of pleasure has been shown to be a necessary aspect of happiness, some factors such as nationality and culture could influence the experience and preference of pleasure [20]. A similar study extended previous research by comparing samples from Australians and the United States using three components of happiness [8]. The researchers analyzed whether the life of meaning and engagement influenced subjective well-being after controlling for the life of pleasure. The study found that all of the three happiness orientation were significantly related to personal happiness with both the United States and Australian samples, although the meaning and engagement orientations have stronger affects in personal happiness. According to their results, all three components of happiness are crucial for personal happiness; however, some orientations contribute more variance in personal happiness across cultures [8]. It has been shown that even though all three components of happiness predict well-being of individuals, strength of relations between each components and well-being differ between cultures [21]. Additionally, each of the three components of happiness has been shown to anticipate life satisfaction across 27 nations [12]. The results were for the most part similar in the earlier results of two researches. Although some nations showed higher orientations to pleasure, engagement and meaning were stronger predictors of happiness than pleasure in general.

Although all three components of happiness seem to be related to personal happiness across countries, culture could affect multiple aspects of individuals such as their attitudes, values, and behaviors. It has been known that culture shapes individuals' subjective experiences [22]. One specific aspect in which culture differs is individualism and collectivism [23]. In fact, considering cultures from individualistic and collectivistic values has been one of the ways to explain cultural differences [24].

Individualism

It has been known that in individualistic societies, the central focus of individuals is on personal identity, personal feelings, and personal success [25,26]. Focusing on personal identity includes (1) the individual's perspective, needs, and aims; (2) the individual's enjoyment and fun; and (3) the individual's particular beliefs [26]. People in individual society are thought to take care of themselves and immediate family members only. People are expected to have autonomy over their life choices and decisions because the self in individualistic society is independent and priority [27]. Therefore, individualistic societies emphasize personal goals rather than goals as a group, and encourage demonstration of one's distinct needs, attitudes, beliefs, and wants [21].

Collectivism

Many theories describe collectivistic cultures focus on interdependence, in-group identity, connectedness, committed, and unity with their family members and in-groups rather than independence, personal identity, and personal interests [25,26]. People in collectivistic societies perceive themselves "we" rather than "I". Self-representation is not unique identity. It is rather social relationships within individuals' community. Therefore, their focus is on satisfying social roles, group goals, socially desirable achievements, and responsibilities in a group rather than fulfilling personal values and preferences [27]. Therefore, happiness is a consequence of emotions, relationships, and feelings related to others and being accepted by the community [27]. In response, harmony within groups has been put as the highest priority [25], and reward self-control, role performance, patience, and self-cultivation [22]. For example, one study explained that individuals in collectivistic society stay in unhappy marriages or jobs, most likely because of conforming to social norms [28].

There is a great amount of evidence that indicates the influence of Individualism-Collectivism components on personal happiness [23,27,29]. Thus, research examining happiness maybe inaccurate or misleading if researchers do not assess culture when researching

happiness [30]. Depending on cultural norms and individual's particular values, different factors could contribute in happiness for different cultures [1]. Given the differences between individualism and collectivism, Lee and colleagues [1] examined the following questions: Do people in individualistic and collectivistic countries diverge on the criteria for happiness? Do members of different cultures care different things when they want pursue happiness? By comparing Canadian samples and Korean samples, the study found out that people from the collectivistic country and people from the individualistic country share generally the same criteria of happiness. While the criteria of happiness seem to be matching for the individualistic society and the collectivistic society, the importance of each criterion appeared to be different across each culture type. Canadian students mentioned criteria of happiness related to family, financial/materialistic wealth, and stress free life more often than Korean students. On the other hand, Korean students mentioned criteria related to the relationship with significant others, spiritual/religious life, goal in life, as well as recognition by others [1]. Although the priority of the criteria differs across cultures, it has been revealed that contents of happiness appear to be the same.

Besides seeing a culture by a country, considering culture precisely from individual level of individualism/collectivism personal orientation has been standard last few decades [29]. Personal tendency of individualism has been considered to be strongly associated with well-being [31,32]. It has been reported that the greater individualism significantly correlates with higher personal levels of happiness across 55 countries even without other predictive factors such as higher income, human rights, and social equality [33]. Yetim [23] also reported the different levels of happiness in Turkish students based on their personal tendency of individualism or collectivism. Members of Turkish society do not uniformly represent one specific cultural tendency; cultural practices of both individualistic and collectivistic are mixed together in a Turkish society, thus Turkish culture cannot be clearly classified as either of them. Yetim investigated the relationship between life-satisfaction and culture (individualism-collectivism), using university students. The study found that students with high scores of individualism were roughly three times more likely to score high in personal levels of happiness. Not only that, but the study also found that the individualism was positively correlated with levels of life-satisfaction while collectivism was negatively correlated with life satisfaction.

Individualistic oriented people have a wider range of options in how to live their lives [34]. Therefore, individualistic oriented person is motivated to pursue their life goals and report high level of personal happiness [35]. However, it has also been reported that people with a high motivation to gain happiness face adverse outcomes in consequence of pursuing happiness in individualistic societies [36]. Due to freedom of choices, people are eager to pursue personal happiness, which produce competitions among individuals [37]. On the other hand, individuals from collectivistic societies tend to pursue happiness through social engagement and prefer socially engaged experiences of happiness [36]. In these cultures, individuals are more encouraged and supported to gain happiness by their culture than individuals from individualistic country. Therefore, individuals from collectivistic attain happiness more successful compared to individuals from individualistic cultures.

In fact, people with individualistic orientation have reported higher level of depressive symptoms and stress while people with collectivistic orientation have lower levels of depression and higher level of well-being [38]. However, it has been shown that individualistic orientation decreased personal level of happiness in Japan, but not in the U.S. [39]. Personal orientation seems to affect personal happiness differently across culture.

The purpose of the present study is to analyze whether interaction of cultural orientation and personal orientation affect personal levels of happiness by measuring individualistic/collectivistic tendencies and levels of the three self-reported components of happiness as defined by Peterson and colleagues [9]. Optimism, which has been considered to influence personal happiness significantly [40-42], will also be included as a control variable and will allow us to understand the effects of culture beyond the influence of optimism. This study intends to investigate whether individuals will report higher level of happiness when their individualism/collectivism orientation matches with their cultural orientation when the effect of optimism is taken out by comparing an individualistic country (the U.S.) and a collectivistic country (India). Specifically, the researchers hypothesized that when personal orientation of individualism/collectivism orientation matches with the orientation of the country, individual would report higher levels of personal happiness than individuals who

do not. Combination of the past research and the findings from the present study may help to uncover the unexplained variance of happiness, well-being, and life satisfaction between these two cultures.

Method

Participants

Participants from two countries, one is an individualistic country (the United States) and the other is a collectivistic country (India), were recruited online. For a single regression coefficient, based on an estimated effect size of 0.35, alpha = 0.05, and power = 0.80, the total sample size required is 256. An initial total of 318 participants (162 American and 156 Indian) were collected through Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT). Of 318, the data of 65 participants (41 from the U.S. and 24 from India) were eliminated due to inability to answer the survey accurately. Because it is a known issue for participants using the Amazon Mechanical Turk to complete surveys just to receive payment, participants were excluded when they completed the survey in less than three minutes. Thus, the data for 253 participants (121 American and 132 Indian) were used in the subsequent final analysis. For the U.S. sample, males were 28 and females were 92 with the mean age of 36.89. For the Indian sample, males were 84 and females were 48 with the mean age of 31.86.

The online marketplace AMT connects individuals or companies ("requesters") offering small tasks ("Human Intelligence Tasks" or "HITs") for people ("workers") to complete these tasks for a small compensation [43]. Compensation for each task is commonly quite little (e.g., $0.02 U.S.) and requesters can filter to accept or reject the result of each task before the payment would be sent to the worker [43]. As reported by Buhrmester, Kwang, and Gosling [44], participants recruited through AMT are likely to be diverse comparing to the other typical samples and the quality of data collected through AMT qualifies with or exceeds standard published research. The study was reviewed and approved by an IRB.

Measures

Demographic Questionnaire

A demographic questionnaire was used to assess basic demographic information, including participant's age, gender, nationality, location, income, educational levels, relationship status, and occupational status.

Individualism and Collectivism Scale (INDCOL)

INDCOL developed by Triandis and Gelfland [45] was used to measure the tendencies of individualism versus collectivism. The measure showed high internal consistency and reliability [45]. A total of 16 items are designed to measure four dimensions of collectivism and individualism: vertical collectivism, vertical individualism, horizontal collectivism and horizontal individualism. All items were answered on a 9-points Likert type assessment system, ranging from 1 = never or definitely no to 9 = always or definitely yes. An example of a horizontal collectivism item is, "If a coworker gets a prize, I would feel proud" and vertical collectivism item is "Parents and children must stay together as much as possible". An example of a horizontal individualism item is "I rely on myself most of the time; I rarely rely on others" and vertical individualism item is "Winning is everything". For the current study, the researchers combined the vertical and horizontal dimensions into one composite variable.

The Orientation to Happiness (Approaches to Happiness)

Approaches to Happiness scale developed by Peterson, Park, and Seligman [9] was used to measure individual's levels of happiness. This questionnaire contains three orientations of happiness (pleasure, meaning, and engagement), and it consists of six items per orientation [8]. Each item will be answered by participants on a 5-point scale ("1 = very much unlike me" to "5 = very much like me"). An example of an item is "life is too short to postpone the pleasure it can provide". Higher scores on this questionnaire indicate higher orientation to an individual's happiness. The validity and reliability of the scale is established in several studies [8,9,46,47]. The study used a composite variable for all three dimensions.

Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R)

Optimism was measured by the LOT-R developed by Scheier, Carver, and Bridges [48]. LOT-R is a measure of dispositional optimism and pessimism. The LOT-R consists of 10 items which include both optimism and pessimism questions (e.g., Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad") are calculated using 5-point scale (0 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). Higher optimism scores represent higher level of optimism while higher pessimism scores represent higher level of pessimism. Validity and reliability have been established in several studies [48-55].

Procedure

The present study published surveys on AMT as a happiness and culture. Workers who are interested in the task were linked to external online survey tools. The compensation of completing the task was $.20 and the availability of the surveys on AMT was during a period of three days. All participants answered demographic questionnaires, happiness surveys, individualistic/collectivistic measurements, and optimism scale.

Results

The data were analyzed using the SPSS v20 statistical package. Hierarchical multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to determine if personal cultural tendency could predict personal happiness beyond the effects of optimism for an U.S. sample and an Indian sample. Tables 1 and 2 presents the results from the hierarchical regression for the U.S. sample. With the American sample, a significant regression equation was found (F (3, 117) = 19.34, p < 0.01, with an R2 of .33. Participants' predicted happiness is equal to 13.93 + 0.72 (Optimism) + 0.42 (Personal Individualism) + 0.22 (Personal Collectivism). Both personal tendencies of individualism and collectivism predicted personal happiness with American sample. Also, as Table 3 shows that optimism had been reported to predict personal happiness significantly (β = 0.34, t (119) = 4.33, p < 0.05) with an R2 of 0.17. Based on the results, personal tendency of individualism appears to predict individual happiness better than personal tendency of collectivism with American sample after controlling for the effects of optimism.

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	R^2 change	F change	df 1	df 2	Sig. F change
1	0.38	0.15	0.14	0.15	20.36	1	119	0.00
2	0.58	0.33	0.31	0.19	16.23	2	117	0.00

Table 1: Change statistics for variables predicting personal happiness levels (U.S sample).

1 Predictors: Optimism

2 Predictors: Optimism, Individualism, Collectivism

	Unstandardized coefficients U.S.		Standardized coefficients U.S.		
Variable	**B**	**Standard error**	**β**	**t**	**Sig.**
Optimism	0.72	0.17	0.34	4.3	0.00
Individualism	0.42	0.10	0.35	4.3	0.00
Collectivism	0.22	0.11	0.17	2.0	0.04

Table 2: Summary of hierarchical multiple regression analysis for variable predicting personal happiness levels (U.S. sample).

p < 0.05.

	Happiness	Optimism	Collectivism	Individualism
Happiness	-			
Optimism	0.00	-		
Collectivism	0.00	-0.25	-	
Individualism	0.00	0.073	-0.34	-
M	54.60	13.65	51.64	47.10
SD	11.80	5.55	9.14	9.81
N	121	121	121	121

Table 3: *Descriptive statistics and correlations for study variables (U.S. sample).*

p < 0.05.

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	R^2 change	F change	df 1	df 2	Sig. F change
1	0.14	0.02	0.01	0.02	2.64	1	130	0.11
2	0.41	0.17	0.15	0.15	11.52	2	128	0.00

Table 4: *Change statistics for variables predicting personal happiness levels (Indian sample).*

1 Predictors: Optimism

2 Predictors: Optimism, Individualism, Collectivism

	Unstandardized coefficients India		Standardized coefficients India		
Variable	B	Standard error	β	t	Sig.
Optimism	0.32	0.38	0.07	0.85	0.40
Individualism	0.02	0.15	0.02	0.15	0.88
Collectivism	0.44	0.13	0.38	3.4	0.00

Table 5: *Summary of hierarchical multiple regression analysis for variable predicting personal happiness levels (Indian sample).*

p < 0.05.

Tables 4 and 5 present the results from the hierarchical regression for the Indian sample. The regression equation with Indian sample was significant, F (3,128) = 8.71, p < 0.05. Personal tendency of collectivism predicted personal happiness significantly (β = 0.39, t (130) = 3.38, p < 0.01), personal tendency of individualism did not predict individual personal happiness with Indian sample (β = .016, t (130) = 0.15, p > 0.88). Additionally, as table 6 presents, it has been shown that optimism did not significantly predict personal happiness with Indian sample, (β = .07, t (130) = 0.85, p > 0.40). Pleasure and meaning of happiness were not correlated with optimism, there was a positive correlation between optimism and meaning of happiness, r = 0.24, n = 132, p = 0.05 (Table 7). Although optimism did not predict personal happiness with Indian sample, optimism has a significant influence in life of meaning.

	Happiness	Optimism	Collectivism	Individualism
Happiness	-			
Optimism	0.15	-		
Collectivism	0.00	-0.23	-	
Individualism	0.00	0.14	0.69	-
M	60.63	13.52	57.30	52.94
SD	12.70	2.78	10.10	9.51
N	132	132	132	132

Table 6: Descriptive statistics and correlations for study variables (Indian. sample).

$p < 0.05$.

	Happiness: Pleasure	Happiness: Meaning	Happiness: Engagement
Optimism	0.01	0.24**	0.11
Pleasure	1	0.57**	0.67**
Meaning	0.57**	1	0.80**
Engagement	0.67**	0.80**	1
M	20.27	20.92	19.44
SD	4.68	5.28	4.38
N	132	132	132

Table 7: Descriptive statistics and correlations between optimism and content of happiness (Pleasure, Meaning, and Engagement, Indian sample).

$p < 0.05$.

Discussion

The current study examined whether individuals would report higher level of happiness when their individual/collectivism orientation matched with the cultural orientation of their country after controlling for the effects of optimism. This study shows that both tendencies of individualism and collectivism influence personal happiness with the U.S. sample. However, personal tendency of individualism had higher influence than personal tendency collectivism, meaning that individualism seems to be more predictive of happiness in the US than an orientation to collectivism. On the other hand, only personal tendency of collectivism predicted personal happiness with the Indian sample.

These finding have several important implications for research on well-being, the self, and culture. First, although previous researches have shown a strong association between personal tendency of individualism or collectivism and personal levels of happiness, the alignment of one's personal orientation to the country's orientation affect the relationships of the personal tendencies and personal happiness significantly. Thus, it is the compatibility of this tendency with the orientation of the host culture [our "country"] rather than specific cultural tendency itself that predicts personal happiness. The specific findings with the U.S. sample might have been related to the diversity of the U.S. populations are. Most of individuals have multicultural context and background that are unique and complex mixture of different cultures. Therefore, even though the United States is considered as an individualistic country, depending on the origin of individual's culture, and their surroundings might have affected to the results.

Second, even though optimism has been known to significantly influence personal happiness across countries, optimism did not predict personal happiness with the Indian sample in the present study. Analysis showed that even though optimism did not significantly influence personal levels of happiness, optimism had a significant relation with life of meaning with the Indian sample. The future research need to explore the relation between optimism and life of meaning.

Third, all of the three orientations of happiness were equally significant to personal happiness with both American and Indian sample.

A few limitations of the present study should be considered. First, people who use Amazon Mechanical Turk might have been different from the general population in the U.S. and India. Taking Amazon Mechanical Turk requires computer access and some basic skills of computer. Although compensation is monetary in Amazon Mechanical Turk, it has been shown that works are internally motivated rather than the amount of money they receive. These factors could have affected the sample we recruited. Second, in the present study, we cumulated the scores of horizontal and vertical cultural tendencies as a whole personal cultural tendency.

Horizontal and vertical tendencies were emerged into one to be able to analyze the influence of personal individual/collectivism tendency on personal happiness. The measurement was created to measure the detail and depth of personal tendency of individualism/collectivism from four dimensions. Therefore, combined horizontal and vertical might have been affected the scores and validity of the measurement. A third limitation of the present study is the accuracy of the answers of participants. Even though the study eliminated people who took surveys less than three minutes, the accuracy of the data might have been affected due to compensation. Additionally, English is an official language of India, yet not proving survey in Hindi might have affected the results or otherwise biased the participant sample.

Despite some limitations, the study reveals that culture and personal tendency of cultural preference have strong affect in personal levels of happiness. Future studies should expand more individualistic and collectivistic countries and use different values instead of optimism that have a significantly influence on personal happiness across cultures.

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