Subjective Wellbeing

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The cross-cultural importance of happiness and contentment can be inferred from their emergence in philosophical discussions across many cultural traditions. Aristotle linked happiness to virtuous behavior; Bentham regarded it as the basis for an overarching moral principle (Kesebir & Diener, 2008). An appeal of Buddhist meditation is the sense of contentment and freedom from suffering that mindful awareness can bring (Gaskins, 1999). Even Confucius—whose emphasis on social harmony and righteous action invites the image of a stern, conservative scholar—was said to be a man "whose life was full of joy" (Confucius, 1979, p.54), a characteristic that may have been as appealing to his many disciples as his teachings.

Subjective wellbeing (SWB) involves the various ways that people evaluate and experience their lives. In many ways, the term is synonymous with the everyday notion of *happiness* – positive feelings are an important aspect of wellbeing. However, SWB encompasses more than positive feelings. Diener (1984) synthesized what has since been referred to as the tripartite model of SWB (Busseri & Sadava, 2011). This model posits three distinct but often related components of wellbeing: frequent positive affect, infrequent negative affect, and cognitive evaluations such as life satisfaction. The emphasis on *subjective* wellbeing assumes that people can meaningfully evaluate their *own* lives and experiences. This assumption is validated by numerous studies showing that self-reported SWB is related to other important variables such as the conditions of a society, social relationships, the ability to function in a healthy manner (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Oishi & Schimmack, 2010), as well as non-self-report measures of subjective wellbeing (Sandvik, Diener, & Seidlitz, 1993).

We focus our review of cross-cultural SWB research on the three components of life satisfaction, positive emotions, and negative emotions. Many conclusions about "what makes people happy" and which cultures are "happier" than others depend on which component of SWB is examined. Our review is necessarily a brief summary and interested readers are referred to more extensive treatments elsewhere (Diener, 2009; Diener & Suh, 2000; Tov & Diener, 2007; Tov & Scollon, 2012).

We begin by focusing on similarities, noting what has been found to correlate with the components of SWB across most cultures. Cross-cultural similarities are important because they highlight our common humanity and hint at which factors may be fundamental to wellbeing. Next, we temper these conclusions by describing how people from different cultures and cultural backgrounds vary with regard to what relates to their wellbeing and how they experience it.

Common Correlates of SWB Across Cultures

The evidence for universals in the correlates of SWB has accumulated only recently due to the need for large, diverse samples across the world. Approximately 70% of the historical data on happiness and life satisfaction is based on European and North American respondents (Tov & Au, 2013) – two regions that represent only 16% of the world population. However, over the past two decades, cross-national studies like the World Values Survey and the Gallup World Poll have now surveyed samples representing 80–95 % of the world population. Data from these surveys suggest that certain factors are universally associated with SWB. As might be expected, fulfilling basic needs for food, shelter, and safety and

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having socially supportive relationships are associated with greater SWB across various demographic groups (Diener, Ng, Harter, & Arora, 2010) and regions of the world (Tay & Diener, 2011). In addition, psychological needs – such as competence (mastery of important skills), and autonomy or personal freedom – are also associated with greater SWB in cross-cultural samples (Diener, Ng, et al., 2010; Sheldon, Cheng, & Hilpert, 2011; Tay & Diener, 2011).

Despite the popular belief that money can't buy happiness, income is consistently related to SWB. However, the relation between income and SWB is smaller after taking into the account the fulfillment of basic, social, and psychological needs (Diener, Ng, et al., 2010; Tay & Diener, 2011). The causal direction may go multiple ways, however. Money helps people meet their basic needs and enhance wellbeing, but psychological needs such as competence and mastery could improve one's chances of earning a higher income and being happier and more satisfied with life. The relation between money and wellbeing also depends on the component of SWB that is measured. Material factors such as income and basic needs are more strongly associated with how people *cognitively* evaluate their lives (e.g., life satisfaction) than with how they *emotionally* experience it (e.g., feeling happy or sad; Diener, Kahneman, Tov, & Arora, 2010; Howell & Howell, 2008).

In contrast, psychosocial wealth is more strongly correlated with emotional wellbeing than life satisfaction. Specifically, supportive social relationships are strongly tied to positive feelings and greater autonomy is associated with *less* negative feelings; these patterns hold across international samples (Diener, Ng, et al., 2010; Tay & Diener, 2011). Compared with everyday emotional experiences, cognitive evaluations that invite people to think about whether they are living the "best possible" life may be influenced more by material consumption (Oishi & Schimmack, 2010). Thus, there may not be one single ingredient to happiness. Satisfying a need may be more associated with some SWB components and less associated with others.

Cultural Variation in the Correlates of SWB

Although all humans must fulfill certain needs, the manner in which they are fulfilled and the extent to which they contribute to wellbeing may be shaped by cultural and economic factors. One way to understand how SWB can be both universally and culturally determined is through the metaphor of eating. Everyone everywhere needs to eat to acquire nutrients such as protein, calcium, and vitamins. However, the specific foods that are consumed and the importance of specific nutrients may vary from culture to culture depending on environment, lifestyle, and genetics.

Certain variables are more strongly associated with SWB in some cultures than in others. Income appears to contribute more to life satisfaction in developing countries than in wealthy countries (Howell & Howell, 2008). In the former, more people may struggle to meet basic needs; hence a single dollar has a stronger effect on wellbeing than it does in wealthier countries. The importance of certain psychological needs also varies across cultures, and this variation may depend on how cultures define the boundary between self and others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Individualist cultures, including many Western European and North American societies, emphasize the self as an entity that is distinct from other people – this distinctiveness is reinforced by cultivating values like personal freedom and prioritizing personal goals over the wishes of others. Collectivist cultures, including many Asian, African, and Latin American societies, emphasize the self as *interdependent* with others; the lines between personal and collective goals may be blurred.

Variations in individualism and collectivism may augment the importance of some needs relative to others. Self-esteem and sense of personal freedom correlate more strongly with life satisfaction in individualist countries (Diener &

Diener, 1995; Oishi, Diener, Lucas, & Suh, 1999) than in collectivist countries. In contrast, having harmonious relationships and spending time with important others are more strongly associated with life satisfaction and positive emotions for collectivist groups such as Asians and Hispanic Americans compared with European Americans (Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1997; Oishi, Diener, Scollon, & Biswas-Diener, 2004).

Cultural differences in the correlates of SWB may exist because when people attempt to fulfill their needs, they pay special attention to culturally valued goals. Establishing a strong sense of personal freedom and self-esteem helps people maintain independence and dignity, goals that are valued in individualist societies. On the other hand, cultivating harmonious relationships may help reinforce one's interdependence with others, a goal that is valued in collectivist societies. In both cases, the alignment of needs with culturally valued goals enhances the relation between need fulfillment and wellbeing. Such alignment can apply to more specific domains of life as well. In Korea, where academic achievement is highly valued, satisfaction with school was more strongly associated with adolescent life satisfaction than it was in the United States. (Park & Huebner, 2005). Though academic achievement may generally help students attain a sense of competence, the successful Korean student may also receive extensive positive feedback from friends, family, and teachers. Thus, the attainment of culturally valued goals may bolster wellbeing in ways that less valued goals do not. A similar process may underlie the relation between personality traits and wellbeing. Extraverts are generally happier than introverts, but these personality effects are stronger in cultures where people are more extraverted on average (Fulmer et al., 2010).

Cultural Variation in the Structure of SWB

The tripartite model of SWB distinguishes between cognitive wellbeing (e.g., life satisfaction) and emotional wellbeing (positive emotions and negative emotions). The three components are generally related: people who are satisfied with life tend to experience positive emotions frequently and negative emotions infrequently. These components are related in part because people rely on their ongoing emotional experiences to make judgments. People who frequently feel miserable may infer that their life is not going well and thereby report lower life satisfaction. However, this assumes that people accept their internal feelings and thoughts as a valid basis for their judgment and behavior. Though this may be accurate in individualist cultures, it may be less so in collectivist cultures where people are expected to regulate their emotions and act more in accordance with social norms. Indeed, the relation between emotional experience and life satisfaction is weaker in collectivist countries than it is in individualist countries (Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). People in collectivist cultures may disregard their personal feelings to a greater degree when evaluating the overall conditions of their life.

Another area of cultural divergence is the relation between the emotional components themselves. Positive and negative emotions are often viewed as opposite ends of a single, bipolar continuum. This implies that the two are inversely related – as negative feelings increase, positive feelings should decrease. Nevertheless, the inverse relation between positive and negative emotions appears more strongly in Western European and North American cultures than in Asian cultures (Bagozzi, Wong, & Yi, 1999; Schimmack, Oishi, & Diener, 2002), although such differences are weaker when momentary feelings are measured (Scollon, Diener, Oishi, & Biswas-Diener, 2005; Yik, 2007).

Cultural differences in the bipolarity of emotions may be due to the distinct philosophical traditions that have influenced Western and Eastern cultures. In Aristotelian philosophy for example, opposites are viewed as either-or propositions. This contrasts with Asian philosophies such as Taoism, which views opposites as engendering each other, and Buddhism, which stresses moderation between extremes.

Dialectical beliefs may partly account for the lack of bipolarity particularly when Asians summarize their emotional experience over time (Spencer-Rodgers, Peng, & Wang, 2010). However, Asians also exhibit less bipolarity when emotions are assessed repeatedly and averaged over time (bypassing the need to reflect; Scollon et al., 2005). Thus factors other than dialectical beliefs may also be relevant.

Societal Levels of SWB: Are Some Cultures Happier than Others?

On average, people are neither ecstatically happy nor mired in depression – instead, they evaluate their lives in a mildly positive way (Diener & Diener, 1996). That said, countries vary in their overall levels of wellbeing, and although most people are at least mildly happy, exceptions exist. For example, in 2001, the average life satisfaction was below neutral in both Zimbabwe and Tanzania (Tov & Diener, 2007). Thus, even if people are predisposed in general to happiness, extremely difficult societal circumstances can lead to widespread unhappiness.

Economic development is consistently related to the average SWB of a nation. Changes in the per capita gross domestic product of a country are generally mirrored by changes in societal SWB (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2008). As noted earlier, income helps people meet basic needs and perhaps other needs as well. This may be particularly true in regions of extreme climates. In such areas, wealthy nations are better able to shield their citizens from excessive heat or cold, and sustain their wellbeing (Fischer & Van de Vliert, 2011). In more temperate climates, the links between economic condition and societal SWB are attenuated.

Non-economic factors such as cultural norms also influence overall levels of SWB. The desirability and appropriateness of feeling certain emotions varies across cultures. In the United States and Australia the vast majority of people value positive emotions; in China and Taiwan, however, some emotions (e.g., joy and affection) are more desirable than others (e.g. pride; Eid & Diener, 2001). Such differences may be related to the level of individualism and collectivism in these countries. In collectivist cultures, positive emotions like pride or excitement may detract from social harmony and be discouraged. In individualist cultures, personal expressions of positive emotions are more tolerated. In addition, individualism is associated with a greater desire for one's children to feel happy, which could foster cultural differences in how emotions are socialized (Diener & Lucas, 2004). Norms governing the appropriateness of an emotion may shape how often and intensely it is experienced (Diener & Lucas, 2004; Eid & Diener, 2001), which could affect societal levels of wellbeing. This may partly explain why individualist countries have higher SWB even after controlling for economic development (Fischer & Boer, 2011).

Whether some cultures are happier than others also depends on the specific component of SWB that is measured. When SWB is gauged by cognitive measures such as life satisfaction, wealthy nations like Denmark and the Netherlands rank high, whereas poor nations like Sierra Leone and Tanzania rank low (Diener, Ng, et al., 2010). However, when nations are compared in terms of emotional experience, a different picture emerges. Levels of positive feelings are uniformly high in Costa Rica and Laos; levels of negative feelings are notably low in Nepal and Japan (Diener, Ng, et al., 2010; Diener & Tov, 2009). Average wealth is not as strongly related to emotional wellbeing as it is to cognitive wellbeing (Diener, Kahneman, et al., 2010). Thus, other variables may be important. In Costa Rica, for example, 94% of people report that they are able to do what they do best everyday (Diener & Tov, 2009), thereby fulfilling a psychological need for competence (Sheldon et al., 2011). There may also be genetic contributions to population levels of wellbeing, although the exact process is likely to be complex. For instance, the short allele of the serotonin transporter gene may predispose carriers to depression under stressful social conditions (Way & Lieberman, 2010). However, recent analyses suggest that collectivist cultural

norms may have coevolved with such genes to minimize these conditions (Chiao & Blizinsky, 2010). Thus, overall levels of anxiety and mood disorders are lower in collectivist cultures despite a higher prevalence of short alleles.

The notion of a "happy society" is more complex than it might first appear. Rare are those nations that are fairly high (e.g., Denmark) or low (e.g., Sierra Leone) across several SWB components (Diener, Ng, et al., 2010). For the majority of nations, variation in economic, cultural, and genetic variables may push the various components of SWB in different directions.

Future Research Questions

Researchers have made much progress in understanding cultural variation in wellbeing; nevertheless, many issues remain for future researchers to investigate. Cross-cultural equivalence in the meaning of SWB measures could be more closely and systematically studied and improved. Though this has not impeded researchers' efforts to establish important relations between needs and wellbeing (e.g., Tay & Diener, 2011), better measures could help clarify inconsistent findings such as the extent to which positive and negative emotions are inversely related across cultures. Second, the timeframe referenced by wellbeing measures deserves greater scrutiny. Cultural differences tend to be larger when people evaluate their wellbeing in general than when they evaluate their feelings in the short-term (Oishi, 2002). Moreover, though distinctive correlates between emotional and cognitive wellbeing exist, emotion measures often reference the previous day's experience, whereas cognitive measures reference overall evaluations of life. There is some evidence that income correlates less strongly with overall happiness as compared with overall life satisfaction (Diener, Kahneman, et al., 2010; Howell & Howell, 2008), but a greater range of positive and negative emotions should be explored. Finally, entirely new inquiries on culture and wellbeing are on the horizon. A better understanding of gene-environment interactions would provide a nuanced counterpoint to the notion that wellbeing is purely genetically determined. In addition, knowing the consequences of wellbeing will be important for policymakers and lay people alike. There is evidence that positive affect predicts greater health and longevity (Diener & Chan, 2011), but how these effects may be moderated by cultural norms and practices is an open question. Over the past few decades, the field of culture and SWB has not only shed light on the generality of wellbeing theories, it has also provided important illustrations of how culture and psyche are intertwined. We expect this symbiosis to continue into the future.

SEE ALSO: Happiness; Quality of life; Satisfaction; Wellbeing

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