

# The relationship between culture and happiness



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“ What everyone wants from life is continuous and genuine happiness”

(Baruch Spinoza). Happiness basic meaning is an emotion that creates feelings of contentment, love, complete joy, and life satisfaction. However, how happiness is attained and interpreted can vary across cultures throughout the world. Researchers have asked the question of what makes one culture happier than another, and why. According to Suh and Oishi(2002), “ all humans strive to be happy is true, intriguing findings emerged when researchers scrutinized happiness in more detail across cultures: 1) individualist cultures are happier than collectivist, 2) psychological attributes characterizing the self such as, self-esteem, and self-consistency are more relevant to happiness of individualist than to the happiness of collectivist, and 3) the self-judgment of happiness is anchored on different types of cues and experience across cultures.” Adrian White a researcher at the University of Leicester researched over a 100 studies within the psychology of happiness and created the first Map of Happiness using over 80, 000 people worldwide, across 178 countries. He ranked the countries based on relational data to a nations, health, wealth, and education ( ).

Subjective well-being (SWB) is a commonly used term within the field of psychology, which can be defined as how someone identifies his or her current life satisfaction or happiness. There are three components to SWB: 1) life satisfaction, 2) positive emotional experiences, and 3) absence of negative emotions (Suh & Oishi, 2002). Therefore, people that are satisfied with their lives regularly feel positive emotions, and rarely experience negative feelings are considered to possess a high level of SWB. Most

importantly, one's personal subjective perception over their own personal well-being can only be judged by them and is of great importance.

There are many cultural trends within SWB such as, happier nations tend to be happier, gross national product (GNP) as well as, a linkage between SWB and income level across nations attributes to higher levels of happiness. On the contrary, the idea that richer countries are happier is not true. A country may be economically stable but they may also value human rights and provide a democratic government that contributes to their SWB. Therefore, it is not certain whether possessing a national wealth causes SWB because of their monetary value or simply because of non-materialist qualities.

Furthermore, there are groups of nations that challenge the linkage between SWB and income. Suh and Oishi (2002) reported that " SWB reports of some wealthy East Asian nations are among the lowest in the world (e. g., Japan), in comparison to some Latin American nations (e. g., Puerto Rico) reporting having a higher level of SWB in contrast to their reported income level. In addition, " Once a nation becomes rich enough to fulfill most people's basic needs (food, shelter), further economic prosperity does not guarantee further increase of SWB."

### **Individualism, Collectivism, and Subjective Well-Being**

Individualism and collectivism are dimensions of national cultures and they are strongly linked to SWB. Individualistic societies (e. g., America) values individual rights, and feelings are more important over the expectations of the in-group, thus, everyone is expected to look after themselves and/or their immediate families; whereas, collectivist societies (e. g., East Asia) value the needs of the in-group over the needs of the individual. Personal <https://assignbuster.com/the-relationship-between-culture-and-happiness-essay-samples/>

freedom may have positive and negative consequences. Within individualistic or collectivist societies, people have personal freedom to choose their own lifestyle with the risk of not having a strong social support which may lead to serious consequences such as, suicide. On the other hand, collectivist societies do possess strong social support as long as one does not seek to fulfill personally rewarding goals that do not reflect the in-group goals.

According to Diener, Diener, and Diener (1995), “ although there seems to be a tradeoff associated with personal freedom, in study after study researchers have found that individualist culture members are happier than collectivist cultural members. One explanation is that because wealthier individualist societies have a lower level of poor living conditions to their counter poor collectivist societies may account for this differentiation. Additionally, “ when a nation’s degree of individualism is statistically controlled, income no longer predicts subjective well-being.”

A major contributor to a high level of SWB is, having a high sense of personal choice and freedom. In order to achieve personal goals, individualist are willing to risk attaining their goals over having strong network of support since personal goals affect people on a daily basis whereas, life crisis only happen occasionally. Additionally, individualistic societies strive for a high level of SWB than collectivist societies. Within individualistic societies, there is accountability for each individual to attain happiness in their lives because the inability to attain happiness is perceived as though they have not been successful. Whereas in collectivist societies, there is not much personal

choice and freedom to seek happiness because their level of luck or their ancestry is what determines ones happiness.

People in individualistic cultures may believe that they are happier than collectivist cultures because they have personal freedom to choose how to evaluate their level of happiness on their areas of strength such as, their careers or their marriages. For example, if Bobby is an excellent lawyer, whereas, Tom has a successful 30-year marriage. Consequently, if the most valued personal quality were career and marriage success, then they would both would feel quite happy. These individual beliefs are respected within individualistic cultures. However, in collectivist cultures what is valued is based on the in-group and not by the individual. For instance, achievements such as, education may be their area of strength and evaluating factor for happiness. For that reason, if they are unable to meet these goals it is viewed as failure to the in-group and they are unable to justify happiness.

## **Individualism vs. Collectivism**

Psychologist, Dr. Geert Hofstede worked and analyzed fifty countries from around the world and came up with four primary dimensions to describe a country's culture, which include Power Distance, Individualism, Masculinity, and Uncertainty Avoidance ( ). Individualism describes the countries orientation towards the group or the individual. The orientation that looks to the group is referred to as Collectivism, and the orientation that looks to the individual is Individualism. According to Hofstede, Individualism and Collectivism assess the function of the individual and the group within society. Hofstede reported that there is a correlation between individualism and wealth. Within the ten individualist countries, Denmark ranks 74.  
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Hofstede concluded that individualistic cultures place achievement on family and profession.

Denmark has a very high individualism culture with a score of 74, with only seven other countries having a higher individualistic culture. The Danes are very proud of their work and do not accept help from others because they believe they do it best. They strive to be on top of their business getting the most credit or the greatest individual merits. Danes also like to have a very private life away from their business lives. When meeting they will only talk about business plans and work at the working environment and then when at a family meal they will discourage business talk. Denmark is also a competitive country when it comes to education. Even the education, Denmark's individualism is very important there is a constant struggle to be on top of your class, and have the best grades and merit status. Although Denmark is a very high individualistic country, they have some collectivist characteristics. Danes are proud people, however, most are modest and reserved about their accomplishments and refrain from bragging. They believe there is one way to act and if you are not acting according to the codes, someone will speak up to correct or discipline you. Danes do not like to stand out, nor do they yell or scream so they do not call attention to themselves when in public. In addition, when doing business each person will give their input on the decision and then after getting everyone's input they will make a decision.

t Geert Hofstede Cultural Dimensions Cultural Dimension(Graph). 2003.

Retrieved March 15, 2010, from: [http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede\\_denmark.shtml](http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_denmark.shtml)

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The United States high rankings of Individualism signify a more self-reliant, self-centered population that is concerned with themselves and their families. Individualistic population's possess a more "I" than "we" mentality; for instance, when climbing the corporate ladder they do not take into account how this would affect others. Americans are constantly in pursuit of reaching for a better job or position. When Americans reach success, they are quick to emphasize their success and achievements. Since America is such a competitive nation, the people are expected to defend their interests and try to promote themselves whenever possible. Unlike the Danes, Americans rarely are modest, they want to be heard, stand out in a crowd, and is ready to boast whenever possible.

## **World Map of Happiness**

Adrian White a social psychologist from the University of Leicester created the first "World Map of Happiness". White analyzed information from more than 100 studies within the field of happiness research. Some of the collected data that White analyzed in order to create a global projection of SWB was published by United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the New Economics Foundation, the World Health Organization (WHO), the Veenhoven Database, the Latinbarometer, the Afrobarometer, and the United Nations Human Development Report (UNHDR). In order for White to map out SWB across 178 countries, his research incorporated using a battery of statistical data along with responses of 80,000 people worldwide.

Adrian White analyzed the data in relation to a nation's health, wealth, and access to education. According to White, the main factors related to <https://assignbuster.com/the-relationship-between-culture-and-happiness-essay-samples/>

determining a nation's happiness are health, the level of poverty, access to food and water, access to basic education, and population size. The top ten countries included Denmark and five other European countries, including Switzerland, Austria, and Iceland, while bottoming the list were Zimbabwe and Burundi (Kamenev, 2006). Some of the better scoring nations were smaller encompassing greater social cohesion with a stronger sense of national identity, whereas, the nations with the largest populations scored the worst. For instance, China ranked 82, India 125, and Russia 168. The United States ranked 23.

Rank

Country

Rank

Country

Rank

Country

1

Denmark

11

Ireland

23



United States

2

Switzerland

12

Luxembourg

35

Germany

3

Austria

13

Costa Rica

41

United Kingdom

4

Iceland

14

Malta

62

France

5

The Bahamas

15

The Netherlands

82

China

6

Finland

16

Antigua and Barbuda

90

Japan

7

Sweden

17

Malaysia

125

India

8

Bhutan

18

New Zealand

167

Russia

9

Brunei

19

Norway

177

Zimbabwe

10

Canada

20

Seychelles

178

Burundi

Jubak, J Jubak, J.. (2009). GDP vs. GNH (Gross National Happiness). MSN Money. Retrieved March 15, 2010, from <http://articles.moneycentral.msn.com/Investing/JubaksJournal/gdp-vs-gnh-gross-national-happiness.aspx?page=2>

Not surprisingly, being wealthy and healthy can influence a person's level of happiness. Wealthier countries ranked higher on the index such as, Switzerland ranked two, and Luxemburg 10 in comparison to impoverished and unhealthy countries like most African countries. For instance, Zimbabwe ranking 177 has an AIDS rate of 25%, average life expectancy of 39, and an 80% poverty rate. Fellow Africans in Burundi ranked the worst 178, despite have a slightly lower poverty rate of 68%, their low ranking was partly due to their constant conflicts between the Hutus and the Tutsis (Kamenev, 2006).

In the past, researchers have linked collectivism with a high level of SWB. However, some highly collectivist Asian nations scored worse such as, China ranked 82, Japan 90, and India 125. Furthermore, Capitalist countries typically associated with being heartless were not a source of unhappiness. With the top scoring countries being strong capitalist, including the U. S. ranking 23, allegedly possessing free-market systems attributes to

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unhappiness because it may create a sense of insecurity and competition is not true.

A Global Projection of Subjective Well-being (map). 2006. Retrieved March 15, 2010 from: <http://www.technovelgy.com/ct/Science-Fiction-News.asp?NewsNum=893>

## **Danish**

Denmark easily tops the World Happiness Map with their negative poverty level, endless public and social services, and high standard of living.

Education is of great importance to them, in turn they possess a high level of education including, top-notch public schools, and affordable private schools. Their strong sense of national identity is mainly due to their low population levels. Furthermore, their panorama of natural beauty could not hurt them either, however, the weather is cold and windy.

Most Danes value equality, coziness, individuality and democracy. Danes' tone is informal in comparison with many other countries. Friends, family members and colleagues are addressed with the informal "you" and their first name. It is also normal to address managers by their first name. Additionally, the informal tone is found in the educational system, where students address their teachers by first name.

Discussion and debate are fundamental aspects of Dane's upbringing, both in society and in families. This means that many Danes have a fundamental awareness that it is possible to speak up and have an influence. Danes business world and associations are social, informative with a structure that characterizes Denmark.

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In Denmark, importance is placed on everyone being equal and having equal rights without regard to social background and origin. Thus, one could be led to believe that Danes are anti-individualists; however, this is far from the truth. As in most other European countries, Danes have a fundamental belief in the rights of the individual and career, housing, etc., which is selected, based on their individual needs. Entrepreneurship and initiative are prized and self-confidence is generally high among Danes. This ability to combine individualism with a focus on the welfare of the group is what one could call social individualism.

Denmark has a comprehensive public health service, including doctors, medical specialist, hospitals, health service, home care, health visitor services, and pediatric dental care and more. The Danish health service is based on the principle of equal access to the health services for all citizens. The municipalities are responsible for preventative health care programs for children, home nursing, health visitor services, pediatric dental care and in-school health services. The municipalities issue health cards and administer citizens' choice of doctor and health insurance group. The five regions are responsible for operating the hospitals and psychiatric treatment in the regions.

## **Americans**

America is the land of free and strives to "be all that you can be." Nearly every American could agree that American values are based upon individual freedom, which may be considered individualism or independence. The United States solidified and guaranteed these values with the creation of the United States Constitution. It encompasses the belief that it is everyone's

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individual responsibility to choose his or her own destiny by treating everyone as equal and not judged by race, gender, religion, age, disability, or sexual preference.

The key to success and financial freedom is often attributed to education. Education is not limited to the classroom for Americans; it is extended by educational programs such as, extracurricular activities, and internships. Additionally, continued education through adult education programs are just as equally valued.

The American family unit consists of love, respect for all members and bringing happiness to each individual member. Individuality is emphasized by allowing children to disagree or even argue with their parents, which is regarded as a part of developing independence. American family values can easily be misunderstood by other cultures or perceived as a sign of disrespect.

The American Dream is attained by hard work, persistence, and resiliency. Success is measured by individual success, power, status, and wealth. In America, the government protects the rights of the individual and the individual does not need to protect those of the government. Progression is the key to success and change is constant in America. If one cannot keep up with what is happening they will be left behind because what was important yesterday is not necessarily important today.

The hunt for happiness in America can be quite difficult because it can be compared to an individual sport. Americans are quite competitive including the search for happiness. It is believed that happiness is directly attributed <https://assignbuster.com/the-relationship-between-culture-and-happiness-essay-samples/>

to a person's family and friends. Interestingly enough, possibly everything that defines an American could possibly be what is preventing us from being happy.

## **Conclusion**

One's happiness is influenced just as much by culture as it does by our goals and personalities. Most people in society desire some form of well-being psychologically as well as physically. Depending on what culture a person is a part of may be the defining factor for whether a person is happy or not. Many researchers from the field of happiness psychology have studied whether happiness could be regarded as universal. We now know that it is not. The pursuit of happiness varies greatly depending on one's culture and circumstances. What is certain is that happiness is linked to health, wealth, and education. Furthermore, whether or not one is a part of an individualist or collectivist nation, is it the individual that has priority or is it the in-group that makes someone happy?