

Article

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Psychological Universals in the Study of Happiness: From Social Psychology to Epicurean Philosophy

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Abstract | Within the framework of Positive Psychology and Needing Theories, this article reviews cultural practices or perceptions regarding what happiness is and how it can be achieved. Mainly research on Subjective Well-Being (SWB) has identified many cultural differences in the pursuit of happiness, often described as East-West splits along categories such as highly expressed affect vs. quiet affect, self-assertion vs. conformity to social norms, independence vs. interdependence and the like. However, it is the overall goal of this article to show that whatever the normative content of a culture's or subculture's view of happiness may be, it involves the same basic psychological needs beyond how people may choose to report or express resulting emotions. In particular, the theory of happiness proposed by the Hellenistic philosopher Epicurus provides broader, more inclusive categories and concepts which can be used to explain and possibly harmonize assumptions from particular traditions.

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Introduction

The pursuit of happiness has been a fundamental topic of philosophy for millennia and thrived especially in ancient Hellenistic philosophy. In psychology, the study of happiness has become a major field of inquiry notably since the advent of Positive Psychology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000; Seligman 2002). Positive Psychology is a strength-based approach, which, in its first version, understood “happiness” as a combination of the *pleasant*, the *good* [i.e. virtuous] and the *meaningful* life. In Seligman's (2011) final version, the concept of well-being in positive psychology has been defined through the acronym PERMA (Positive emotion [pleasure], Engagement [exercising virtue, finding flow], positive

Relationships, Meaning [using signature strengths for a larger purpose] and Achievement), though many authors also include factors from self-determination theory (autonomy, competence, relatedness) (Ryan and Deci 2000, 2017) and others. Such approaches have been understood as Needing Theories, in that they highlight basic needs that are required for humans to achieve happiness and well-being, even though PERMA is more of an integrative model (cf. Jayawickrem, Forgeard and Seligman 2012). Likewise, in this article I define happiness via Needing Theories broadly as the fulfillment of such basic psychological needs and use “happy” or “happiness” with quotation marks as a theory-independent proxy term for the subjectively positive and desirable state of being that theories of happiness are concerned with.

Some Cross-Cultural Conflicts in the Psychological Study of Happiness

However, since the very beginning of Positive Psychology (which gave “happiness” as a psychological field of inquiry public fame and opened it for interdisciplinary discussion) the field has been under criticism from social and cultural perspectives. This criticism stretches from the general question whether people really want to achieve happiness as a primary life goal, which is a basic assumption in most WEIRD (Western-Educated-Industrialized-Rich-Democratic) cultures, to social expectations and motivated behavior across nations, to specific predictors of happiness in a given society, to the expression of affect and the kinds of emotions that are (thought to be) felt when people describe themselves as “happy” or “satisfied”.

This article will address several such problems by combining the psychological study of happiness with Epicurean philosophy of happiness to demonstrate that drawing on both research traditions can solve several cross-cultural problems associated with the (largely Western) scientific study of happiness by drawing on broader, more inclusive categories to explain assumptions from particular traditions. This enumeration will yield the following hypotheses: 1) The pursuit of happiness is a universal and prime motivator of human action, 2) it is to some extent possible to resolve apparent cultural oppositions by drawing on more inclusive categories based on ancient philosophy and positive psychology, and 3) typical “Eastern” concepts of happiness are highly desired also in Western cultures. As will be shown, the third hypothesis organically results from the comparison of Eastern and Western definitions of the good life, especially when considered in light of larger philosophical concepts, such as *ataraxia* which cannot be directly studied empirically. Still, cultural differences do exist and are significant. They seem, however, to predominate (aside from particular cultural practices) on a deeper level concerning how the self is viewed and construed, and thus influence happiness on a more abstract level (e.g. Markus and Kitayama 1991; Uchida, Norasakkunkit and Kitayama 2004).

Consequently, it is the overall goal of this article to illustrate that, whatever the normative content of a culture’s or subculture’s view of happiness may be, it should involve the same basic psychological needs (here, in particular, drawing on PERMA) or even a similar neurochemical substrate.

The fact that the majority of studies on happiness come from individualist WEIRD cultures has been criticized since the onset of positive psychology. Still, it would seem unlikely that the hundreds of relevant empirical studies have little value in other cultures. A useful first approach to tackling this issue is to analyze subjective reactions of people from different cultures. Three illustrative cases of such cross-cultural objections are presented in a comment to Schwartz (2000) in *American Psychologist’s* special inaugural edition of Positive Psychology. In this article (Ahuvia 2001, 77) the author presents three conversations he had with Eastern Asian students:

- An Indian doctoral student showed him an American book on the cover of which it said, “we all want to be happy” and simply remarked “I don’t”.
- A Korean student told him explicitly he chose a career to be rich so he could bring face [see, e.g., Spencer-Oatey 2008] to his parents by buying them a new Mercedes.
- A Singaporean student reported he was going to marry his fiancée because it was socially expected from him, and not because he expected this union would make him happy.

Of course the question always arises whether individual case reports are generalizable to most of the population, and how ethical certain attitudes are from a normative philosophical perspective. Nonetheless, they illustrate some important cultural points which will first be considered through psychological research on culture, prior to syntheses with philosophical research in the re-analysis.

The first case relates to the more general question if happiness is, indeed, the goal (*télos*) of life as it has been assumed since Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095a), who held that happiness is desirable in its own right (1097a). In a similar way, Gautama Buddha stated in the Four Noble Truths (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*) that his philosophy offers a systematic way out of the omnipresent suffering of the world (Saṃyutta Nikāya, 56.11), which can be seen as a negative definition of happiness. However, Becker and Marecek (2008, 593), for example, criticize the “emphasis on gratification and feeling good as the endpoint of self-development” in the architecture of positive psychology, which, ex-

PLICITLY drawing on Aristotle, also assumes well-being as a central goal of human life. This is, in fact, a common misunderstanding. As Haybron (2007, 18) notes, “[w]hen happiness gets discussed at all, for instance, it is often only to be dismissed as a superficial state of cheerfulness. But perhaps the superficiality lies in the way people tend to *think* about happiness and related states, and not in the idea that such matters are of central importance in a good life.” This kind of hedonic view of happiness, as it is probably colloquially understood in most Western cultures, is dominant in Liking Theories, in which happiness, in its basic form, is understood as the sum of hedonic experiences (positive emotions) in the absence of negative experiences, often (falsely) thought to be achieved through fulfilling material or otherwise external wants (Lyubomirsky 2008). In Positive Psychology, however, positive emotion/pleasure is only one dimension of PERMA, and engagement and meaning may not always feel good. For instance, if a person chooses to climb a frozen cliff (Seligman 2002, 119), he is not really enjoying positive emotion, but he is in a state of flow because he does something subjectively meaningful that leads to personal growth while exercising signature strengths which are matched with an appropriate challenge (Csikszentmihalyi 1997; Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2002). Thus, Positive Psychology combines the hedonic elements of positive emotion with eudaimonic elements of engagement, meaning and fulfilling one’s human potential (Jayawickrem et al. 2012). As a result, the statement “I don’t want to be happy” probably means “I do not support a fully hedonic approach equating happiness with cheerfulness.”

The second case above can be explained by differences in the value individual achievement receives in different cultures. In North America, happiness is “most typically construed as a state contingent on both personal achievement and positivity of the personal self”, while in Eastern Asian cultures happiness is construed as a state “contingent on social harmony” and on a “balance between different selves in a relationship” (Uchida et al. 2004, 227). As a result, personal success is not as much a priority as strengthening relationships. To explain, the construal of the self, i.e. of personal identity or personhood, is culture-dependent and shapes cognition, emotion and motivation evoked in social life (see Markus and Kitayama 1991; Kitayama and Park 2007). According to the authors, in independent (individualistic) cultures the personal self is the center of thought, action and motivation. While

social relationships are important, they are somewhat instrumental as they are needed (the R in PERMA) for happiness and well-being. Likewise, individuals are highly motivated to seek affirmation of the set of internal attributes with which they construct a positive self. Logically, this is best achieved through personal achievement (see, e.g., Emmons 1991).

In contrast, in interdependent (collectivist) cultures, the personal self is of importance as well, but it is fundamentally construed in its relationship with others (vs. others are ‘simply’ psychologically *needed* for personal well-being). Likewise, the “boundary” between self and others is psychologically blurred and negotiated in social interaction. This type of construal of the self has clear implications on what kind of behavior predicts personal happiness. Oishi and Diener (2001), for example, have found that achievement of more independent goals increased reported happiness in a European-American sample, while in an Asian sample happiness increased as a function of the achievement of goals which were *less* independent, i.e. more interdependent (often understood as bringing happiness to parents). However, both striving for personal and interpersonal goals can activate the motivational system of the brain by indicating useful details and rewarding successful steps toward achieving a subjectively meaningful goal. Thus, both types of goals would equally fulfill the basic human need for achievement (the A in PERMA).

Such facts about the construal of the self also help explain the third case reported above, though additional factors also play a role in this case. It has been shown that expression of cheerfulness, self-esteem and personal achievement are typical features of “happiness” in individualist cultures, while more quiet affect, strengthening social relationships and maintaining social harmony are typical features of “happiness” in Asian collectivist cultures. Another aspect is the role of social norms and expectations. Suh, Diener, Oishi and Triandis (1998) studied a massive population (61 nations, $n=62,446$) to determine the impact of emotions versus norms as predictors of life satisfaction. This study revealed that emotions, not norms, were a strong predictor of happiness in more individualist nations, while in more collectivist nations both were strong predictors. As collectivist cultures are tighter than individualist cultures (e.g., Triandis 1994) and as uniqueness (vs. similarity with in-group members; Kim and Markus 1999) is not a priority, there is more

consensus on what is socially appropriate. In addition, the social and psychological consequences of deviating from social norms are much more severe than in individualist cultures. Accordingly, having one's behavior judged as appropriate becomes an important life task and members would pay close attention to what others feel, think or expect (Suh et al. 1998). In the words of the authors:

“In [collectivist] cultures, the major normative task is to maintain harmony with others by coming to terms with their needs and expectations. If necessary, individuals are expected to subordinate their personal feelings and wishes to the goals of their in-group (e.g., family). Whereas authenticity to one's inner feelings is often regarded as a virtue in individualist cultures, in many cases, it is construed as sign of personal immaturity or selfishness in collectivist cultures” (p. 483).

Consequently, adapting to social norms and fulfilling relational obligations is of prime importance in order to attain happiness. From a Western perspective, this would be seen as colliding with the fundamental assumption about the independence of each self as it was of prime importance in Renaissance Humanism and Kantian Enlightenment. For Kant, for example, exercising total autonomy by means of pure reason (*reine Vernunft*) untainted by social influence is seen as the only way to arrive at truly moral judgment (Kant 2011 [1785]). In contrast, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism promote a holistic worldview in which everything is connected to everything else (even though in Buddhism, for example, achieving clarity of mind (*vipassanā*) by mindfully abstracting from past experiences and future expectations is a necessary requirement to overcome suffering; Digha Nikāya, 22). However, in light of the analysis of the construction of the self in relation to others and the high priority given to social harmony, it becomes clear why in Asian collectivism social harmony (as, e.g., achieved by fulfilling relational expectations) is a higher predictor of happiness and life satisfaction than positive emotion. Still, social relations have been found to be an essential component of human well-being in various psychological needing theories – from *belonging* in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, to McClelland's *need for affiliation* (nAff) to *relatedness* in Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory, to *positive relationships* in positive psychology's PERMA system. Indeed, SWB research has suggested that positive relationships may

be the single most important source of happiness (Reis and Gable 2003), however culturally construed.

Philosophical Theory Building: Epicurean Notions of the Good Life

Thus far, some of the social psychology literature on culturally different views of happiness has been reviewed and interpreted via needing theories of happiness. Additionally, certain cultural practices can usefully be evaluated and synthesized under an Epicurean framework, which, drawing on some research on cultural dimensions (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 2010), perhaps unexpectedly indicates that certain Eastern values may be quite conducive the world over, at least if somewhat culturally mediated under an Epicurean framework.

Ancient eudaimonistic philosophies generally viewed “happiness” as the highest good (*summum bonum*). However, Epicurus qualified this concept significantly by distinguishing simple pleasures (*hēdonē kata kinesin*) and abiding pleasure (*katastēmatikē hēdonē*) (*Diogenes Laertios* [DL], X.136) as sources of happiness. Among the latter are friendship and social harmony (*Kyriai Doxai* [KD], XXVII), learning/discovery (*Gnomologium Vaticanum*, 27; DL, X.120), fearlessness (*Letter to Herodotos*, 37, 80; *Letter to Pythokles*, 116), and serenity/imperturbability (*ataraxia*), which is seen as the highest goal (*tēlos*) (*Letter to Menoikeus* [LMen], 128, 130). In the latter passage, Epicurus states: “When we say, then, that pleasure is the end and aim¹, we do not mean the pleasures of the insatiable or the simple pleasures of sensuality [but] the absence of pain in the body (*aponia*) and of trouble in the soul (*ataraxia*)”.

In order to assess which pleasures are conducive or harmful so as to achieve sustainable happiness, Epicurus distinguished between natural-and-necessary desires (the *katastēmatikē hēdonē*) and natural-and-unnecessary desires (chiefly *hēdonē kata kinesin* like sensual pleasures and materialistic possession). In addition, conceivable sources of happiness like reputation, glory or wealth are classified as unnatural or empty desires (LMen, 127) because they “tend to be vain or self-defeating, reaching out for a ‘boundless’ object that can yield no stable satisfaction” (Nussbaum 2009, 112). Such desires have no limit, i.e. they cannot be achieved with finite and ready to hand resources and there is no clear and definite criterion or limit of satisfaction (*ibid.*), and, thus, almost necessarily cause

stress and frustration. The logical (and neurological) antagonist of *ataraxía* is anxiety, and Epicurus identified unfounded fears, social isolation and striving for empty desires as strong predictors of anxiety.

This Epicurean framework is highly conducive to evaluating some cultural practices outlined above. It has been said that in many individualist nations happiness is to a significant extent defined in terms of personal achievement, while in collectivist cultures there may even be a fear of (such) happiness owing to its socially disruptive nature, e.g. as caused by envy from others (Joshano 2013). However, also in the US such striving may backfire, owing to increased self-focus and disappointed expectations (Gruber, Mauss and Tamir 2011). In contrast, in some Asian nations the conscious pursuit of happiness is positively correlated with happiness as its cooperative pursuit may increase social connectedness and well-being. At this point it needs to be noted that in the US loneliness is almost an epidemic and leads to enormous unhappiness (e.g., Cacioppo and Patrick 2008), which is not surprising in the context of the information presented on the psychological importance of social relations. Such contrasts show that both Eastern and Western approaches can cause both joy and anxiety. Either individuals are always under social scrutiny and may be judged harshly for fulfilling natural personal desires, or they are expected to constantly assert themselves and being unsuccessful may cause severe stress and frustration.

Epicurean philosophy solves this issue in an interesting way. On the one hand Epicurus held it that one should not be overly concerned with society's opinion (*DL*, 120) in order to avoid anxiety/achieve serenity and that practical reason (*phronēsis*) was imperative to arrive at the best (personal) decisions (*LMen*, 132). On the other hand, the ancient Epicureans lived in a family-like society of friends (e.g., Crespo 2014) founded on deep relationships and mutual trust and support. This is corroborated in a more global way in Ye, Ng and Lian (2014), who assessed whether nine well established dimensions of culture (like long-term orientation, indulgence/restraint, power distance, gender egalitarianism and more) are either positively or negatively related to subjective well-being. As it may not be possible to predict the effects of collectivism and individualism on SWB globally, the authors distinguished between in-group collectivism and institutional collectivism. They have found that the first is negatively related to SWB (see Arrindell

et al. 1997) as it emphasizes constraints on individuals (and, thus, may cause anxiety), while the latter was positively related to SWB as it stresses the feeling of social support while allowing individuals more personal freedom (p. 525). This distinction represents a highly Epicurean “best of both worlds” idea.

The authors, in addition, identified two dimensions that were very significantly related to SWB with 50% and 37% respectively: power distance (PDI) and gender egalitarianism (GEI). PDI refers to inequalities owing to prestige, status, wealth or civil rights and may cause people to feel they are at the mercy of forces beyond their control. GEI is about the degree to which a society minimizes gender role differences. Interestingly, Epicurus was the only ancient philosopher who allowed women and slaves into his school (or “society of friends”) and made no differences based on status or gender (see, e.g., Gordon 2004). This is part of his doctrine that “of all things that wisdom provides for living one's entire life in happiness, the greatest by far is the possession of friendship” (*KD*, 27), and this kind of friendship sees no role differences. In addition, the PDI factors clearly represent empty desires which Epicureans try to relinquish entirely since they are likely to produce anxiety and clearly stand in the way of serenity/imperturbability (*ataraxía*) and self-sufficiency (*autárkeia*). Thus, these findings bear powerful implications on what it means for a society to foster citizens' happiness based both on the Epicurean view of the good life and empirical evidence corroborating this philosophy.

An interesting question is the general status of serenity as the highest good, which is a quiet affect emotion typically associated with Eastern Asian culture (see Lee, Lin, Huang and Fredrickson, 2013). Interestingly, Schwartz (2000) already warned against the disorientation the pressure of too much choice may cause in many WEIRD nations, implying a need for more contemplation and (Epicurean) self-sufficiency (*LMen*, 130). In addition, a very recent study (DelleFave et al. 2016) researched lay definitions of happiness across 12 countries from different continents and coded reports along a number of categories. The authors found that 42% of definitions were psychological in nature, with 19% of definitions referring to family and relations. Interestingly, most psychological definitions across all continents stressed a type of “harmony”, described as inner peace, serenity, balance, detachment, peace of mind or tranquility (only Cro-

atia and Mexico did not stress this point), indicating the universal value of this *télos* and challenging some of the “clear split” research cited above. It is also my own observation as a teacher of positive psychology, Buddhist philosophy and Hellenistic theories of happiness that perhaps people in WEIRD cultures feel disoriented and thus describe a need for some kind of inner balance. Delle-Fave et al. (2016) themselves noticed the analogy to Epicurean *ataraxia* and note that “harmony presents the core feature of happiness in its individual and social manifestations, as it presupposes connections or bonds at the intra and interpersonal level” (p. 19).

Conclusion

This article has reviewed a number of cultural differences between Western individualist and (predominantly) Asian collectivist cultures. Such differences stretch from the general question concerning whether people really want to achieve happiness as a primary life goal, to social expectations and motivated behavior across nations, to specific predictors of happiness in a given society, and the kinds of emotions or expression of affect that are felt when people describe themselves as “happy” or “satisfied”. By utilizing concepts from both Positive Psychology and Epicurean philosophy, broader, more inclusive categories can be created to explain assumptions from individual traditions. As “happiness” seems to be quite universally a prime motivator of human action, diverse cultural practices may address very similar basic psychological needs. Beyond how people may choose to report or express resulting emotions, the state of serenity and social harmony appears to be a strong predictor of happiness the world over.

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Endnotes

[1] This statement has been heavily criticized in Greek and Roman antiquity and beyond as many philosophers found it inconceivable that “pleasure [hedonic happiness] and virtue [eudaimonic happiness] are inseparable” (LMen, 132). However, recent research on the functional neuroanatomy of pleasure and happiness (see Kringelbach and Berridge 2009; Berridge & Kringelbach 2013 for the following information) seems to corroborate Epicurus’ hypothesis that well-being involves both eudaimonic (abiding) and hedonic (simple) pleasure as both have been empirically found to converge in the same individuals. Specifically, brain mechanisms (interlinked subcortical hedonic hot spots, cortical pleasure coding in regions of the orbitofrontal cortex, mesolimbic dopamine transmission, and others) involved in simple pleasures overlap with those for higher-order pleasures. It is probable that eudaimonic/higher/abiding pleasures such as socializing, altruism or transcendence all draw upon the same neurobiological roots – hedonic brain activation and cortical pleasure coding – that originally evolved for sensory pleasures. In addition, studies

using deep brain stimulation and magnetoencephalography provide evidence for a view of happiness as freedom from distress (*aponía* and *ataraxía*?). Finally, neurobiological research on “happiness” allows for the conclusion that hedonic happiness can be conceived as ‘liking’ without ‘wanting’, i.e. as a state of contentment without disruptive desires which can spiral into maladaptive patterns such as addiction. This can be seen to empirically corroborate Epicurus’ emphasis on relinquishing empty desires (see below) and on achieving self-sufficiency (*autárkeia*) via practical reason (*phrónēsis*).