



# Happiness, culture, and context

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**Abstract:** The first part of this paper discusses why statistical comparisons of happiness and wellbeing are insufficient. It considers criticisms of these statistical comparisons, and discusses how, while they are useful for some purposes, they do not enable fully adequate cross-cultural comparison. The paper then discusses the problem of surveys both in terms of language, given the subtly different terms in different languages for happiness, and in terms of culture, arguing that difference in cultures can cause the findings of surveys to be less than transparent. It then turns to a consideration of culture itself, which has become increasingly problematic in anthropology in recent decades. 'Culture' is a term that has been shifting in its meanings. Culture no longer refers simply to 'the way of life of a people,' but also to the array of choices individuals make from 'the global cultural supermarket'; culture in both these senses needs to be analyzed in terms of how it develops in the individual, as recent anthropological theories have been exploring. This new-found complexity of culture does not mean that researchers on subjective wellbeing should abandon culture as a variable; rather, they should augment statistical surveys of wellbeing, which are based on the older, conventional conception of culture, with ethnographic interviewing conducted by researchers who understand the language and culture in a given society. Only on this basis can the cross-cultural study of wellbeing reach its full potential, the paper argues, a potential uniting of different academic disciplines in a common endeavor, that of fully understanding what happiness means and how it can best be attained in the world.

**Keywords:** happiness, wellbeing, well-being, statistical surveys, ethnographic research, culture, the cultural supermarket

## 1.1 Why the statistical comparison of wellbeing is not enough

Research into happiness and wellbeing has become increasingly sophisticated in recent decades. In an earlier era, wellbeing of societies was often assumed, particularly by economists, to equate unproblematically with per capita income (Conceição & Bandura, 2008: 2). Only in recent decades has it become fully understood that wellbeing cannot be equated with such a measure, but is more complex (McGillivray, 2007), involving different individuals and different societies in how they comprehend their lives.

This shift has been led particularly by psychologists and other scholars emphasizing 'subjective wellbeing' (for example Diener & Suh, 2000), focusing upon how individuals across different societies report upon their wellbeing, rather than relying upon objective measures. Various prominent surveys of wellbeing ask, 'Taken all together, how would you say that things are these days: would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?' Alternatively, they may ask people to rate their life satisfaction on a scale of 0 to 10 (Conceição & Bandura, 2008: 6). These statistics are then used to compare various groups as to their degree



of wellbeing. This effort at statistical measurement, the dominant form of research into wellbeing today in the social sciences, seems, on the surface, to be straightforward. But can statistical measures of wellbeing yield the kind of transparent comparison of wellbeing that their proponents seek?

Many authorities have argued not. Kahneman and Tversky, after many attempts, eventually abandoned their attempts to find an impartial scale of subjective wellbeing apart from social context (Easterbrook, 2004: 167). As Kahneman and Krueger write in a recent paper,

How should a social scientist interpret answers to questions about global life satisfaction or happiness? After all, life satisfaction [...] is a global retrospective judgment, which in most cases is constructed only when asked and is determined in part by the respondent's current mood and memory, and by the immediate context (2006: 6).

As they explain about surveys of subjective wellbeing:

One of the difficulties of using data on subjective wellbeing is that individuals may interpret and use the response categories differently. If Jim says that he is 'very satisfied' and Tim says that he is only 'satisfied,' is Jim really satisfied more than Tim? Maybe. But maybe Tim is the type of person who rarely uses superlatives to describe himself, either when he is jubilant or depressed, while Jim tends to extremes in his self-descriptions. To put it another way, when Tim answers a 4 about the intensity of a particular emotion, maybe that is the equivalent of a 6 for Jim (Kahneman & Krueger, 2006: 18).

They offer an alternative measure in this paper, the "U-index," for measuring the mood of respondents over a more extended period, giving a fuller sense of subjective wellbeing than measurements of life satisfaction alone can allow (Kahneman & Krueger, 2006: 19). In a similar vein, Diener (2000: 34-35) discusses how, because subjective wellbeing consists of different components, it should be measured in multiple ways: not just in terms of life satisfaction, but also in terms of specific domains such as work and family, as well as levels of affect over time. These approaches reveal how the quantitative study of wellbeing is becoming progressively more sophisticated. And yet they do not fully solve the basic underlying problem that Kahneman and Krueger identify: Given the kind of variation described above, can statistical measurements of wellbeing ever be transparently valid, or are these measurements too imprecise, too prone to the variables of subjective interpretation to be fully reliable?

I maintain that statistical measurements of wellbeing and happiness are indeed valid and useful in some contexts. The variation that Kahneman and Krueger describe may perhaps cancel itself out if there is a sufficiently large sample size, although this itself would need to be measured in survey questions designed to uncover the range of intensity of feelings from individual to individual. Given the current 'state of the art,' if a given society were to be measured as to wellbeing over a period of years or decades, using a sufficiently large sample size and the sophisticated array of survey instruments now available, thanks to the work of scholars like Diener, Kahneman, and Krueger, and many others, the changes in wellbeing shown statistically over that period might indeed be indicative of something very real. However, once we extend this comparison from that of individuals in a given society to that of societies across the globe, the validity of measurement becomes more doubtful.

## 2. The statistical measurement of wellbeing across societies

Kahneman and Krueger describe the difficulties of subjective wellbeing in terms of individuals, but even greater are the difficulties in comparing wellbeing across societal and cultural bounds. As Diener and Tov have written,

Well-being can be understood to some degree in universal terms, but must also be understood within the framework of each culture [...] There are pancultural experiences of SWB (Subjective Well-Being) that can be compared across cultures, but [...] there are also culture-specific patterns that make cultures unique in their experiences of well-being (2007: 691).

They are implying that cross-cultural statistical measures alone are not enough; rather, each culture must be understood on its own terms.

This represents a new mode of thinking in Diener's work, a new methodological caution in the work of a scholar who is arguably the most influential figure in the psychological study of wellbeing. Earlier, in Diener and Suh's edited book *Culture and Subjective Well-Being* (2000), there was a generally unquestioned assumption that cross-cultural statistical measures of wellbeing reveal truth. Suh's chapter in this book, for example, asks, "Why are North Americans happier than East Asians?" (2000: 64, 72). This question assumes that statistical survey results reflect the reality of happiness or its lack, rather than being the product of surveys themselves and their culturally shaped responses.

Americans, a more detached observer has noted, may "inflate their reports of happiness [...] Most modern Americans say they are very or extremely happy, and one must be skeptical about whether their lives are really so wonderful" as the answers they give to survey questions indicate (Baumeister, 1991: 210). Indeed, in a society declaring in one of its founding documents the inalienable right to 'the pursuit of happiness,' its members seem all but culturally required to pursue and proclaim happiness in order to be fully American. In East Asian societies such as Japan, on the other hand, personal modesty is a key social value—one should not boast about one's success or declare too loudly one's wellbeing. To proclaim happiness, even in an anonymous survey, is felt by at least a few people I have spoken with to be an affront to good manners. Thus it seems plausible that North Americans are not "happier than East Asians," but are simply more willing to proclaim their happiness on a survey form (Mathews & Izquierdo, 2009: 7).

Psychologists investigating wellbeing have become increasingly aware of these difficulties. Diener, Oishi, and Lucas (2003: 411) note how North Americans may engage in self-serving biases such as self-enhancement more than East Asians, contributing to this difference in reports of subjective wellbeing, and also ask whether "impression management" might lead to different subjective wellbeing scores across cultures (2003: 413). In subsequent work, Oishi (2010) has demonstrated an acute insightfulness as to cultural variations in conceptions of wellbeing. He and scholars such as Helliwell *et al.* (2010), Veenhoven (2010) and Frey (2008) are becoming progressively more aware of the impact of sociocultural differences on wellbeing. However, because they are professionally committed to the statistical measurement of wellbeing, they can only note these differences while continuing with measurements that seem unable to take these differences fully into account.

As of this writing, the latest major work on cross-cultural wellbeing is Helliwell, Layard, and Sachs' *World Happiness Report* (2012). It is sophisticated in its careful parsing of different types of measurements of happiness, distinguishing between current emotion, remembered emotion, and life evaluation and also in acknowledging cross-cultural variation. Nonetheless, it

never fully analyzes statistical data in terms of sociocultural context in its chapters. In their chapter in the book, Helliwell and Wang simply say that:

one basic check, once comparable data are assembled, is to see to what extent the answers drawn from different nations and cultures appear to be influenced by the same factors, and to the same extent. As it turns out, the cross-cultural commonality of the correlates of life evaluation is substantial (2012: 19).

This may be true, but a degree of cross-cultural commonality does not indicate that culture can be ignored.

This does not mean that the cross-cultural measurement of wellbeing is without value, despite what some critics seem to argue.<sup>1</sup> These statistical comparisons viewed very broadly seem indeed to be accurate. When Helliwell and Wang (2012: 12-13) note that several societies in Northern Europe have far higher ratings in life evaluation than do several of the more poverty-stricken societies in sub-Saharan Africa, where life expectancy is almost thirty years shorter and poverty is endemic, the truth of this seems indubitable. The broad fact that the statistical data from developed-world societies represent those societies as happier than developing-world societies is important, and by no means self-evident: the data teach us something. But other, less extreme variations in these statistical data, such as the fact that northern European societies show on average a higher degree of happiness than East Asian societies, calls for cultural contextualization of a kind that these authors do not provide. Indeed, I argue that all of the subtle differences in happiness between different societies shown in the data require cultural contextualization in order to be fully comprehensible.

### 3. Why and how culture must be considered

Scholars of wellbeing have argued that the effect of culture on wellbeing is not especially pronounced. The psychologists Diener, Oishi, and Lucas (2003: 419), analyzing two large samples, maintain that between-nation differences amount to 12% and 15% of variance in life satisfaction, with much of the rest due to individual differences within societies.<sup>2</sup> The sociologist Ruut Veenhoven in 2005 told me during a personal conversation that in his own and others' survey research on happiness, statistical analysis reveals that only a small degree ("no more than 20 percent") of variation between societies can be attributed to cultural factors. These views imply that overemphasis on cultural difference in the measurement of wellbeing cross-culturally may be misguided; culture may not be all that important.

But while I certainly do not claim that culture is everything, as I will shortly discuss, to use survey results that may be culturally problematic to demonstrate that culture does not matter leads to the downplaying of culture as a foregone conclusion. The situation is like that of the joke about a man searching for his car keys at night. He is asked, 'Where did you lose them?' and points into the blackness: 'Over there.' 'Well, why are you looking for them here?' 'The light's better here' (Mathews & Izquierdo, 2009: 7). If valid knowledge is viewed as being only

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<sup>1</sup> One recent analysis (Eckersley, 2009) argues that Western liberal democracies rank highest in wellbeing surveys largely because of the skewed methodologies of investigators. "SWB is a dubious measure for comparing countries because of cultural differences in response and because other attributes and attitudes also need to be considered... If there is a 'holy grail' of a single indicator that accurately measures how well nations and people are faring, SWB is not it; the search must continue" (2009: 9, 10).

<sup>2</sup> As Diener, Oishi, and Lucas indicate (2003: 410), it is easier to compare nations than cultures, since the bounds of the latter may not be clear. This is quite true: culture today in one sense cannot be thought of apart from the context of nation-states, which shape their citizens into adhering to a common cultural framework. However, as I shortly discuss, culture today is more complex than this.

that which can be revealed through statistical measures, then that which is not statistically measured is rendered irrelevant, even though it may have fundamental value.

Scholars such as those cited above are well aware of the problems in using surveys and statistical measures to compare wellbeing across cultures, societies, and nations, but again, because their professions are based on the use of statistics, they attempt to address these problems by using still more surveys and statistical manipulations. This is not meant to in any way disrespect the scholars mentioned in the previous paragraphs, who are pioneers in the study of happiness in their disciplines and who have done very significant research. It is only to suggest that perhaps the answer to the problem of cross-cultural statistical measurement lies not in further statistical measurement, but rather to move beyond such measurement. If cross-cultural statistical measurement of wellbeing cannot fully explicate sociocultural difference, as all the studies thus far discussed seem to indicate, then other kinds of explication become necessary.

In interpreting statistics purporting to compare wellbeing across societies, anthropologists and linguists and other scholars who have expert cultural knowledge of these different societies must be consulted; otherwise the meaning of the data will remain open to question. There are two levels of problems that must be dealt with in the cross-cultural statistical measurement of happiness. The first is at the level of translation: the term for 'happiness' or 'life satisfaction' in one language may have subtly different nuances than that in another, affecting the data arrived at in surveys; this problem may be in some cases uncorrectable, but at least it must be acknowledged. Thus, for example, the Japanese terms *shiiawase* or *kōfuku* have subtly different implications than the English term *happiness*, as does too the Cantonese term *hoisam*, with speakers of Japanese and Cantonese using these terms in slightly different contexts than speakers of English use the term happiness. Surveys purporting to statistically compare happiness cross-culturally must acknowledge and account for these differences. A term such as *life satisfaction* may be more easily translatable cross-culturally, but still may be problematic, since in some societies the term may appear more alien and experience-distant than in others, leading to subtly skewed statistical results. Even a slight difference in nuance may result in a quite significant difference in survey results; but investigators into cross-cultural subjective wellbeing have for the most part not adequately addressed this fact.

But the problem is not only linguistic. There is also the broader problem of cultural understanding, whereby the cultural context of happiness and wellbeing must be fully unpacked in any given society in order to understand statistical measurements of happiness in that society. How much does happiness matter in a given society? It is no coincidence, I argue, that happiness researchers have been based overwhelmingly in Western Europe and particularly the United States, societies emphasizing the individual pursuit of happiness; in many other societies, the individual pursuit of happiness is not of such salience (see, for example, Mathews, 1996: 12-49). The personal pursuit of happiness is more highly valued in some places in the world than in others. Beyond this, the array of particular cultural meanings of happiness differs in different sociocultural contexts. I address this issue in the final section of this paper, in advocating interviews and their analysis as a supplement to surveys and their statistical data; but first there is another problem that must be addressed. After this paper's initial discussion of the importance of culture, we must ask: what is culture?

#### **4. The shifting meanings of culture**

Ironically, at the same time that researchers from other disciplines have been realizing the importance of culture, anthropologists have been turning away from the concept. In

anthropology today, it is only a slight exaggeration to say that the word 'culture' can no longer be used with a straight face. If I were to go to an American Anthropological Association meeting and speak of 'Japanese culture' or 'American culture' or 'Chinese culture,' I might not even be argued with, but merely smirked at as being hopelessly naïve. Culture today, in the anthropological world, can be used in its adjectival form, but not as a noun; one can speak of something being cultural, in terms of it being socially constructed, but not of 'Indonesian culture,' or 'the culture of Turkey' (see Brightman, 1995: 510). This is because it has become increasingly apparent to anthropologists in recent decades that societies do not have walls around them. There is no absolutely separate set of values distinguishing all those who are Japanese or German or Brazilian from all those who are not; rather there are so many borderlands and other imprecisions that all such cultural comparison becomes questionable. As Hannerz has written,

Humankind has...bid farewell to that world which could...be seen as a cultural mosaic, of separate pieces with hard, well-defined edges. Cultural connections increasingly reach across the world (1997: 107).

Of course some elements of separate cultures do indeed remain; culture in the older sense of the term cannot be dismissed. An observer of a street-corner interaction in Tokyo will know immediately that it is Tokyo, not Paris or Cairo: interpersonal modes of behavior mark it instantly as Japan as opposed to France or Egypt. Culture in this sense may be defined as "the way of life of a people" (Mathews, 2000: 4): the way people living within a particular society are linguistically, culturally, socially and institutionally shaped to relate to the world, and behave in certain distinctly recognizable ways. This is the standard definition of culture that anthropology textbooks have long offered; and this is the conception of culture that the analysts discussed in the preceding section seem more or less to adhere to.

This aspect of culture clearly exists, particularly as set forth by national states today in their patriotic exhortations and educational curricula, seeking to bind their disparate populations into a single entity (Hall, 1992: 291-99). However, it by no means exhausts culture in today's world. Culture can no longer be seen only as the way of life of people in a given society, anthropologists argue, in contrast to the ways of life of people in other societies. We also increasingly live within a global cultural supermarket, where we pick and choose aspects of our cultural worlds. Thus, for example, a Mumbai entrepreneur may read Dale Carnegie or Stephen Covey on how to conduct one's life, while a New York stockbroker may practice yoga for similar guidance; the Seoul doctor may follow Christ while her European counterpart engages in Buddhist meditation. Culture in this sense may be defined as "the information and identities available from the global cultural supermarket" (Mathews, 2000: 5): we choose aspects of our cultural world from the global culture that surrounds us, as befits our personal environments, desires, and characters. The cultural supermarket has become increasingly prevalent in today's world, particularly because of mass media: it can plausibly be argued that in crucial respects, two football players or fashion models or *anime* aficionados or clinical psychologists located in Beijing and New York, or Madrid and Tokyo, or Auckland and Rio de Janeiro, might typically have more in common with one another than they might have with their own parents or grandparents, or with the vast majority of their fellow citizens.

Some readers may ask, 'How important is the cultural supermarket, really, in understanding cultural difference?' The answer to this question depends very much on what aspects of culture are being investigated. If, for example, the investigator is exploring linguistic categories, then the cultural supermarket may not matter very much, since one's native language is not chosen but acquired in a child's earliest years. If, on the other hand, the

investigator is exploring attitudes towards sexuality, or an array of other topics about which there are ranges of different personal views, then the cultural supermarket may be of considerable importance, and can hardly be ignored—even though, undoubtedly, choices from the cultural supermarket are influenced by one’s underlying cultural background. Research into happiness may involve both these realms: both culture as ‘the way of life of a people’ and culture as ‘the information and identities available within the global cultural supermarket.’ In order to explicate this, let me now turn to how culture develops in individual minds.

## 5. Culture and the individual

The two concepts of culture I have just discussed co-exist within individual minds. To a very rough extent, the wealthier a society is, and the more individuals within that society are educated and computer literate, the more the cultural supermarket may play a significant role in individuals’ lives. I estimate that full consumers in the cultural supermarket have in recent years constituted the top 15 to 20 percent of the world’s population in terms of wealth, whether the middle class of developed societies or the upper class of developing societies. However, with the increasing development of the internet, cheap computers, and smart phones, as well as air transportation, the reach of the cultural supermarket is becoming significantly expanded. My recent research has investigated African and South Asian traders and merchants in their global routes, and they too may be heavily involved in the global cultural supermarket, despite having little money (Mathews, 2011: 207). Because of the development of technology, and because the cultural supermarket does not directly require money in order to be consumed from,<sup>3</sup> the cultural supermarket is increasingly sweeping the globe.

Choices from the global cultural supermarket are heavily conditioned by one’s social and national worlds. For every one American like John Walker Lindh, the California teenager who, after discovering Islamic websites, eventually became an American Taleban (BBC, 2002), there are hundreds or thousands of Americans who become evangelical Christians; by the same token, for every one Indian who is a fan of Western rock music, there are hundreds or thousands who find their musical passions expressed in the songs of Bollywood. Nonetheless, the global cultural supermarket is readily apparent today: while almost 30 percent of Koreans are Christian, by one account 28 percent of Americans of baby-boomer age claim to believe in reincarnation (Roof, 1994: 72). They may formulate these beliefs from within their own cultural patternings—some concepts of reincarnation in the United States emphasize personal growth, as reincarnation in India typically does not, just as Korean Christianity takes on forms that American Christianity typically does not. Still, the culture one lives in is no longer a reliable indicator of one’s spiritual beliefs, given the global cultural supermarket, and this is true in a number of other realms as well, from one’s taste in music and art to one’s choice of sexual partners. We each pick and choose from an array of available global choices, and our personal identities are shaped accordingly.

Of course this is not true in terms of one’s native language, and deep-seated, often subconscious, cultural norms—those underlying norms corresponding to Bourdieu’s term *habitus* (1977: 72-95), the principles that cause us to recreate in its own image the social world that has created us. These features of ‘the way of life of a people’ stay with one throughout one’s life. But so too, today, is the increasingly important assumption that one can in many

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<sup>3</sup> The material supermarket cannot be consumed from without money, but the cultural supermarket can: all that one encounters in life can at least theoretically serve as elements within the cultural supermarket. But to most fully consume, education is highly useful if not essential, as is familiarity with global mass media through the internet.

respects make one's own life. Just as capitalism and consumerism have swept the globe in the economic realm, so too has adherence to the cultural supermarket within the cultural realm – increasingly we are all cultural consumers.

Once we allow for the existence of the global cultural supermarket, then culture as earlier discussed by Diener and other psychologists becomes insufficient as a variable, because it involves only culture as 'the way of life of a people' and not culture as 'the information and identities available from the global cultural supermarket.' Culture as 'the way of life of a people' is most apparent, as noted above, at the level of interpersonal interactions,<sup>4</sup> as well as underlying cultural assumptions. This aspect of culture clearly influences happiness to a substantial degree; but happiness also has a large individual component, as linked not only to one's individual experiences and one's choices from the cultural supermarket but also to one's genetic endowment (Layard, 2005: 55-58): whether one is innately wired to 'be happy.' This is culturally influenced, but it is also acutely individual. When we say of someone, in an Anglo-American context, 'I think she's crazy, but if it makes her happy, what can I say?' we are acknowledging this realm: we have no comprehension of how she finds her happiness, but feel obliged to accept her individual pursuit of happiness.

This 'individual pursuit of happiness' has a particular American ring to it, of course, and is much less emphasized in some other sociocultural contexts; but there is a universal element to the individual pursuit of happiness because of our nature as human beings. We are social beings subject to the ideas and wills of others, yet we are also alone in our own subjective consciousnesses, which no one else can finally fully know. Only we, as individuals, can know whether we are happy or not.<sup>5</sup> Happiness in this sense is primarily in the realm of individual psychology, involving all the different genetic and environmental factors that have shaped a given individual, as I have noted. However, on this basis, it is also a matter of the cultural supermarket: of how individuals have made an array of cultural choices that have shaped their happiness on the basis of deep, taken-for-granted cultural shaping, and a matter of the social worlds that individuals live within, which evaluate and comment upon individuals' choices.

## 6. The cultural shaping of the individual

The cultural shaping of the individual takes place at three levels (Mathews, 2000: 11-16). At the deepest level, there is that which is taken-for-granted: this is the shaping of one's native language and of *habitus*; this is made up of culture as 'the way of life of a people,' but also of culture as 'the information and identities available from the global cultural supermarket,' if the idea of free choice as to one's self and happiness is assumed and unquestioned. This level cannot usually be questioned, unless a profound enlightenment or a wrenching life event brings it fully to consciousness: we can't get at our taken-for-granted unless it is brought to light and examined, but this may be traumatic or simply impossible. Consider, for example,

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<sup>4</sup> Psychologists who discuss 'individualistic cultures' and 'collectivist cultures' emphasize the interpersonal realm as shaping East Asian cultures far more than Western cultures. There is a degree of truth to this, but I view the distinction as partly bogus: 'Eastern' and 'Western' societies are both 'individualistic' and 'collectivist' (see Bellah *et al.* [1985] for a discussion of American collectivism straining against a dominant individualistic language; see Mathews (1996) for a discussion of Japanese and American individuals making their lives in diverse ways within and against the cultural, social, and institutional poles of 'individualism' and 'collectivism'). In fact, all human beings are rooted in both the individual and the collective, however much their cultural vocabulary and social and institutional imperatives may encourage expression leaning towards one or the other of these poles.

<sup>5</sup> And of course even we ourselves typically cannot know with clarity whether we are happy or not; we may know this only in fleeting insights, or in retrospect. As I discuss at this paper's close, we do not know ourselves, which is the great conundrum at the heart of research on subjective wellbeing.

how difficult it is for us to understand how our native language shapes our thinking: even if we are bilingual, we cannot easily analyze this realm because it is too deeply lodged within our minds.

At the middle level, there is that which one has no choice but to follow; this is the level of *shikata ga nai* (Japanese) and *mouh bahnfaat lah* (Cantonese), terms meaning roughly, 'that's the way it goes'/'there's nothing I can do about it.' At this level, unlike the deepest level, the individual consciously understands the shaping he/she must follow, but can do little to resist: 'I have to work/obey the boss/enrol my children in school/stop at the stoplight,' and so on—the level of institutional and social rules and pressures. This level too is universal, although there is no exactly appropriate English translation to convey the meaning of these Japanese and Cantonese terms.

At the surface level, the individual, shaped on the basis of the bottom two levels, consciously shapes his or her life. This top level is one at which we believe we have our own free choice: 'I chose this Buddhist path because I felt it was the most suitable path to obtaining wisdom / I married him because he was clearly the right person for me / I choose to listen to Frank Sinatra because he truly touches my heart as no other music does.' But these choices are based on our two deeper levels of shaping: they are not really free. We choose on the basis of how we have been shaped to make our choices. We also choose on the basis of our social worlds and their judgments, and most broadly at the level of contemporary global capitalism and what it offers, making some choices—the global brands we all know so well—far more readily available than others. Choice is free only to a very limited degree, but we typically believe it to be free. The metaphor of the cultural supermarket is in this sense a bit misleading, because it may be seen as implying that cultural choice is as free and easy as choosing flavors of ice cream or brands of beer, but it is not: our choices are often personally agonizing and also in large part preordained by our underlying cultural shaping.

These levels have direct implications for happiness. At the deepest level of one's cultural shaping are likely to be found those cultural patterns and shapings of language, gender, social class, and familial background that largely determine the basic conditions for happiness. These determinations aren't known to the individual, but it is essential to be aware of them analytically. At the middle level are those factors the individual recognizes as blocking happiness: 'I would be happy if only I didn't have to work at this job / had more money / wasn't married to my husband / didn't have such awful parents / grew up in the kind of society that would have recognized my talents,' and so on. At the surface level are the efforts one makes to become happy despite the unconscious and conscious barriers of the deeper levels, whether these efforts involve religious belief, self-help books, self-exhortations, or sexual encounters.

Other anthropological analysts have offered different accounts of how the individual is culturally shaped (for example, Strauss & Quinn, 1994 discuss cultural schemas as modes by which collective cultural concepts are rendered individual); but anthropologists in general today are aware that culture is far more complicated and individuated than was once assumed. Before happiness can be fully understood and compared cross-culturally, these complexities must be understood and accounted for, I argue. And this necessarily requires ethnographic interviews: qualitative rather than quantitative research involving not statistical analysis, based on who interviewees represent, but rather discourse analysis, based on what interviewees say and how they say it within their larger social, cultural, and economic context.

## 7. What can culturally-sensitive research on happiness most fruitfully consist of?

Culture thus matters, but the meaning of culture has of late become much more difficult to pinpoint than was earlier assumed. Thus, what might research on happiness best consist of? I argue that cross-cultural comparison of happiness on a country-by-country basis using only statistical measures is insufficient; there are too many contextual elements that are left out, such as those discussed above.

In every society, there is both a particular broad cultural context, and also substantial individual differences, which are apparent in individuals' choices from the global cultural supermarket. These individual differences may seem to lessen the importance of culture as conventionally conceived of: since individuals can increasingly to some extent pick and choose their cultural shapings, why should we be so concerned about conventionally defined cultural differences? However, in a broader sense, culture's contemporary complexities make all the more important the inclusion of culture as a variable. Without this inclusion, we cannot understand the range of different individual comprehensions, motivations and lives lived within common cultural frameworks. We must understand not only conventional cultural differences, but also how these shape individuals' arrays of choices from the cultural supermarket.

For this reason, cross-cultural analysis of happiness must be done on an individual basis through ethnographic interviewing, as well as on a statistical basis through cross-cultural surveys. This makes research on happiness more difficult; but through cross-cultural surveys coupled with close interviewing of a range of individuals, culture in all its complexity can appropriately be taken into account. Interviews of individuals, done in depth and thoroughly analyzed, can bring a great wealth of knowledge about the complexities of individual lives as lived within their cultural, social, and institutional contexts, knowledge that statistical data alone cannot provide.<sup>6</sup>

It will take effort and expense to include individual interviews within cross-cultural statistical surveys of subjective wellbeing, but not as much effort as might be imagined. If interviewees are carefully chosen to form an accurate representation of the population at large of a society, in terms of gender, age, income, education level, place of residence, and religious belief or its lack, then I estimate that anywhere from 50 to 150 interviews would be sufficient, depending on a country's population and variation, to provide enough of a detailed depiction of individual senses of happiness to enable fruitful cross-cultural comparison.<sup>7</sup> (See Bernard, 2002: 203-239, on the methodological bases of anthropological interviewing.) These interviews should be analyzed not in terms of statistical analysis but in terms of discourse analysis, the

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<sup>6</sup> It might be suggested that because quantitative cross-cultural survey data is used to rank societies in terms of happiness or some other attribute and to compute correlations between happiness and other measured variables, I should explain how my proposed interviews would improve the ability of quantitative survey methodology to do these things. But in fact, ethnographic interviews will not improve the ability of quantitative survey methodology to do these things. My argument is rather that quantitative surveys used to compare happiness cross-culturally, however sophisticated their methodology, are inherently insufficient, and must be augmented by ethnographic interviewing and by subsequent cross-cultural analysis to reach their full analytic potential.

<sup>7</sup> Ethnographic interviewing as to happiness is relatively new in anthropology (but see the chapters in Mathews & Izquierdo, [2009]); there is little disciplinary consensus on what an ethnographic survey of happiness in a given society might entail in terms of numbers of interviews. I have written a book comparing Japanese and American senses of 'what makes life worth living' (Mathews, 1996) that involved extensive interviews of 50 Japanese and 50 Americans, but in the book itself, only nine pairs of people were closely compared. This was seen as being anthropologically legitimate, since these people were portrayed as individuals living their unique lives within Japanese and American contexts, rather than as representatives of Japan and the United States.

close examination of what interviewees say and how they say it. The analysis of these discourses, in all their complexity, can provide a thorough sociocultural grounding to the uncontextualized statistics of so many psychological, sociological, and economic cross-cultural analyses of wellbeing.<sup>8</sup>

## 8. Ethnographic interviews on happiness and their analysis

There are a number of ways in which such interviews might be conducted, but let me offer a simple prototype. These interviews could conceivably be conducted in one session of two hours in length, although two sessions would be ideal, to enable follow-up questions and observe differences in mood as well as to obtain a greater degree of familiarity and thus frankness, as I have discovered from my own interviews. These interviews would ask about 1) a person's life history ('Tell me the story of your life: what's happened to you over the course of your life? Tell me about your work / family / friends / hopes / dreams / fears / religious beliefs. How do you view your life? Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your life? On a scale of 1 to 10, would you describe yourself as happy? Why? Why not? Explain why you see your life in this way. What do you think happiness means for you?') and 2) that person's senses of what happiness means in their society ('How do people in your society typically think of a happy life? Who do you know who is most happy, and why? Who do you know who is least happy and why? How are you similar to and different in your sense of what makes you happy as compared to other people in your society? Do you see your society as being a happy society? In what ways yes? In what ways no?'). Questions such as these would enable the interviewer to both discover how a given individual views and pursues his or her life and happiness, and also how he/she views his/her society at large in its happiness, views which in an individual sense would be of limited validity, but when taken in aggregate would provide valuable cultural insights.

Interviews would need to be recorded, transcribed and translated, with notes taken as well concerning individuals' facial and bodily responses to questions and expressions of emotion. In addition to these interviews, researchers would need to examine the prevailing popular and scholarly writings on happiness in each given society, scouring self-help books, magazines, movies, and television to find out what the prevailing discourses of happiness and wellbeing are within a given society. Investigators also would need to understand the historical backgrounds of each given society, including religious belief, gender and familial relations, traditional social class formations, and so on. This must be understood before interviewing takes place, so that researchers can comprehend in advance the historical, sociocultural, and mass-mediated worlds of interviewees. It is essential that the interviewer thoroughly understand both the spoken and written language of interviewees, so that the nuances of interviews can be comprehended without the need for interpreters, and so that interviewers can thoroughly investigate the literature and mass media of a given society. In short, interviewers should not be globalists hopping from society to society; rather, each should be an expert on the society being investigated.

Interviews may be analyzed in accordance with the theory of culture offered earlier, with its different conceptions of culture, and different levels of the cultural shaping of the

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<sup>8</sup> I define a discourse as an underlying conceptual model shaping the thoughts of individuals on a given topic. Typically a pluralistic society will have a number of competing yet overlapping discourses in any given realm: for example, for living a fulfilled and happy life, 'be true to yourself' as opposed to 'love conquers all,' or 'you can't get anywhere without money.' The analysis of such discourses can provide pivotal maps of the meanings of happiness in different societies. The map of discourses in a given society, in a full array of realms, provides a representation of its culture, in both of the senses I have discussed.

individual. Or another theoretical basis could be used, as long as it gives suitable weight to the complexity of culture today, in both its traditional and contemporary aspects. Discourses of happiness need to be fully analyzed, in accordance with both interviewees' accounts and also with mass media and other sociocultural representations; these discourses would need to be fully analyzed in the context of culture in both of the senses I have discussed. In this way, a full cultural portrait can emerge from the interviews conducted in a given society, a portrait that can give a rich contextual backdrop to the findings of statistical surveys. In the final analysis, statistical survey results and ethnographic findings will need to be combined so that the former can provide the latter with breadth, and the latter can provide the former with depth. Only through this analytical combination can the statistical and the ethnographic be fully and usefully merged in arriving at suitably subtle and nuanced portraits of happiness in different societies.

### 9. Concluding thoughts

Obviously the kind of study I have just outlined, conducted globally, would require much expertise, and more money than grant agencies up until now have shown any willingness to hand out. It is, admittedly, more economically feasible to conduct global surveys alone, as has been done thus far. However, for the reasons I have discussed in this paper, particularly the changing nature of culture in the world, such means of measurement are today insufficient. Happiness can only be understood cross-culturally not just through questionnaires, but through extensive interviews of individuals of the kind I have described. Only when these kinds of interviews are conducted, and the statistical and the ethnographic are combined, can the cross-cultural study of happiness and wellbeing truly come of age as an academic endeavor not confined to a single discipline or means of gathering data, but one that unifies disciplines and forms of data in a common endeavor. Happiness research is not the domain of psychologists, or sociologists, or economists, or anthropologists alone—it must be the domain of them all, working together. In seeking to understand happiness, let us learn both from all the world's societies and all the world's academic disciplines: only through combining them can happiness be, if not necessarily found, then at least fully understood.

There is a larger question obliquely addressed in a number of the articles and books mentioned in this paper, but one generally avoided in the study of subjective wellbeing. To what extent do people truly comprehend their own happiness? Accounts of utopias and dystopias, from Plato (1974) to Huxley (1977) to the *Matrix* (1999) show us that just because humans may judge their lives to be happy does not mean that they truly are fulfilled (see Fromm, 1955 for a trenchant analysis of such incomprehension in the capitalistic world). Marx's 'false consciousness' may ring just as true today as when he explored the idea a century and a half ago. This is the most fundamental limitation on research into wellbeing, one that stretches to the horizons of future research: how can we comprehend ourselves? To cite just one contemporary analyst of happiness (Gilbert, 2006), perhaps we cannot comprehend our own happiness and how to attain it. But this opens up a whole new realm of inquiry, one stretching far beyond the bounds of this current paper.

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