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PERCEPTION OF HAPPINESS: A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON OF FRANCE AND RUSSIA

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Цель данного исследования состояла в том, чтобы понять различия в счастье между французской и русской культурами. Опрос был проведен среди пятидесяти девяти участников, принадлежащих к обеим группам всех возрастов и полов. Это исследование показало, что россияне чувствуют себя более удовлетворенными своей жизнью, чем французы. Причины счастья, однако, различаются в обеих группах. В целом, наши исследования показывают, что есть связь между чувством контроля, чувством цели, ориентацией во времени и счастьем.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to understand the differences in well-being between the French and Russian culture. A survey was administered to fifty-nine participants belonging to both groups of all ages and genders. This research showed that Russians feel more satisfied with their life than French. Causes of happiness, however, differ between both groups. All in all, our research suggests that there is a link between sense of control, sense of purpose, time orientation, and happiness.

Ключевые слова: счастье, благополучие, кросс-культурная психология

Keywords: happiness, well-being, cross-cultural, psychology

Introduction

Overall happiness can be defined as the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his or her own favourably (Veenhoven, 2012). Its importance lies in the fact that happiness is seen as one of the main goals of modern society (Veenhoven, 2012). Therefore, measuring the happiness of societies may seem like a sensible way to compare them. However, it is not always true.

First, most research on happiness has been conducted in the West. What results can we expect when applying theories on subjective well-being originated in Western thought in Asian societies, for example? The pursuit of happiness is seen as one of the most important things to strive for in the Western world, but this is not necessarily true in the Asian world (Hommelich et al., 2012). Just like many other areas, subjective well-being is deeply affected by culture. The traditional dichotomy between East and West is still

relevant here. Scholars highlighted, for example, the importance of social integration in happiness among Eastern societies (Lu et al., 2000). We can understand further variations when looking into Hofstede's dimensions (2001). Happiness levels have been linked with power distance, masculinity, and the individualist collectivist dimension in societies. Individual societies, for example, emphasize individual freedom and achievement. Collectivist societies care more about human relationships, therefore, relationship between the individual and the subjective well-being is unclear (Ye et al., 2015). Likewise, the source of happiness is not the same for everyone. An associative experiment done with Koreans and Americans showed that both cultures link happiness with social words, but to a much greater extent for Koreans, making "family" the most popular word -while it was "smile" for Americans (Shin et al., 2018).

It is understood that happiness depends on internal and external factors, but it is difficult to determine to what extent. When talking about external factors, an important contributor to happiness can be money. Scholars showed indeed that high income is linked to perceived happiness, but only to a certain point. To put it clearly, individuals who earn more money will tend to be happier but beyond a certain point, whatever the income of money they will earn, the happiness level will remain static (or change very slightly). This phenomenon has been named the Easterlin paradox after his founder (1974).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) can also be mentioned when discussing sources of happiness. The more needs are satisfied, the more individuals from a given culture is susceptible to be happy.

Time orientation is an internal factor that has also been discussed by scholars. It has been shown that nostalgia is not just a past-oriented emotion but it actually extends into the future and in particular, the positive future. What's more, some studies suggest that this feeling has motivational consequences and helps to develop meaning in life (Cheung et al., 2013 and 2017).

Studies tend to focus on one type of factor: internal or external. There have been some attempts, however, to adopt an interactionist perspective (Ahuvia et al, 2015).

One should be aware of all these limitations before assessing an individual's happiness, but these are not the only ones. If we use a self-assessment questionnaire, we have to assume that individuals are capable of judging how happy they are (Hommerich, 2012). If happiness is measured by the means of a scale, we also have to assume that individuals can clearly define the limits on the scale presented to them (Bond & Lang, 2014). The choice of a given option over the other is as well culture-dependent. Japanese tend to present themselves as average citizens and will respond modestly, which may not reflect the reality (Veenhoven, 2012). By the same token, an individual coming from a culture where happiness is highly valued will tend to overstate his perceived happiness (Veenhoven, 2010).

Another issue that we are likely to face when it comes to cross-cultural surveys is the question of

language. Unless the cultures that are compared speak the same language, we will have to rely on translation sooner or later. The problem is that the concept of happiness is not the same in all languages. It is translated in German as "Glück" and adds a nuance of luck and fortune to the English word (in fact, Glück means both happiness and luck). In languages such as French and Russian, the equivalent of the word "happiness" evokes a rare state (Oishi, 2013). Therefore, we can say that the concept of happiness we have in English is not standardised in all languages and results in different languages may be biased.

In this study, we will focus on comparing happiness between two cultures: the French and the Russian culture. We will not only measure it but try to understand what it consists of and how both cultures relate to it.

Methods

Instruments

- Self-assessment survey and associative experiment (French)

- Self-assessment survey and associative experiment (Russian)

Procedure

The self-assessment survey has been specifically designed for this study. Its ambition was not only to measure happiness between the two cultures but also to understand what it means for each individual: how do each aspect of their life contribute to it? To what extent do they feel on control of their well-being? We were also interested in understanding the time orientation of each participant. A 6-level assessment scale has been proposed to the participants in order to provide more accurate responses. Moreover, we did not include a neutral option to urge participants to take a side. Since the study is directed toward two groups speaking their own language, two questionnaires have been created: one in French and the other in Russian. In order to prevent discrepancies of meanings between the two questionnaires, we benefited from the help of Russian natives with a high proficiency in French.

The questionnaire was sent online.

Participants

Fifty-nine individuals belonging either to the French culture or the Russian culture : 40 participants from France and 19 participants from Russia. Most French participants are males, while most Russian participants are female. Most participants on both sides are between age 18 and 34. We also asked about their status, as we considered it might have an influence on the results. French participants were mostly single or divorced, while most Russian participants are married or in a relationship.

Results

Results from the study administered in France can be found in Table 2 and the ones collected in Russia have been compiled in Table 3. Illustrations of the rest of the answers are provided in Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3.

Overall, Russians report feeling more satisfied with their life than their French counterparts. It can be noted that both cultures avoided "extreme" responses at both ends of the scale. What can be highlighted is that

the most chosen option is "rather satisfied", corresponding to the fourth option out of six.

When asked to rate the importance of different aspects of their life in their overall happiness level, French rate health as the most important factor, followed by time, friendship and family. Russians also value health as the most important factor, followed by family, time, friendship, and work. Both cultures report feeling in good control of their life, the majority of them estimating at 80% or more the extent to which their well-being is up to them.

Lack of time appears to be the most common obstacle to happiness among the two cultures. It is followed by lack of resources on the Russian side, while society seems to be the second main one for French participants.

Most people on both sides agree to some extent having a goal in life. Russians participants tend to be more certain about this statement than the French ones.

Regarding time orientation, neither culture reports feeling particularly nostalgic about the past, although the Russians situate themselves in the middle of the scale. When asked about how positive a future both cultures predict, Russians appear very optimistic, while the French are rather neutral.

When looking at the profile of the participants, further inferences can be made.

As far as interpretation goes, gender does not seem to be a factor in this cross-cultural study of happiness. Regarding marital status, Russians who are single tend to feel less satisfied with their life, which is not necessarily true in France. While the lowest levels of self-reported satisfaction are found among single individuals, others report feeling satisfied with their life. When looking at the age factor, elder individuals from both cultures report being happier than younger generations. In the questionnaire administered in Russia, the highest levels of satisfaction are found among the oldest participants.

The associative experiment required the participants to write the first three words they think of when presented the word "happiness", French participants provided various reactions. The most frequent words were "joy, love, calm" (joie, amour, calme). Several participants related happiness to words like "food" (nourriture) or "sun" (soleil). Russian participants referred most frequently to the words "love, health, family" (любовь, здоровье, семья). Terms found only on the Russian side include "sufficient" (достаток) and "warm" (тепло).

Table 2

Results of the questionnaire in France

	1	2	3	4	5	6
<i>Satisfaction in life</i> (1 = not satisfied at all, 6 = very satisfied)	2,5 %	12,5 %	15 %	37,5 %	30 %	2,5 %
	Rating of different aspects of life in happiness (1 = not important at all, 6 = very important)					
<i>Health</i>	0	0	8	5	13	14
<i>Work</i>	5	7	7	10	9	2
<i>Success</i>	2	7	8	7	10	6
<i>Family</i>	2	7	7	3	11	10
<i>Friends</i>	0	4	6	8	12	10
<i>Time</i>	0	3	7	9	9	12
	Agreement with statements (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree)					
<i>I have a goal in life</i>	0 %	12,5 %	12,5 %	37,5 %	17,5 %	20 %
<i>I feel nostalgic about the past</i>	22,5 %	12,5 %	32,5 %	15 %	10 %	7,5 %
<i>I feel optimistic about the future</i>	20 %	17,5 %	10 %	27,5 %	17,5 %	7,5 %

Table 3

Results of the questionnaire in Russia

	1	2	3	4	5	6
<i>Satisfaction in life</i> (1 = not satisfied at all, 6 = very satisfied)	0 %	5,3 %	15,8 %	52,6 %	21,1 %	5,3 %
	Rating of different aspects of life in happiness (1 = not important at all, 6 = very important)					
<i>Health</i>	0	0	2	1	4	12
<i>Work</i>	0	0	2	3	7	7
<i>Success</i>	0	1	2	6	2	8
<i>Family</i>	0	0	2	2	3	12
<i>Friends</i>	2	0	2	1	9	5
<i>Time</i>	0	1	2	2	6	8
	Agreement with statements (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree)					
<i>I have a goal in life</i>	0 %	5,3 %	15,8 %	26,3 %	21,1 %	31,6 %
<i>I feel nostalgic about the past</i>	10,5 %	15,8 %	26,3 %	26,3 %	5,3 %	15,8 %
<i>I feel optimistic about the future</i>	0 %	0 %	15,8 %	26,3 %	26,3 %	31,6 %

Figure 1 and Figure 2 : Perceived obstacles to happiness in France and Russia

Figure 3: Subjective sense of control of happiness in France and Russia

We should, however, consider the limitations of this research. Although the data we collected does not permit us to believe there is a difference in subjective well-being between men and women, only a more thorough study will give us a definite answer as to whether or not the happiness level is the same among both genders.

Causes of happiness and misery should be studied for each individual. Umbrella terms were used for the sake of classification but each individual did certainly not have the same image in mind when choosing one option over the other.

Conclusion

Measuring happiness is a delicate task. However, by investigating what people associate happiness with and what is included in their definition of happiness, we can get an accurate representation of reality. This is how we gained the insight that Russian people feel more satisfied than their French counterparts as a whole. Although both identified similar basic components to happiness, they tend to associate it with different things. Despite comparable limitations, both seem to agree that they have a certain control over their happiness. Time orientation differs between the two groups, such as the sense of purpose in life. It can be inferred that there is a link between these factors and overall well-being, and further research could be initiated to corroborate our findings.

Other research could be made about optimism and expectations: is optimism the key to happy life? Should one have high or low expectations in life to maximize happiness? We could also look closer at the translation problem and administer a survey to bilingual individuals in both languages to observe the differences in their responses, if any.

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