



## Short Communication

# Conceptions of happiness and life satisfaction: An exploratory study in 14 national groups



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between 4 conceptions of happiness and life satisfaction in a sample of 2715 university students across 14 national groups. The 4 conceptions were self-transcendence, self-directed hedonism, conservation, and self-enhancement, which emerged from a principal component analysis of a 19-item scale generated for the purpose of the present study. Results of multi-level modeling showed that self-transcendence and conservation predicted life satisfaction positively and significantly. In addition, we found that self-directed hedonism and self-enhancement interacted in their effects on life satisfaction.

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## 1. Introduction

Conceptions of happiness are individuals' notions and beliefs about human happiness, including beliefs about the determinants of happiness (Joshanloo, 2014a). To date, these conceptions have not received enough attention in the psychological literature. To expand this line of research, we generated a comprehensive list of potentially important

determinants of happiness and asked our participants to rate the importance of each in determining individual happiness. To guide our selection of the potential determinants of happiness, we used the 19 values identified in the refined theory of human values (Schwartz et al., 2012). This theory provides a comprehensive categorization of commonly pursued goals and ideals by individuals across cultures (for a complete list of the 19 values see the Supplementary material). Values are “abstract desirable goals that guide individuals throughout their lives” (Sagiv, Roccas, & Oppenheim-Weller, 2015, p. 103). Actions people take in pursuit of values have consequences for objective and subjective aspects of life. Research shows that one's subjective well-being partly depends upon the set of values that one endorses (Sagiv &

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Schwartz, 2000). For example, people for whom extrinsic and material values are especially important tend to have relatively low levels of subjective well-being (Sagiv et al., 2015). Research on personal values suggests that values tend to group together and form a small number of higher order value domains (Schwartz et al., 2012). Thus, we used principal component analysis (PCA) to identify the smallest number of interpretable factors that explained the correlations among the 19 items.

Previous research indicates that endorsing certain conceptions of happiness has some impact on people's levels of subjective well-being (Jochanloo et al., 2015; Lu & Gilmour, 2004). Hence, we also probed the relationships between the emerging conceptions of happiness and participants' sense of life satisfaction. Life satisfaction is a broad judgment of one's overall life that constitutes the cognitive component of subjective well-being (Diener, Inglehart, & Tay, 2013).

We used a large sample of university students from 14 national groups. Considering that independence of observations (which is an assumption of single-level regression analysis) is violated with nested data (Hox, 2010), we used multi-level modeling to obtain more accurate estimates.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

An attempt was made to include as many countries from all continents as possible. A total of 2715 university students from 14 nations took part in this study. The demographic characteristics of the samples are summarized in Table 1. More information about the sample and procedure can be found in the Supplementary material.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. The conceptions of happiness scale

This scale was developed for the purpose of the present study. Nineteen factors and a short description for each were presented to the participants. The respondents were asked to indicate how important each of the factors was in determining the happiness of an individual from their perspective (from 1 = *not at all important* to 9 = *very important*). The 19 factors were drawn from the refined theory of values (Schwartz et al., 2012). The scale is provided in the Supplementary material

#### 2.2.2. Life satisfaction

The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) was used to measure general life satisfaction (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Each of the

five items is rated on a 7-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). This scale is among the most widely used scales of subjective well-being. Its validity and reliability have been supported across various cultural contexts (Diener et al., 2013).

### 2.2.3. Control variables

In addition to gender and age, national individualism was included as a contextual variable to control for nations' general cultural orientation (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Principal component analysis

Using the whole sample across all the nations, we ran a PCA with promax rotation to identify the smallest number of interpretable factors underlying the responses to the 19 items. This analysis resulted in four components with eigenvalues over 1. Although the scree plot suggested three factors, we decided to maintain four components, because in the three-component solution, traditional values (e.g., obeying the rules) and values related to self-transcendence (e.g., concern for all people) loaded strongly on a single component. In contrast, in the four-component solution, these two groups of items loaded on different components. Hence, the four-component solution provided a more sensitive and intuitive representation of the data. These four components represent four broad conceptions of happiness that we used in the multi-level analysis. Factor loadings and eigenvalues are reported in Table 2. The components were named as *self-transcendence*, *self-directed hedonism*, *conservation*, and *self-enhancement* based on their content. The components collectively explained 56.57% of the variance in the responses. Means and internal consistencies of each component are presented in Table 1.

### 3.2. Multi-level modeling

An intercept-only model (Hox, 2010) was first tested. The results of this analysis showed that there was statistically significant variability in life satisfaction at the individual ( $b = 37.108$ , Wald  $Z = 36.063$ ,  $p$  [one-sided]  $< 0.001$ ) and national ( $b = 4.520$ , Wald  $Z = 2.445$ ,  $p$  [one-sided]  $= 0.007$ ) levels. In a second analysis, all of the predictors were added to the model, as well as the control variables, and all possible interaction terms between the four conceptions ( $N = 6$ ). However, considering that five of the interaction terms were not significant, they were removed from the model. The intercept and the slopes of gender,

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistic and alphas.

|                                     | N    | % female | Age   | Survey language | Data Collection Mode | Transcendence | Conservation | Hedonism  | Enhancement | Satisfaction | Individualism |
|-------------------------------------|------|----------|-------|-----------------|----------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------|-------------|--------------|---------------|
| New Zealand                         | 169  | 63.7%    | 22.03 | English         | O                    | 6.42          | 6.07         | 7.46      | 5.54        | 21.68        | 79            |
| Iran                                | 220  | 54.5%    | 23.18 | Persian         | PAP                  | 6.68          | 6.57         | 6.77      | 6.73        | 21.56        | 41            |
| Singapore                           | 221  | 51.9%    | 21.51 | English         | O                    | 6.82          | 6.34         | 7.11      | 6.26        | 21.98        | 20            |
| Hong Kong                           | 183  | 68.1%    | 20.88 | English         | PAP                  | 6.80          | 6.66         | 7.37      | 6.60        | 20.03        | 25            |
| Malaysia                            | 219  | 51.9%    | 19.44 | English         | PAP                  | 7.35          | 6.85         | 7.55      | 6.82        | 21.26        | 26            |
| Japan                               | 270  | 44.8%    | 19.31 | Japanese        | O                    | 6.89          | 6.64         | 7.78      | 6.60        | 18.25        | 46            |
| Korea                               | 150  | 39.3%    | 22.05 | Korean          | PAP                  | 6.57          | 6.55         | 7.46      | 6.44        | 18.94        | 18            |
| Taiwan                              | 207  | 64.1%    | 20.48 | Chinese         | PAP                  | 6.76          | 6.33         | 7.23      | 6.06        | 19.66        | 17            |
| India                               | 150  | 58.7%    | 20.42 | English         | PAP                  | 6.60          | 6.56         | 6.99      | 5.62        | 24.67        | 48            |
| Russia                              | 150  | 67.3%    | 20.28 | Russian         | PAP                  | 6.13          | 5.90         | 7.46      | 6.09        | 22.28        | 39            |
| Brazil                              | 136  | 64.0%    | 30.40 | Portuguese      | PAP                  | 7.58          | 6.49         | 7.94      | 5.55        | 22.49        | 38            |
| Pakistan                            | 208  | 58.3%    | 21.93 | English         | PAP                  | 7.21          | 6.97         | 7.18      | 6.45        | 23.17        | 14            |
| Netherland                          | 178  | 56.7%    | 20.98 | Dutch           | O                    | 6.73          | 6.10         | 7.38      | 4.72        | 25.17        | 80            |
| USA                                 | 254  | 83.4%    | 18.79 | English         | O                    | 7.49          | 6.95         | 7.99      | 6.04        | 24.93        | 91            |
| Total                               | 2715 | 57       | 21.29 | –               | –                    | 6.88          | 6.52         | 7.41      | 6.15        | 21.80        | 42.05         |
| Alpha (whole sample)                | –    | –        | –     | –               | –                    | 0.82          | 0.75         | 0.76      | 0.73        | 0.85         | –             |
| Alpha range across nations (N = 14) | –    | –        | –     | –               | –                    | 0.73–0.87     | 0.68–0.81    | 0.62–0.86 | 0.46–0.83   | 0.71–0.88    | –             |

Note. O = online; PAP = paper and pencil.

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