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Can Happiness change? An Interdisciplinary, Multi-Method Investigation of the Dynamics of Happiness

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Abstract

None of the major basic questions social sciences are concerned with can satisfyingly be answered from the perspective of one discipline alone. Each of them proposes theories and perspectives that make unique and important contributions. At the same time theoretical perspectives in general inevitably do have their blind spots. This fundamental insight was the reason for us to choose as the motto for the 19th IACCP congress held in Bremen in 2008 “Crossing borders – (Cross-) Cultural Psychology as an Interdisciplinary, Multi-Method Endeavor”. In this chapter we first want to illustrate this motto and our reasons for choosing it by reviewing recent research on one exemplary basic question of the social sciences: Can happiness change? We will cover findings across the social science disciplines in order to illustrate the benefits of interdisciplinary, multi-method investigations. This review will also reveal that the recent evidence violates traditional mono-disciplinary views on the respective question. After that, we will briefly introduce the contributions of this volume.

Humans strive for happiness. Yet, the pursuit of happiness is often confronted with the most pessimistic outlook by psychologists, economists, biologists, sociologists, and political scientists. After decades of research on happiness, the majority of scholars from various scientific disciplines agree on this claim: at least in the long run happiness remains constant. While many factors have been identified that contribute to the general level of subjective well-being (for an overview see Kahneman, Diener & Schwarz, 1999), research on both societal and individual levels of analysis implies that as time passes people remain on their level of happiness in the “hedonic treadmill” (Brickman & Campbell, 1981; Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999; Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004). On the societal level, sociologists and political scientists have shown for instance that although richer populations tend to be happier than poorer ones, a society’s average happiness is a constant that remains unchanged, even if per capita incomes increase for most of the population (Easterlin, 1974, Kenny, 2004). Studies on the individual level show that biological factors play an important role in one’s sense of well-being (Ebstein, Novick, Umansky, Priel, & Osher, 1996; Hamer, 1996), and the average level of happiness may in fact be partly heritable as twin studies suggest (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade 2005). As a consequence, individual differences in happiness may resist change (Diener & Lucas, 1999). Many authors agree that happiness fluctuates around a more or less fixed set-point (Headey & Wearing, 1989; Larsen, 2000; Williams & Thompson, 1993) suggesting that no efforts can bring about substantial and lasting changes in happiness. Not only biological, but also cognitive factors contribute to the stability of happiness, such as for instance social comparisons (Festinger, 1954; Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Mussweiler, 2003). Merton and Kitt (1950) argued that individuals derive their life-satisfaction from comparing themselves to others belonging to their ‘reference group’. This concept can partially explain why the average level of subjective well-being across a society remains stable, even though its members become more affluent: The evaluative outcome of social comparisons does not change, if an individual gets richer and the members of the reference group become more affluent simultaneously. Individuals are even equipped with mechanisms that prevent (negative) changes in subjective well-being. The human capacity to cope with and adapt to both positive and negative events is striking. In fact, research has shown that people underestimate the adaptive potentials of their ‘psychological immune system’. As a result they tend to overestimate the duration of their affective reactions to events in the future (a phenomenon called ‘immune neglect’; Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg & Wheatley, 1998; Igou, 2008). To summarize, traditional research in various domains on both societal and individual levels of analysis converges on the straight forward conclusion: Despite the fact that people may strive for improvements in their subjective well-being, happiness does not change.

Happiness can change!

However parsimonious and consistent this evidence might seem, recent research challenges this notion substantially. Recent data from Political Science (the World Value Survey, WVS) shows that there is an (almost) worldwide trend toward higher levels of subjective well-being. Inglehart, Foa, Peterson and Welzel (2008) analyzed data from 1981 to 2007 and found that happiness rose in 45 of the 52 countries. Furthermore their analyses suggest that the extent to which a society allows freedom of choice has a major impact on happiness. Since 1981, economic development, democratization, and rising social tolerance have increased the extent to which people perceive having free choice, which in turn has led to higher levels of happiness around the world.

Yet, this world-wide trend does not take place without exceptions. Over the 1990 - 2000 decade happiness in China plummeted despite massive improvement in material living standards. Brockmann, Delhey, Welzel and Yuan (2009) explained this so called “China puzzle” by drawing on a specific version of relative deprivation theory, the concept of “frustrated

achievers.” They found that income inequality in China became increasingly skewed towards the upper income strata, so that related to the average income the financial position of most Chinese worsened. Consequently, financial dissatisfaction rose and became an increasingly important factor in depressing happiness.

Inglehart et al. (2008) explain the (almost) worldwide increase of happiness with what they call “empowerment”: With increasing extent to which people endorse self-expression values, identified by the World Value Survey, agency related motives become subjectively more important. Personal freedom and control over one’s life are conducive to perceiving the self as a self-determined agent, which is conducive for a person’s sense of subjective well-being. Obviously, the work by Inglehart et al. (2008) challenges the traditional views held by many psychologists and sociologists that at least in the long run happiness remains stable.

Yet again, we believe that recent psychological research has also made significant steps forward in explaining cultural difference in the construal and experience of happiness that may stimulate further large scale survey research in the other social sciences as well. From a psychological perspective agency is only one of two fundamental dimensions of human motives and behavior with communion being the other. These basic dimensions have different names and slightly different meanings, and they were studied in different research contexts like person perception, self research, personality, group perception, or values. Bakan (1966) introduced the terms of agency versus communion and described them as “two fundamental modalities in the existence of living forms, agency for the existence of an organism as an individual and communion for the participation of the individual in some larger organism of which the individual is part” (pp. 14–15). Agency arises from strivings to individuate and expand the self and involves such qualities like instrumentality, ambition, dominance, competence, and efficiency in goal attainment. Agentic traits like being active, decisive, self-confident, and efficient are profitable and useful in the perspective of the self because they help to attain one’s goals. Communion, conversely, is the dimension primarily related to the interests of others. Communion arises from a striving to integrate the self in a larger social unit through caring for others and involves such qualities like a focus on others and their well-being, cooperativeness, and emotional expressivity.

The notion that agency and communion are truly fundamental dimensions of human behavior is substantiated by the fact they can be used to describe judgmental and behavioral patterns in various domains, such as person perception (Rosenberg & Sedlak, 1972; Wojciszke, 2005), self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), gender stereotypes (Eagly & Karau, 2002), autobiographical memory (McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, & Day, 1996), occupational development (Abele, 2003), attachment styles (Bartz & Lydon, 2004), reward distribution behavior (Watts, Messé, & Vallacher, 1982), or information processing (Woike, Lavezzary, & Barsky, 2001). Agency and communion are rooted in two basic motivations: The need to affiliate with others and the need for personal distinctiveness. According to optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991), the need to assimilate (aiming at a sense of belonging and in-group inclusion) and the need to differentiate (aiming at distinctiveness) are the result of evolutionary adaptation and work in opposition to each other. Therefore, people frequently need to negotiate between the two motivations (Pickett, Silver, & Brewer, 2002). Hence, the consequences of experienced agency and communion can be considered to be quite dynamic.

As a matter of fact, agency and communion do have important consequences for a person’s subjective well-being. Helgeson (1994) argued that both agency and communion are required for optimal well-being. In numerous studies, she could show that when one exists in the absence of the other (unmitigated communion or unmitigated agency) negative health outcomes occur with detrimental consequences for subjective well-being (e.g. Helgeson, 2003; Helgeson, Snyder, & Seltman, 2004).

The two basic needs are also associated with the independent and interdependent construal of the self. It has been suggested that whereas people with independent self-views should be seeking to confirm their internal positive attributes of the self, interdependent individuals can be expected to seek the affirmation of their relationship with significant others. Accordingly, their general well-being should be crucially dependent on how well they manage to achieve these cultural tasks (see for instance Kitayama, Karasawa, Curhan, Ryff and Markus, 2010). In fact, this has been supported in many studies. For instance, Kwan, Bond and Singelis (1997) found that general well-being for collectivist culture members can be better predicted on the basis of their relationship harmony than self-esteem, while the reverse is true for individualists (see also Diener & Diener, 1995; Kitayama & Markus, 1999; Uchida, Norasakkunkit & Kitayama, 2004). Most recently, Kitayama et al. (2010) presented survey data from the US and Japan which showed the link between culture, well-being and health. They found that the strongest predictor of well-being and health was personal control in the US, but the absence of relational strain in Japan. One of the implications of this kind of research is that a complete picture of happiness across cultures requires simultaneously taking both agency and communion related motives into account. Yet again, these findings still await a test with representative samples from various cultures.

While the latter findings reflect relatively stable differences between cultures, other studies confirm that the degree of independence and interdependence of the self varies dynamically with the context (e.g. Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991). In a series of experiments Kühnen and colleagues (e.g. Kühnen, Hannover, & Schubert, 2001; Kühnen & Haberstroh, 2004; Kühnen & Oyserman, 2002) have argued that if the self is one of the crucial psychological factors that mediate the impact of culture on subjective experience, then inducing either independence or interdependence experimentally by means of cognitive priming should result in behavioral and judgmental patterns that mirror cross-cultural differences (for overviews see Hannover & Kühnen, 2004, 2009). Haberstroh, Oyserman, Schwarz, Kühnen and Li (2002) applied this logic of reasoning to judgments of subjective well-being. They showed that after being primed for interdependence, participants are more likely to rely on tacit assumption of cooperative conversational conduct when answering question about their general life satisfaction than after being primed for independence. Furthermore, these authors found parallel differences in subjective well-being ratings between the Germans (i.e. individualists) and Chinese (i.e. collectivists). Hence, independence-interdependence of the self has a causal impact on judgments of well-being and varies in part dynamically with the current context. In addition these findings suggest that culture affects judgments and behavior (including subjective well-being) via the configuration of independent and interdependent self-aspects. Yet again, psychological experiments are usually supposed to investigate short-term consequences of contextual influences (such as priming) only. Whether findings from long-term investigations are indeed due to the same causal mechanisms that are identified in experiments often remains an open question. Few long-term longitudinal studies have been reported. Recently, reporting data from a longitudinal study that commenced in 1985, Boehnke and Wong (2011) were, however, able to show that German adolescents who had seen a great threat of a Third World War in the mid 1980s and had become politically agentic in this situation, are 21 years later happier than those peers, who also had seen a great threat but had not participated in any political action. That study, lacks a cross-culturally comparative dimension and may thus only apply to cultures where independent self-construals are the norm.

In the opening of this chapter, we have stressed the importance of transcending traditional borders of scientific disciplines. The issue of whether or not happiness can change was introduced as one of the basic questions that all social sciences are concerned with. We are aware that the above reported review of the current literature is of course far from being exhaustive in the sense that all relevant findings on happiness around the world are covered. A look into Bok's recent monograph (2010) on *Exploring Happiness: From Aristotle to Brain Science*

is advisable if this is sought. Our intention was a different one: We intended to merely illustrate that each of the social sciences makes unique and important contributions in understanding the dynamics of happiness. Therefore, a comprehensive answer requires “crossing borders” or even “rendering borders obsolete,” as we now formulate it in the title of the present volume¹. Current studies from political science see the increasing level of freedom and the subjectively experienced increase of personal agency as the driving force underlying the world-wide trend toward greater happiness. While this may be true, a psychological perspective suggests that agency is only one of two fundamental dimensions of human behavior, with communion being the other. Optimal happiness requires that both needs are satisfied in a balanced fashion. While many studies suggest that both motives are universally relevant, cross-cultural differences exist in the relative emphasis that is placed on either of them. Depending on whether individuals define their selves primarily in terms of independence or interdependence, respectively, either personal agency or relational harmony are more important predictors of subjective well-being. Furthermore, the dynamics of happiness are partially due to situational influences that affect a person’s current configuration of independent or interdependent self-cognitions, respectively. In sum, we believe that “interdisciplinary, multi-method endeavors” are needed and all social sciences can benefit from such approaches.

Overview of this book

The thematic emphasis was implemented in the scientific program of the 2008 IACCP congress in several ways. For instance, several of our keynote speakers came from neighboring disciplines of psychology, such as political science, sociology and anthropology. The largest part of the scientific program consisted, of course, of individual oral presentations and symposia. A total of 557 oral presentations were given at IACCP 2008. In addition, we had 153 poster presentations, a round table discussion, and a workshop. Of course, we had to choose the motto for our IACCP conference long time before the call for abstracts was sent out to potential contributors. At that point in time, our motto merely expressed our hope that the submissions would fill it with life. We are very grateful that many of them did so. This volume collects contributions that reflect the great variety both in terms of topics and methodologies which characterizes current (cross-) cultural psychology.

The first three contributions address cultural issues in close relationships. Summarizing their keynote address, Hatfield and Rapson address cultural differences in a truly fundamental issue: romantic love. They summarize classic and most recent findings on the question of whether people from various cultures differ in the extent to which they are “romantics” (i.e., demanding love and marriage) or more pragmatics (i.e., being open to marriage without love). Argiropoulou, Pavlopoulos, and Quek assess the conflict strategies of Greek couples. What role do values, self-disclosure, and satisfaction play in predicting how couples try to resolve conflicting issues? Pitting cultural and evolutionary approaches against each other, Rivera-Aragon, Diaz-Loving, Velasco-Matus, and Montero-Santamaria present data on indigenous manifestations of infidelity and jealousy in Mexico. What are the patterns of infidelity and jealousy in Mexican males and females? What is the relation between individuals’ jealousy and infidelity? Which types of jealousy are related to sexual and emotional infidelity?

In a globalizing world, psychological aspects of migration and intergroup relations are becoming ever more important. The contributions of the second part of this volume address several central issues in this realm. Schmitz and Berry present data on the structure of

¹following the tradition that titles of the series of selected papers from international congresses of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology (IACCP) have to always use the next letter in the alphabet, following the first title letter of the selected paper volume of the previous congress. The volume of selected papers from the 2006 international IACCP congress in Athens bore the title “Quod Erat Demonstrandum” (Gari & Mylonas, 2009), so this time the title had to start with the letter ‘r.’

acculturation attitudes of immigrants and a national sample in Germany. The authors examine the psychometric properties of these attitudes, and link them to some features of personality and to the psychological adaptation of immigrants. Host acculturation orientations of French students toward ethnic minority groups were assessed by Jyoti Verma. Do French students expect ethnic minorities to adopt French norms or do they find it more important that immigrants maintain their heritage culture? Also focusing on students, Le Nhat Tran presents data on acculturation experiences of Vietnamese international students. To what extent are these experiences specific for the Vietnamese culture? While ingroup-favoritism is one of the best established findings from the literature on intergroup relation, Leung and Ting show that Caucasians hold rather positive stereotypic beliefs about Asians. Finally, Kirch, Tuisk and Reinkort investigated social identities of Estonians and Russians living in Estonia and found remarkable traces of the perceived Soviet Union's role in the Second World War.

The relevance of value orientation in current cross-cultural research does not have to be stressed here. Chapter 3 of the current volume collects three articles on this topic. First, Shulamith Kreitler presents meaning correlates of value orientations of three cultural communities living in Israel. Second, Mylonas, Gari, Panagiotopoulou, Georgiadi, Valchev, Papazoglou, and Brkich address potential methodological biases in forming culture clusters based on value assessments and present solutions for how to reduce such biases. Finally, Spieß and Stroppa used qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the role of social support and networks for life satisfaction, job stress and company support of staff of international corporations varying in size.

Chapter 4 of this volume includes two articles with a developmental psychology focus. Nandita Babu investigated the theory of mind understanding as reflected in the narratives of children from families of low as well as high socioeconomic status in India. The article by Holding, Abubakar, Obiero, Van Baar and Van de Vijver describes the adaptations made to the Infant-Toddler version of the HOME (Home Observation Measure of the Environment) Inventory for use in a low income population in Kenya.

Finally, the last chapter of the current volume includes three articles on unique and innovative issues in cross-cultural psychology. Boer and Fischer examined the functions of music-listening across cultures. Does music serve equivalent functions across cultures? The second contribution of the final chapter by Setiawan describes a study designed to investigate the relationships between perceptions of counseling and the willingness to seek counseling in Indonesia. Finally, Osborne, Kriese and Davis provide suggestions for how to teach and facilitate critical thinking, intercultural sensitivity, and interpersonal skills in the classroom.

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