

How you measure happiness depends on where you live

9 December 2020



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The meaning of happiness varies depending where in the world a person lives and so benefits from using different measures, new UC Riverside research finds.

Happiness studies historically have focused on the Western ideal of [happiness](#), which is relatively self-centered and big on thrills.

"Accordingly, the prevailing conceptualization of happiness is consistent with a historically Protestant, self-centered world view that emphasizes personal worthiness and hard work to obtain positive outcomes, and sees happiness as a personal achievement," the study's authors wrote in a just-published paper, "Happiness around the world: A combined etic-emic approach across 63 countries."

But Western-centered happiness concepts aren't universal, the authors hold. While happiness is tied to independence in the West, Eastern happiness is related to interdependence.

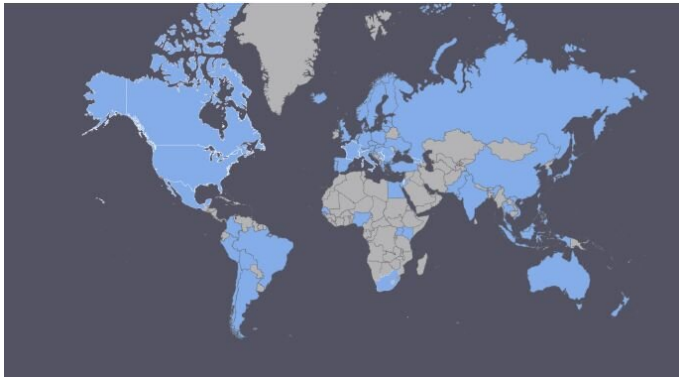
"The East Asian world view has been described as

one in which the self is more entwined with others, such that personal happiness depends on position connections in social relationships," wrote lead author Gwen Gardiner, a recent Ph.D. graduate of David Funder's Situations Lab. "The Eastern ideologies of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism emphasize the interconnectedness of everyone and everything, prioritizing harmony and balance over individual achievement."

Koreans talk about "happiness" and "family" in the same breath, for example. And [past research](#) has shown even perhaps the most obvious measure of happiness—a smile—is different in the East and West.

It led the authors to the current study, aimed at measuring which tests of happiness would be most effective among 15,368 worldwide participants. The two measures used were the Subjective Happiness Scale developed in the U.S., and the Interdependent Happiness scale, a relatively new test developed in Japan. The Eastern measure looks more closely at factors such as "interpersonal harmony" and equality of accomplishment with one's peers.

In addition to expanding and comparing the measures of happiness, the study extended the study group beyond traditionally studied Westerners in the U.S. and Canada and East Asians to include Africans, Latin Americans, Middle Easterners, and Southeast Asians.



Map showing all the countries the survey participants are from. Credit: Gwen Gardiner

The study included college-age students across 63 countries and 42 languages who were asked to log in to a custom website (ispstudy.ucr.edu) and complete a survey that included happiness measures.

The Western measure, the Subjective Happiness Scale, proved most reliable at measuring happiness in Western European countries including Belgium, Denmark, and the United Kingdom. Countries with higher development, less population growth, and in colder climates were more likely to score similarly in the Western, or independent, measure. The Western scale wasn't as effective at determining happiness in Eastern countries such as China, Japan, and Vietnam. And it performed poorly in other countries, namely African countries.

The Eastern measure, the Interdependent Happiness scale, was most reliable in Asian countries including Japan and South Korea. It was more difficult for researchers to relate those scores to country-by-country factors including economic development or [cultural factors](#). And the Eastern measure was generally a less reliable predictor in Western countries.

Interestingly, the interdependent measure of happiness did not vary nearly as much across countries. The performance of the measure was much more consistent—an important finding for cross-cultural researchers.

Both measures were highly reliable in the United States and Japan. That was of particular interest to researchers because those are the respective countries where the Western and Eastern tests were developed.

"For us, this result was particularly interesting and surprising because, typically, the U.S. and Japan are the prototypical countries used to highlight cross-cultural differences in cultural psychology," said Gardiner, who earned her Ph.D. from UCR this fall, and is now in Germany on a Humboldt Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship. "But in this case, they were much more similar to each other."

Both measures performed poorly in countries without Christian Protestant or Buddhist traditions, including African and Middle Eastern countries. Future studies should consider new measures for those world regions, the authors wrote.

The happiness study is among the first results published from the farthest-reaching original research of how people experience everyday life. The International Situations Project relied on a worldwide network to canvass 63 countries, 42 languages, and more than 15,000 people, and the results are only now being distilled.

The article was published in the journal *PLOS ONE*.

More information: Gardiner G, Lee D, Baranski E, Funder D, Members of the International Situations Project (2020) Happiness around the world: A combined etic-emic approach across 63 countries. *PLoS ONE* 15(12): e0242718. doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0242718

Provided by University of California - Riverside

APA citation: How you measure happiness depends on where you live (2020, December 9) retrieved 20 June 2021 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-12-happiness.html>

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