



The Many Faces of (Happiness)

Cultural twists on the concept hint at new ways of lifting your spirits and making you more content with life

By Suzann Pileggi Pawelski



Lankasana, a 23-year-old Maasai warrior, sports long, ochre-stained, braided hair extensions and carries a bow and arrow, a short sword and a steel-tipped spear. He spends his days raiding neighboring villages and protecting his own tribe from attacks by wild animals. For fun, he wrestles fellow tribesmen and practices his aim by tossing spears at tree trunks. Lankasana once killed a lion armed with only a sword, but not before the lion clawed his shoulders, leaving huge scars.

Living in remote villages in East Africa, the Maasai build simple homes out of mud, dung and sticks. These hunter-gatherers have no running water or electricity and minimal exposure to Western society and media. They engage in rituals that may seem unappealing to Westerners, such as adolescent circumcision, branding and bovine blood drinking.

Psychologist Ed Diener of the University of Illinois and his son, psychologist Robert Biswas-Diener of Portland State University, have traveled to the remote villages of the Maasai in northern Tanzania and southern Kenya several times over the past 15 years. The father-son team is at the forefront of research attempting to unravel the makings of happiness. Diener, a leading investigator in the field, had conducted dozens of studies on happiness around the world. But because most studies are done in industrial societies, he and his son were curious to see how

groups not living in modern cultures, such as the Maasai, would measure up.

The researchers' questions were part of a bigger project to measure happiness across the globe. First conducted in 2005, the Gallup World Poll is an attempt to assess how individuals are faring on various indices of well-being, economics and health, among other measures. The poll covers approximately 155 countries, a representative sample of 98 percent of the world's population. "What we find is that countries vary enormously in happiness," says Diener, who is also a senior scientist at Gallup.

The results emerging from the world poll suggest that society and culture can play a big role through the importance they place on positive emotions and beliefs about how to achieve a state of well-being. At the same time, the fact that people as different as the Maasai and the Danes can all achieve joy suggests



Happiness flourishes in many nonindustrial cultures. In a world poll, the African Maasai (left) scored high by one important measure: feeling good. The Amish (center) also experience a lot of joy. Costa Ricans (right) reportedly boast the most positive feelings of any culture in the world.

that humans can obtain pleasure and satisfaction in many different ways.

A Wealth of Good Feelings

In the burgeoning field of positive psychology, investigators are still trying to agree on a definition of happiness. Some think of this state in emotional terms. Other scientists believe happiness comes from a more reasoned appraisal of life satisfaction. To capture both facets, Diener measures something he calls subjective well-being, which combines emotional reports with cognitive self-assessments across various domains, such as work, income and relationships.

Biswas-Diener used such a test when he queried the Maasai. The 358 participants reported how they felt about their life in general and how often in the past month they experienced joy and amusement, among other emotions. Additionally, the respondents rated their food, friendships, health and other important aspects of their lives. To their surprise, Biswas-Diener and his colleagues found that Maasai villagers are quite happy—happier than many other

people in similar circumstances and just as happy as many individuals living in developed societies.

He and Diener—along with social psychologist Joar Vittersø of the University of Tromsø in Norway—also tested two other groups leading their lives in nonindustrial societies, the American Amish and the Inughuit people of Greenland. They found that all three groups rated above neutral in subjective well-being, with the Maasai doing best of all. But in specific domains—namely, income and food, both of which are related to material resources—the Maasai were less satisfied than the Amish and Inughuit. The Maasai also lagged in their views on their overall health and access to medical care as compared with people in modern societies, Diener says. Yet “on a global scale, the Maasai are pretty happy with life,” Diener concludes.

The fact that the Maasai rated their material resources poorly might suggest that money can buy at least some kinds of happiness. It does seem to have a stronger effect on general satisfaction than on positive emotions [see box on page 54]. As long as basic needs are met, however, money appears not to have much of an effect.

For example, research suggests that although the U.S. is economically richer than Denmark, the Danes are psychologically better off. The difference may lie in a person’s ability to trust other people’s good intentions. Scientists have linked happiness with so-called social capital, which includes measures of public trust and cooperation. In a survey in 2010 of the Danish population, Biswas-Diener, Vittersø and Diener found most Danes expressed faith in their government and business sectors and expected to have a lost wallet returned to them. In contrast, Americans viewed both as corrupt and doubted a stranger would give a wallet back to its owner.

The researchers also analyzed social capital in both societies using a “law and order index” includ-

ANIKA BUESSEMEIER Redux Pictures (left); ALAMY (center); TOBIAS HAUSER Redux Pictures (right)

FAST FACTS

Joy to the World

- 1>> The Gallup World Poll, which includes a psychological assessment of people in 155 countries, shows that nations vary enormously in how happy their citizens are.
- 2>> Scientists have linked happiness with so-called social capital, which includes measures of public trust and cooperation. National pride can also improve your quality of life.
- 3>> People in some cultures rate their life satisfaction according to how well they live up to social norms; citizens elsewhere base their judgment on how good they are feeling.

ed in the Gallup World Poll. The rating reflects the respondents' confidence in the local police, how safe they feel when walking alone at night, and whether they or someone close to them had recently experienced a theft. Danes scored significantly higher on this index than Americans did.

But another factor might hold sway over our perceptions of happiness. Previously Diener had found evidence that materialism is associated with unhappiness. And in South Korea, subjective well-being is

erally able to trust strangers, mastering particular skills and feeling respected by others.

Another source of happiness appears to come from thinking highly of your homeland. In a study published in February 2011 University of Illinois graduate students Mike Morrison and Louis Tay, along with Diener, analyzed responses from 132,516 people in 128 countries who had rated their past, present and future life satisfaction (including their standard of living, job and health), as well as their

In poor countries, happiness may depend on factors such as social success and group membership.

low despite its economic prosperity. In a keynote speech in 2010 to the Korean Psychological Association, Diener presented data gathered around the world from participants who were asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 9 how much they value material wealth. South Koreans report high average ratings of 7.24 relative to other economically flourishing countries, such as the U.S. at 5.45, and Japan at 6.01. South Korea also ranks poorly on happiness among wealthy nations, according to the Gallup World Poll's findings. Anger and depression are widespread in South Korea, and the suicide rate is the highest of the 34 richest nations in the world. Although several forces most likely contribute to the situation, researchers hypothesize that greater competition among citizens creates a more stressful environment overall. For example, in South Korea universities are neither big enough nor sufficiently numerous to accommodate the large numbers of hardworking young people who apply every year, denying many adolescents access to a critical gateway to employment.

Sanguine Citizens

The case of South Korea is just one piece of evidence that money and happiness do not necessarily go hand in hand. Costa Rica is another—the nation is a much happier place with per capita income just half that of South Korea. “Happiness in Latin American nations is higher than one would expect on the basis of their wealth,” says sociologist Ruut Veenhoven of Erasmus University of Rotterdam and director of the World Database of Happiness, an ongoing registry of scientific studies. Costa Rica and some of its neighbors might abound in the ingredients that researchers have found to be most important for happiness—social and psychological factors such as possessing strong ties with family and friends, being gen-

contentment with their country, on a scale from 1 to 10. The researchers found that citizens of poor, non-Western nations, such as Bangladesh and Ethiopia, value national satisfaction more than those of richer, Western nations such as the U.S. and Denmark. The citizens of these wealthier nations tended to place more importance on personal factors such as standard of living and health.

The finding that those who felt good about their country also tended to report a higher quality of life was most dramatic in poor countries, where daily life is a challenge and people have trouble meeting basic needs. In these places, citizens' well-being may depend more on external factors such as their perceptions of their social success and group membership. But a sense of belonging, the researchers say, can be an important source of happiness and life satisfaction for everyone. According to social identity theory, fitting in with a group is integral to an individual's identity, influencing his or her feelings of self-worth [see

LIFE SATISFACTION Overall appraisal of life, including work, income and relationships	POSITIVE FEELINGS Enjoyment, smiling and laughing
HIGHEST	HIGHEST
 Denmark Finland Netherlands Canada Sweden	 Costa Rica Canada Paraguay Laos Ireland
LOWEST	LOWEST
 Sierra Leone Haiti Tanzania Zimbabwe Georgia	 Georgia Armenia Serbia Sierra Leone Bosnia

In a global happiness survey, a country's rank depended on how you sliced the term. Still, Canadians scored well—and Georgians poorly—no matter the measure.

For more on cultural differences in happiness, visit ScientificAmerican.com/Mind/sep2011/happiness

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Being extroverted enhances well-being only if most people in the culture are similarly outgoing.

“The Social Cure,” by Jolanda Jetten, Catherine Haslam, S. Alexander Haslam and Nyla R. Branscombe; *SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN MIND*, September/October 2009]. By shifting our focus away from our individual lives and toward our country, we Westerners may be able to tap this source of pleasure.

Still, our ability to attain such a sense of belonging might be limited by how well we match our culture. In a study published earlier this year psychologist Ashley Fulmer of the University of Maryland, along with Diener and their colleagues, surveyed more than 7,000 people from 28 countries to examine how personality and culture interact to affect well-being. The researchers found, for example, that being extroverted enhances well-being only if most people in the culture are similarly outgoing. In another study (to be published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*), Diener and his colleagues found that religious individuals benefit psychologically if they live in a society where religion is widespread. Likewise, an extrovert in an “introverted” country such as Japan or a religious person living in a “nonreligious” country such as Sweden is less hap-

py than a person whose personality is a good match for the society. “Fitting into your culture is very important,” Diener says.

The extent to which a person identifies with a group can, in turn, influence whether that individual links happiness with his or her own feelings or the notions of others. In a study in 1998 of more than 60,000 individuals from 61 countries, psychologist Eunkook M. Suh, then at the University of Illinois, along with Diener and their colleagues, observed that when assessing life satisfaction, members of societies that emphasize group identity, such as China and India, tend to place great value on social norms—that is, how closely their behavior matches socially accepted actions. In contrast, members of individualistic nations such as the U.S. and Sweden base their happiness almost exclusively on their emotions.

Within a culture, social versus emotional factors show more variation. In 2008 Suh, now at Yonsei University in Seoul, Korea, Diener and psychologist John Updegraff of Kent State University had 101 European-Americans complete a questionnaire that asked subjects how frequently they experienced vari-

Green with Satisfaction

Money can buy happiness, but perhaps not in the way you thought. In 2010 psychologist Ed Diener of the University of Illinois and his colleagues reported that money does not directly or dramatically lift your spirits—but it can boost your satisfaction with life. Using a Gallup World Poll sample of roughly 136,000 people from 132 countries, the researchers asked respondents to rate their life on a scale from 0 to 10 and to answer questions revealing the extent to which they experienced various positive and negative emotions the previous day. Along with annual household income, the researchers audited the luxury goods participants owned. Additionally, they measured social and psychological factors: Were you treated with respect yesterday? Do you have family or friends you can count on in an emergency? Did you learn something new during the day? Were you able to do what you do best? Could you choose how you spent your time?

Researchers found that standard of living predicted overall life assessment better than it did the balance of positive and negative emotions. Having your psychological needs met, on the other hand, engendered more positive feelings on the day assessed. Thus, luxury goods can make you feel more satisfied



but do not make your life more enjoyable. The thrill of buying a new sports car or 50-inch plasma television fades quickly even if you might remain proud of owning these items. —S.P.P.

JOHN POWELL/Alamy

ous emotions and how strongly they thought close companions would approve of their way of life. The researchers found that some respondents focused on what they thought they *should* do rather than what they would like to do. For these individuals, happiness rested partly on how they measured up in others' eyes. Other participants relied much more heavily on their own emotions, attitudes and personal beliefs in judging their life satisfaction.

Life, Liberty And ...

Some psychologists argue that happiness measures reflect more of a Western than an Eastern perspective on well-being. People of Eastern descent living in the U.S. consistently report lower levels of subjective well-being than people from Western heritages, but the ratings may not reflect actual contentedness. Instead recent research indicates that Americans with an Asian background do not value the presence of positive emotions in their lives as much as other Westerners do. In a study published in 2009 psychologist Derrick Wirtz of East Carolina University, along with Diener and their colleagues, decided to investigate the role of heritage by having 46 vacationing European and Asian-Americans report, seven times a day, to what extent they were feeling pleasant, sociable, calm, happy and joyful as well as unpleasant, irritated, guilty, sad and worried. A month after returning home, the participants tried to remember how often they had experienced these various emotions during their trip. They also rated how likely they would be to go on the same vacation again.

While on their holidays, European- and Asian-Americans experienced positive and negative emotions to a similar extent. Afterward, however, the European-Americans *remembered* more good moods than the Asian-Americans did, and Asian-Americans recalled more bad feelings. Whether the European-Americans wished to repeat their vacation was related to the number of positive emotions they remembered, indicating that they considered positive feelings paramount; Asian-Americans' desire to redo the trip seemed tied not only to good feelings but also to the absence of negative emotions, hinting that success in their eyes is just as much about preventing bad outcomes as promoting positive ones.

In a similar study published in 2002 psychologist Shigehiro Oishi of the University of Virginia found that the same two groups rated their days as comparably good or bad, but European-Americans remembered being happier than they actually were, and Asian-Americans' memories were more in line with their daily reports. "In Eastern countries, every event has positive and negative sides. A totally

positive condition is considered very unlikely and possibly related to a superficial view of life," observes Antonella Delle Fave, a psychologist at the University of Milan in Italy. As Delle Fave sees it, Easterners learn to detach themselves from their emotions, embracing a life of evenness rather than of ups and downs.

Many people see success as an important ingredient for happiness—and it can be. But Diener urges caution when defining success as Americans typically do. In addition to positivity itself, he says that Americans sometimes overemphasize fortune and fame and undervalue the use of personal strengths and the achievement of results that benefit others. Diener says success boosts well-being if it comes from excelling at activities that you and others respect, rather than from simply doing *better* than others.

Although we do not know for sure why the Maasai are as happy as they are, Diener and Biswas-Diener hypothesize that part of the reason is that they focus on what they have rather than what they lack. In addition, they have a lot of self-respect and possess the skills they need to flourish, critical components of psychological health, Diener adds. The Maasai do vary in wealth, but the disparities are not great, and they all live a materially simple life, explains Biswas-Diener, which might mean they compete less with one another.

Although no one is suggesting that we buy swords and hunt lions (although the practice might add adventure to our lives), we can still learn a thing or two from Lankasana. We could spend more time doing what we enjoy and are good at, looking out for the greater good and bonding with our friends and family, Diener concludes. Just pondering these ideas might even earn you a smile. **M**



Asian-Americans are emotional realists. They remember their feelings more accurately than European-Americans, who tend to recall being happier than they actually were.

(Further Reading)

- ◆ **From Culture to Priming Conditions: Self-Construal Influences on Life Satisfaction Judgments.** Eunkook M. Suh, Ed Diener and John A. Updegraff in *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, Vol. 39, No. 1, pages 3–15; 2008.
- ◆ **Happiness: Unlocking the Mysteries of Psychological Wealth.** Ed Diener and Robert Biswas-Diener. Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.
- ◆ **Wealth and Happiness across the World: Material Prosperity Predicts Life Evaluation, Whereas Psychosocial Prosperity Predicts Positive Feeling.** Ed Diener, Weiting Ng, James Harter and Raksha Arora in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 99, No. 1, pages 52–61; 2010.
- ◆ **Subjective Well-Being and National Satisfaction: Findings from a Worldwide Survey.** Mike Morrison, Louis Tay and Ed Diener in *Psychological Science*, Vol. 22, pages 166–171; February 2011.