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Subjective Well-Being and National Satisfaction: Findings From a Worldwide Survey

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Abstract

We examined the relationship between satisfaction with one's country (national satisfaction) and subjective well-being utilizing data from a representative worldwide poll. National satisfaction was a strong positive predictor of individual-level life satisfaction, and this relationship was moderated by household income, household conveniences, residential mobility, country gross domestic product per capita, and region (Western vs. non-Western country). When individuals are impoverished or more bound to their culture and surroundings, national satisfaction more strongly predicts life satisfaction. In contrast, reverse trends were found in analyses predicting life satisfaction from satisfaction in other domains (health, standard of living, and job). These patterns suggest that people are more likely to use proximate factors to judge life satisfaction where conditions are salutary, or individualism is salient, but are more likely to use perceived societal success to judge life satisfaction where life conditions are difficult, or collectivism predominates. Our findings invite new research directions and can inform quality-of-life therapies.

Keywords

subjective well-being, national satisfaction, socioeconomic wealth, residential mobility, culture

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The country where you live has inescapable consequences for your life. It affects your job opportunities, the quality of your health care, and your risk of becoming a victim of crime or war. Yet people who experience difficult lives might still express high life satisfaction. Biswas-Diener and his colleagues (Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2001; Biswas-Diener, Vittersø, & Diener, 2005) found that, even though individuals in the slums of Calcutta live primarily in poverty, many of them are happy. Why might this be? The research reported in this article provides an intriguing possible answer: These individuals may experience personal satisfaction with their country, which overflows into their life satisfaction despite objectively poor societal conditions. Our examination of a worldwide representative poll provides insight into how a larger group identity might benefit individual subjective well-being (SWB).

SWB refers to a construct that includes people's emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgments of life satisfaction (for reviews, see Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999, and Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Measures of SWB have been found to be positively associated with individual difference variables, such as extraversion (Lucas & Diener, 2008), and with individual circumstances, such as

income (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002) and employment status (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2004).

Research has also examined the relationship between global SWB and satisfaction with specific facets of life, such as health and finances. Studies have found correlations between satisfaction with these domains and overall life satisfaction ranging from .27 to .44 (Diener & Diener, 1995; Kehn, 1995; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). However, individuals' overall satisfaction with their country of residence (national satisfaction) has received little attention. Although studies in the 1960s and 1970s (sampling a small number of countries) found positive within-country correlations (ranging from .08 to .55) between overall national satisfaction and life satisfaction (Cantril, 1965; Levy & Guttman, 1975), there have been no major studies on the relationship between these variables since.

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This neglect of the relationship between life satisfaction and national satisfaction has left a gap in the SWB literature. The contributions of superordinate groups, such as nations, and individuals' evaluations of their society to SWB have been largely overlooked. This article presents telling findings that close this gap and bring together elements of identity, self, culture, monetary wealth, and mobility. Using a representative worldwide sample, we investigated the power of national satisfaction to predict life satisfaction and compared the contributions of national satisfaction and satisfaction in other domains to life satisfaction. We also explored the extent to which there are regional, cultural, and economic differences in the relationship between national satisfaction and life satisfaction and between other domain satisfactions and life satisfaction.

Past theory and research suggest that national satisfaction could play an important role in shaping well-being. *Social identity theory* (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) posits that group memberships are a crucial component of individuals' identity and can have a powerful influence on feelings of self-worth. The more central a given group membership is to an individual's identity, the more that group is tied to his or her well-being. Many studies have shown that participants' in-group evaluations are positively associated with their self-evaluations (Cadinu & Rothbart, 1996; Clement & Krueger, 1998; De Vries, 2003). Further, when good events befall a group with which individuals identify, they are likely to feel better themselves (Hirt, Zillmann, Erickson, & Kennedy, 1992). Given that one's country is a salient component among one's multiple identities, we hypothesized that people feel better when they perceive their country to be doing well.

Social identity theory predicts a strong positive relationship between life satisfaction and national satisfaction, but other perspectives illuminate possible moderators of this relationship. National satisfaction may be particularly important if a person lives in poverty. For instance, Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers (1976) argued that high satisfaction in one domain can compensate for low satisfaction in another to boost overall well-being. Therefore, an impoverished individual who regards his or her country positively can use that as a consolation for an otherwise challenging life. By contrast, where more people have good jobs and good health, feelings about country may be less important to SWB than more personal matters are. Thus, we predicted that the relation between national satisfaction and life satisfaction would be more positive in poorer than in richer nations. Similarly, we expected the relation between national satisfaction and life satisfaction would be stronger among people with low personal income than those who are relatively rich.

We also expected a differential relationship between national and life satisfaction along cultural lines. On average, individuals from Western European cultures tend to view the self as independent, separate, and unique from others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In contrast, individuals from East Asian cultures tend to view the self as interdependent and embedded in a set of relationships. In line with this difference, the

relation between self and life satisfaction has been found to be stronger for people living in individualist cultures compared with those living in collectivist cultures (Diener & Diener, 1995). Conversely, relationship harmony predicts SWB better in collectivist cultures than in individualist ones (Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1997). Given the greater importance placed on how the group is doing in collectivist cultures, we predicted that national satisfaction would be more strongly related to well-being in non-Western than in Western cultures.

Finally, recent research has shown that the collective self is more central to identity and well-being among nonmobile individuals (those not planning to move) than among frequent movers (Oishi, Lun, & Sherman, 2007). Mobile people tend to be more individualistic and less loyal to where they live. Therefore, we expected that the relation between national satisfaction and life satisfaction would be stronger among nonmobile than among mobile individuals. Our worldwide sample of 128 countries created an excellent opportunity to test these hypotheses and further examine moderators of the relation between life satisfaction and national satisfaction.

Method

Participants and procedure

The sample consisted of 132,516 individuals from 128 countries who participated in a World Poll conducted by the Gallup Organization. This poll was aimed at representing 95% of the world's adult population through nationally representative sampling obtained by telephone and in-person interviews. Within-country demographic weights were applied to ensure that each country's sample composition conformed with the latest census data.

Measures

Life satisfaction. Life satisfaction was assessed with Cantril's (1965) Self-Anchoring Striving Scale (the Ladder of Life). This is a three-item measure asking respondents to rate their past, present, and future life using a scale from 1 (*worst possible*) to 10 (*best possible*; $\alpha = .75$).

National satisfaction. National satisfaction was assessed using the same format as in the Ladder of Life, but country ratings were elicited in place of personal ratings ($\alpha = .69$).

Domain satisfactions. Participants' satisfaction with their standard of living, personal health, and job was scored dichotomously.

Residential mobility. Respondents indicated whether they planned to move from their area or city in the next 12 months.

Environmental variables. Several measures were used to examine the effects of individual life circumstances. A measure

Table 1. Correlation Matrix of Variables Analyzed

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Life satisfaction									
2. National satisfaction	.47								
3. Standard-of-living satisfaction	.38	.26							
4. Health satisfaction	.21	.12	.25						
5. Job satisfaction	.26	.17	.37	.18					
6. Household income	.42	.25	.31	.14	.23				
7. Household conveniences	.41	.21	.29	.11	.25	.56			
8. Residential mobility	-.02	-.02	-.06	.03	-.10	-.05	-.09		
9. Gross domestic production per capita	.42	.29	.28	.06	.23	.68	.74	-.12	
10. Region (Western vs. non-Western)	-.33	-.26	-.23	-.07	-.16	-.50	-.38	.06	-.66

Note: Region was coded as 0 for individuals from Western countries (United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Western Europe) and 1 for individuals from non-Western countries (all other countries).

of household conveniences was obtained by asking respondents whether their home had electricity, a telephone, a television, a computer, and Internet access (1 = yes, 0 = no) and averaging these scores ($\alpha = .81$). Household income in international dollars was calculated from World Bank purchasing power parities (PPP) and log-transformed. Additionally, a national indicator, gross domestic product per capita (GDPPC), was gleaned from official sources and log-transformed.

Table 1 provides a correlation matrix of the variables analyzed. This table illustrates that life satisfaction had modest to strong relationships with all variables analyzed with the exception of residential mobility. National satisfaction was more strongly related to standard-of-living satisfaction and to the objective factors of income, household conveniences, GDPPC, and region of habitation than to residential mobility and health and job satisfaction.

Results

We used multilevel modeling (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) to account for within-country dependencies. All nondichotomous predictors were grand-mean-centered and entered as random slopes.¹ The multilevel equations were as follows:

$$\text{Individual-level model: life satisfaction}_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}X_{ij} + r_{ij},$$

$$\text{Country-level intercept model: } \beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}W_j + U_{0j},$$

$$\text{Country-level slope model: } \beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}K_j + U_{1j}.$$

Coefficients β and γ represent the individual- and country-level coefficients, respectively. Individual-level predictors (e.g., household income) are denoted by X_{ij} , and country-level predictors (e.g., GDPPC) are denoted by W_j and K_j . Residual terms are represented by r_{ij} , U_{0j} , and U_{1j} .

National satisfaction was a strong positive predictor of life satisfaction across the world ($\beta = 0.40$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .001$). This positive association was stronger among individuals with lower household income ($\beta = -0.05$, $SE = 0.004$, $p < .001$;

Fig. 1)² and fewer household conveniences ($\beta = -0.15$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .001$); it was also stronger among individuals who were nonmobile than among those who were mobile ($\beta = -0.06$, $SE = 0.007$, $p < .001$; Fig. 2). In contrast, the relationship between life satisfaction and the domain satisfactions was stronger among individuals with more conveniences—job satisfaction: $\beta = -0.06$, $SE = 0.007$, $p < .001$; health satisfaction: $\beta = 0.35$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$; and standard-of-living satisfaction: $\beta = 0.39$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$.

In examining the role of GDPPC, we found that the relationship between national satisfaction and life satisfaction was strongest for participants living in countries with lower

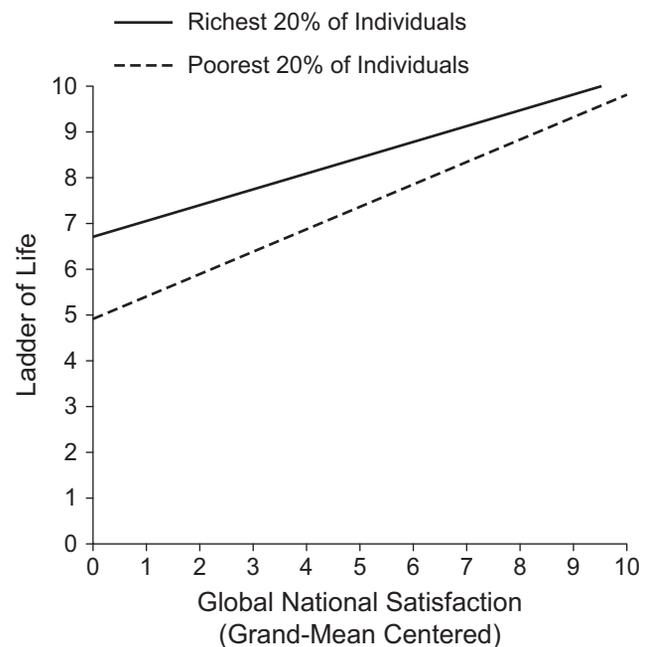


Fig. 1. The role of household income in moderating the relationship between national satisfaction and life satisfaction (Ladder of Life). Slopes for this relationship are shown separately for the poorest 20% and richest 20% of individuals in the worldwide survey. These categories were created by recoding household income (adjusted for purchasing power parity) into quintiles.

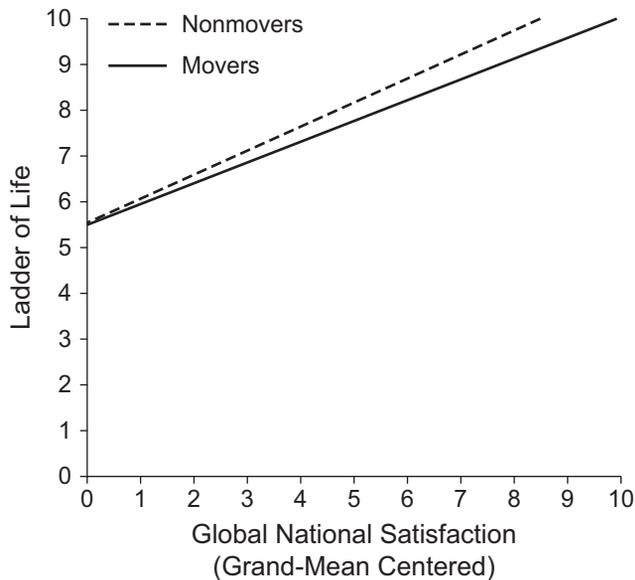


Fig. 2. The role of residential mobility in moderating the relationship between national satisfaction and life satisfaction (Ladder of Life). Slopes for this relationship are shown for participants who did not plan to move within 12 months (nonmovers) and those who did plan to move (movers).

GDPPC ($\gamma = -0.05$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .001$; Fig. 3). Conversely, the relation between life satisfaction and the domain satisfactions was strongest among participants in the richest nations—job satisfaction: $\gamma = 0.05$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .001$; health satisfaction: $\gamma = 0.14$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .001$; and standard-of-living satisfaction: $\gamma = 0.14$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .001$. Table 2 shows that individuals in the lowest income quintile and countries

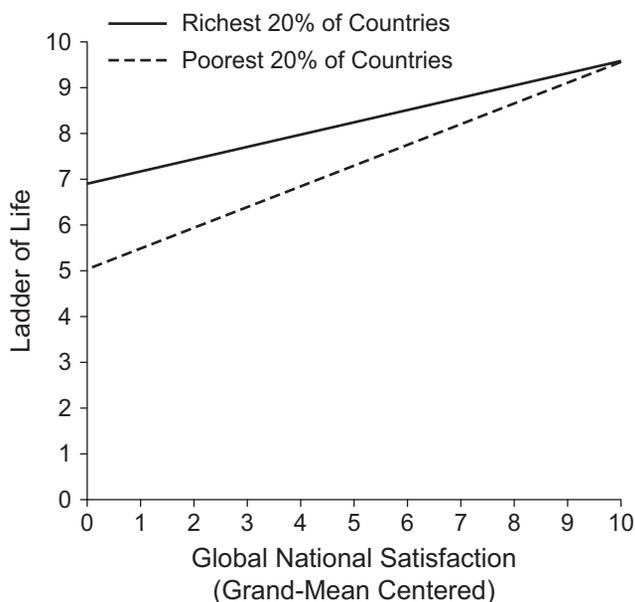


Fig. 3. The role of gross domestic product per capita in moderating the relationship between national satisfaction and life satisfaction (Ladder of Life). Slopes for this relationship are shown separately for respondents from the poorest 20% of countries in the world and respondents from the richest 20% of countries in the world.

in the lowest GDPPC quintile had higher national satisfaction than life satisfaction, whereas the reverse was true for those in the highest quintiles. Auxiliary analyses revealed that income ($\beta = 0.35$, $SE = 0.001$, $p < .001$) and GDPPC ($\gamma = 0.27$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$) were both strong predictors of the difference between life satisfaction and national satisfaction (former minus latter).

Finally, we explored regional patterns by grouping countries into Western (United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Western Europe; coded as 0) versus non-Western (all other countries; coded as 1) categories. National satisfaction mattered more for life satisfaction in non-Western than in Western nations ($\gamma = 0.15$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$; Fig. 4),³ and there was a significant three-way Income \times Region \times National Satisfaction interaction ($\gamma = -0.03$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .05$). Splitting up the data by region revealed that national satisfaction still mattered more among participants with less income in Western countries ($\gamma = -0.03$, $SE = 0.01$, $p = .009$), but the interaction was more pronounced in non-Western countries ($\gamma = -0.05$, $SE = 0.004$, $p < .001$). The other domain satisfactions had a stronger relation to life satisfaction in Western countries than in non-Western countries—health satisfaction: $\gamma = -0.13$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$; and standard-of-living satisfaction: $\gamma = -0.18$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

Our research is the most extensive study of the relationship between national satisfaction and SWB to date and has important implications for understanding life satisfaction and the self. Our results revealed that national satisfaction is a strong predictor of life satisfaction, even when controlling for many other variables linked to SWB in earlier research.

We went beyond establishing the relationship between overall life satisfaction and national satisfaction predicted by social identity theory, and uncovered sociocultural, economic, and regional differences that provide insights into how individuals construe their identity and well-being. We found that the relationship between national satisfaction and life satisfaction is strongest in the poorest countries of the world, among individuals with the least income, and among individuals with the fewest household conveniences. The moderating role of GDPPC, income, and conveniences reveals that when individuals have greater trouble meeting their basic needs, external factors such as group evaluations come to have a stronger influence on SWB. It is much easier for individuals to idealize their nation (e.g., politicians around the world have uttered variants on the line “we live in the best country in the world!” to rousing applause) than to idealize their job, health, or daily standard of living. If people believe that at least one aspect of the self is doing well, their focus may drift toward this aspect when they assess their life satisfaction. Social identity theory predicts that the more central a given group membership is to one’s identity, the more relevant that group becomes in one’s judgment of self-worth. Individuals in poverty may elevate

Table 2. Mean Life Satisfaction and National Satisfaction by Individual- and Country-Level Wealth

Wealth quintile	Individual			Country		
	Life satisfaction	National satisfaction	Difference p value	Life satisfaction	National satisfaction	Difference p value
Lowest 20%	4.62 (1.74)	4.81 (1.60)	< .001	4.82 (0.53)	4.91 (0.56)	< .05
Highest 20%	6.99 (1.50)	6.15 (1.67)	< .001	7.17 (0.35)	6.48 (0.69)	< .01

Note: Standard deviations are given in parentheses. Individual wealth is based on household income; country wealth is based on gross domestic product per capita. The results displayed in this table for country-level wealth are based on country-level data ($N = 128$). However, all other results cited in this article are derived from multilevel analyses utilizing data from individual survey respondents.

their nation to a more central component of their social identity, thus making it more relevant in judging their quality of life. This might explain why ratings of national satisfaction are higher on average than ratings of life satisfaction among relatively poor individuals and those living in poorer countries. Such findings are also in line with the view (Campbell et al., 1976) that perceived well-being in one domain can compensate for perceived well-being in other domains. However, impoverished individuals who fail to idealize their nation can be left feeling quite low indeed, for they lack the protective boost national satisfaction provides their peers.

We also found a stronger relationship between national satisfaction and life satisfaction in non-Western countries than in Western countries. This is in line with the greater importance placed on the group outside more individualistic, Western nations.

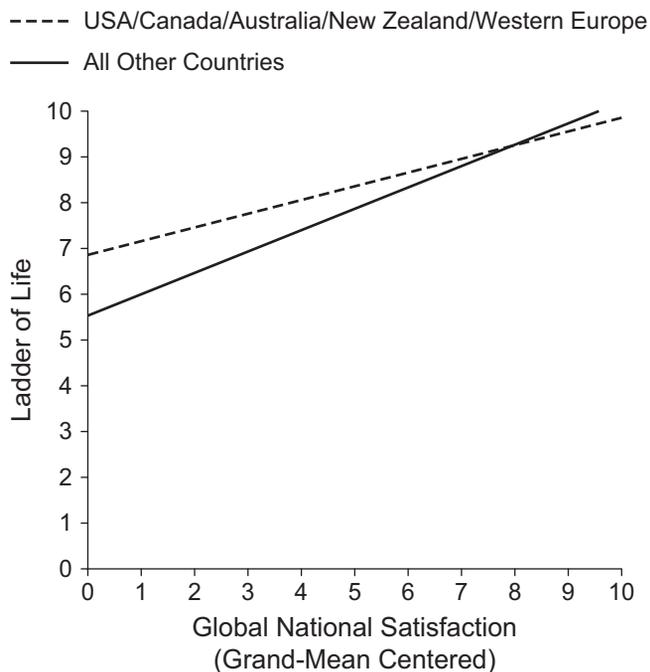


Fig. 4. Regional differences in the relationship between national satisfaction and life satisfaction (Ladder of Life). Slopes for this relationship are shown separately for respondents from Western countries and respondents from non-Western countries.

Our findings also provide support for Oishi's socio-ethological model of the self and social behaviors (Oishi et al., 2007), in which residential mobility plays a role in shaping identity and well-being. National satisfaction matters more for the well-being of people who plan to stay put in their locale than for the well-being of those who intend to move elsewhere.

Another telling pattern is that satisfaction with health, standard of living, and job matters more for life satisfaction among individuals with more household conveniences and those in richer, Western nations. Such people may pursue material goods because of societal standards or expectations. For those for whom the possession of material objects weighs more heavily, standard of living plays a stronger role in life satisfaction (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002). Our results thus provide further evidence that rich, Western and poor, non-Western individuals construe well-being in different ways, with the former focused more on personal, proximate matters and the latter focused more on societal matters.

Our results also have implications for interventions designed to improve quality of life. For instance, Frisch's (1998, 2006) Quality of Life (QOL) inventory and therapy assume that overall quality of life is the sum of satisfaction with important life domains. Frisch's model includes the domains of health, friendships, work, neighborhood, and community, among others. People who received his therapies have reported improved quality of life in diverse settings and randomized controlled trials (Frisch et al., 2005, Rodrigue, Baz, Widows, & Ehlers, 2005). However, national satisfaction, which goes beyond community satisfaction, is missing from the QOL model. Adding it might make QOL therapy more effective, particularly for individuals in impoverished conditions.

Our findings open the door to new avenues of research. Further studies examining key moderators and mediators can enhance understanding of when and where national satisfaction will have the strongest relationship with well-being. We also recommend greater exploration of the related concept of patriotism and its relationship with well-being.

Governments and institutions actively attempt to instill bonds and national satisfaction with national anthems, pledges of allegiance, and other techniques. It is crucial to understand the consequences of such actions. Our research indicates that

to the extent that these exercises make you feel your country is doing well, they may improve your sense of well-being. The strength of that relationship, however, depends on where you live, how long you plan to live there, and what your standard of living is.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Notes

1. All effects discussed were replicated when we used country-mean-centered variables.
2. This coefficient and all that follow throughout the Results section are from interaction terms. The values come from simple models including a type of satisfaction (national or a domain satisfaction), the moderator, and the interaction term. Each of the effects was replicated in analyses controlling for all types of satisfaction and interaction terms. An examination of the score distributions showed that it is unlikely that these interactions are attributable to ceiling or floor effects.
3. The same pattern was replicated when we compared Western respondents with respondents from African and Asian countries (with other non-Western nations excluded).

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