



## Short Communication

## Individualism as the moderator of the relationship between hedonism and happiness: A study in 19 nations

Mohsen Joshanloo <sup>a,\*</sup>, Aaron Jarden <sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology, Keimyung University, South Korea<sup>b</sup> Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

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## ABSTRACT

We hypothesize that hedonism (valuing pleasure) as a pathway to happiness is more strongly correlated with happiness in more individualistic (vs collectivistic) cultures. Multi-level modeling is used to test this hypothesis in a sample of 6899 individuals across 19 cultures, controlling for age, gender, and national economic prosperity. As predicted, we find that individualism moderates the relationship between hedonism and happiness, such that hedonism is more strongly related to happiness in more individualistic cultures. These results suggest that culture influences how happiness is most effectively pursued in various cultures.

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## 1. Introduction

People universally value pleasure, which consists of both pleasant physical sensations and emotional experiences (Higgins, 2011). However, seeking to maximize pleasure is not the only energizer of human behavior. Research suggests that people may prefer unpleasant emotions over pleasant ones when such emotions are useful in certain situations (Tamir & Mauss, 2011). Humans' behaviors are also driven by motives such as seeking competence, relatedness, justice, and knowledge, for the sake of which pleasure may be postponed or forsaken (Higgins, 2011). In addition, individuals often need to dampen their natural inclination to maximize pleasure and comfort to achieve long-term goals (Baumeister, 2005). The ability to commit to challenging and arduous tasks and responsibilities for the sake of long-term goals has been recognized as a crucial facilitator of overall success and well-being (Baumeister & Vohs, 2003). Thus, pleasure is naturally desirable, but it may need to be frequently postponed or forsaken to foster sustained goal-directed activity.

Hedonism is the view that a good life consists mainly of pleasurable experiences (Feldman, 2004). Cultures are not equally supportive of hedonism. In particular, hedonism seems to be more consistent with the ethos of individualism compared to collectivism (e.g., Joshanloo, 2014; Triandis et al., 1986). Individualistic cultures lay special emphasis

on personal goals over collective goals, and foster expression of one's unique beliefs, attitudes, and desires. Personal enjoyment and positive emotions are crucial in affirming the worth of the private self in these cultures (Kitayama & Markus, 2000). Individualistic cultures have been found to value pleasure more strongly than collectivistic cultures (Schwartz, 2009).

Whereas in individualistic cultures, having responsibilities for and concerns about others can be considered a constraint (Schwartz, 2015) or a "drag on having fun" (Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990, p. 1018), collectivistic cultures emphasize group harmony over personal interests and enjoyments (Triandis et al., 1990). These cultures tend to view well-being as consisting mainly of traditional virtues (such as selflessness and harmony), which are less consistent with the hedonistic approach (Joshanloo, 2014). Studies on parenting styles across cultures indicate that parents in collectivistic cultures give more prominence to fostering self-discipline and impulse control in their children (Baumeister & Tierney, 2011; Sabbagh, Xu, Carlson, Moses, & Lee, 2006). The heavier emphasis on self-discipline in the collectivistic parenting style reflects the greater importance of harnessing hedonistic desires and promoting other salient values in these cultures. The collectivistic cultures have also been found to be generally more religious than the individualistic cultures (Diener, Tay, & Myers, 2011). Many religions emphasize values other than pleasure, such as self-transcendence, performing religious duties, and sacrificing personal interests for the sake of the religious community (Joshanloo, 2013, 2014).

In sum, it seems that individualistic cultures regard pleasure as a more central ingredient of well-being, than collectivistic cultures. People in collectivistic cultures seem to attach equal or more importance

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Keimyung University, 2800 Dalgubeol Boulevard, Dalseo-Gu, Daegu 704-701, South Korea.

E-mail addresses: [mjoshanloo@hotmail.com](mailto:mjoshanloo@hotmail.com) (M. Joshanloo), [aaron.jarden@aut.ac.nz](mailto:aaron.jarden@aut.ac.nz) (A. Jarden).

to values and ideals other than pleasure, such as group harmony. Therefore, we predicted that the relationship between hedonism and happiness would be stronger in individualistic nations compared to collectivistic nations. This prediction is supported by a large body of research showing that a congruency between individuals' values and the values emphasized in their cultural environment is beneficial for subjective well-being (Sagiv, Roccas, & Oppenheim-Weller, 2015). In other words, because hedonism is more congruent with the cultural norms prevailing in individualistic cultures, we expected it to be more strongly related to happiness in these cultures.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 6899 community participants, across 19 countries, who completed the first wave of the International Wellbeing Study (<http://www.wellbeingstudy.com>). The study includes many other variables that are not related to the present study. Only the 19 countries that had more than 80 participants are included. Characteristics of the samples and national averages for all the variables of the study are presented in Table 1.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Subjective happiness

The Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) was used to measure subjective happiness (e.g., "Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself": 1 = *less happy* through 7 = *more happy*). The four items were rated on a 7-point scale with different anchors. The Cronbach's alpha of the scale in the whole sample was 0.82, ranging from 0.68 in the Philippines to 0.87 in Canada.

#### 2.2.2. Hedonism

The pleasure subscale of the Orientations to Happiness Scale (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005) was used to measure a hedonistic approach to life. This scale measures the degree to which respondents value physical and emotional pleasure in life, and see it as a pathway to happiness (e.g., "For me, the good life is the pleasurable life"). Ratings are on a 5-point scale, from 1 = *not like me at all* through 5 = *very much like me*. The Cronbach's alpha of the scale in the whole sample was 0.78, ranging from 0.63 in Russia to 0.85 in Portugal and Serbia.

#### 2.2.3. Individualism

We used national individualism scores provided by Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), who define individualism as a concern for oneself and one's immediate family, and an emphasis on personal autonomy, self-fulfillment, and personal achievements. Individualism scores range from 6 to 91.

#### 2.2.4. National economic prosperity

To measure the overall economic prosperity of the nations in the study, the economy sub-index of the 2012 Legatum Prosperity Index was used. This index measures "countries' performance in four key areas: macroeconomic policies, economic satisfaction and expectations, foundations for growth, and financial sector efficiency" (Legatum Institute, 2012, p. 12). The economic prosperity indices range from 3.33 to – 6.78.

## 3. Results

Using multi-level modeling, we first tested an intercept-only model (excluding all the predictors). The results indicated the proportion of variability in subjective happiness that exists at both the individual and cultural levels (Hox, 2010). For an acceptable level of power, multi-level analyses require a sample of at least 20 groups that each has at least 30 individuals (Heck & Thomas, 2000). A sample of 6899 participants nested in 19 groups used in the present study seems to ensure sufficient power. There was statistically significant variability both at the individual ( $b = 1.597$ , Wald  $Z = 58.652$ ,  $p$  (one-sided)  $< 0.001$ ) and cultural ( $b = 0.054$ , Wald  $Z = 2.614$ ,  $p$  (one-sided)  $= 0.004$ ) levels. In a second analysis we added all the predictors as well as the interaction between hedonism and individualism to the model. Following Enders and Tofghi (2007) and Nezlek's (2010) guidelines, individual-level variables (except gender which was a binary variable) were group-mean centered, and national-level variables were grand-mean centered. Because their slopes were not significantly variable across groups, all the individual-level variables were specified as fixed effects.

Adding all of the variables to the model reduced the unexplained variance in the individual-level scores of happiness by 10.08%. The remaining amounts of unexplained variance at the individual ( $b = 1.436$ , Wald  $Z = 58.635$ ,  $p$  (one-sided)  $< 0.001$ ) and cultural ( $b = 0.057$ , Wald  $Z = 2.510$ ,  $p$  (one-sided)  $= 0.006$ ) levels were significantly different from zero. The estimates for fixed effects are shown in Table 2. As can be seen, all the individual-level variables positively and significantly predicted happiness. Yet, national individualism and national

**Table 1**  
Sample sizes and mean scores.

	Female %	N	Age	Hedonism	Individualism	Economic prosperity	Happiness
Slovenia	83.1%	296	23.024	21.963	27.000	1.170	4.677
Philippines	92.6%	108	22.370	19.981	32.000	0.990	5.014
Russia	75.5%	155	26.406	19.697	39.000	0.370	4.285
Finland	51.4%	319	17.323	19.310	63.000	2.400	4.656
Slovakia	82.3%	96	25.417	19.104	52.000	0.670	4.844
Greece	85.6%	181	20.414	18.680	35.000	–.390	4.468
Czech Republic	80.6%	258	27.512	18.233	58.000	1.680	4.905
Germany	71.9%	128	28.242	18.219	67.000	2.780	4.678
Colombia	76.0%	204	33.765	18.044	13.000	1.000	5.169
Mexico	74.3%	315	35.286	17.854	30.000	1.430	5.286
Hungary	83.6%	1076	31.560	17.608	80.000	0.000	4.784
United States	80.3%	870	42.545	17.590	91.000	2.120	5.032
Norway	72.2%	97	32.794	17.588	69.000	3.260	4.716
New Zealand	83.9%	1605	38.581	17.416	79.000	1.810	4.862
Canada	85.9%	128	38.930	17.336	80.000	2.760	5.150
Australia	81.9%	349	42.587	17.223	90.000	2.650	4.934
Portugal	75.3%	81	33.802	17.062	27.000	0.860	4.849
China	58.6%	210	21.029	17.024	20.000	2.590	4.638
United Kingdom	79.0%	423	33.274	16.631	89.000	1.860	4.607
Total	79.4%	6899	33.461	17.909	54.789	1.579	4.830

**Table 2**  
Hierarchical linear modeling predicting subjective happiness.

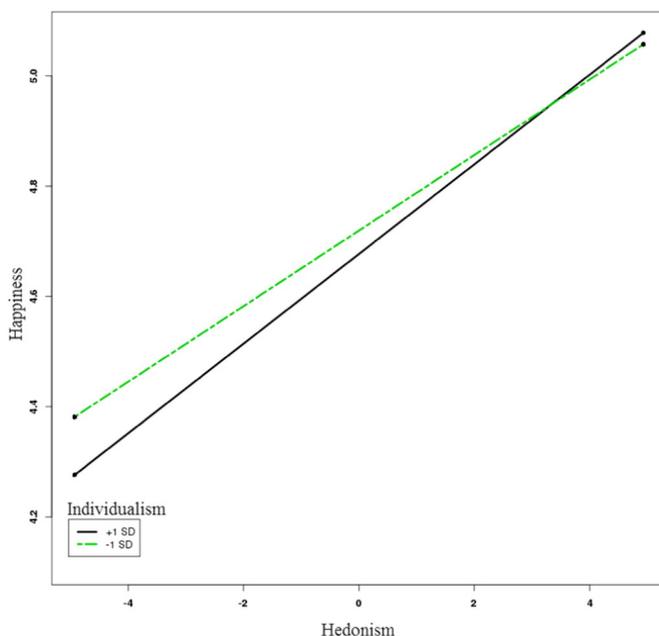
	b	St. error	df	t	p	95% CI	
						Lower bound	Upper bound
Intercept	4.698	0.073	20.868	64.466	0.000	4.546	4.850
Female	0.137	0.036	6891.977	3.760	0.000	0.066	0.209
Age	0.016	0.001	6876.197	13.369	0.000	0.014	0.018
Hedonism	0.075	0.003	6876.124	25.256	0.000	0.069	0.081
National individualism	−0.001	0.002	14.846	−0.360	0.724	−0.006	0.004
National economic prosperity	0.066	0.064	15.911	1.025	0.321	−0.071	0.203
Hedonism × national individualism	0.000	0.000	6876.121	2.094	0.036	0.000	0.001

economic prosperity did not contribute significantly to the prediction of happiness.

With regard to our main hypothesis, the interaction between hedonism and individualism was significant. This indicates that individualism moderates the relationship between hedonism and happiness. The moderating effect is shown in Fig. 1, which is produced using tools provided by Preacher, Curran, and Bauer (2006). As shown in the figure, the correlation between hedonism and happiness was stronger for more individualistic nations, compared to less individualistic nations, which supports our prediction. Simple slopes for high and low levels of individualism were 0.081 and 0.068, respectively (both significant at  $p < 0.001$ ).

#### 4. Discussion

A hedonistic conceptualization of well-being is in accord with the core values and ethos of western culture, which extols liberal individualism (Joshanloo, 2014). Yet, the emphasis on pleasure as an ingredient of well-being is less pronounced in collectivistic nations. In these cultures, such values as conformity, religiosity, and selflessness are considered equally (if not more) important in formulating well-being (Joshanloo, 2014). On this basis, we predicted that levels of individualism would moderate the relationship between hedonism and happiness. Our results supported this prediction, showing that the relationship between hedonism and happiness was stronger in more individualistic nations, when age, gender, and national levels of national economic prosperity were controlled for.



**Fig. 1.** National individualism as the moderator of the relationship between individual-level hedonism and individual-level happiness.

These results suggest that pursuing pleasure as a pathway to happiness is more efficacious in producing happiness in individualistic cultures. Individualist cultures emphasize personal autonomy, self-fulfillment, and personal achievements (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005), and having pleasurable experiences can indicate the individual's success in achieving these ideals (Uchida, Norasakkunkit, & Kitayama, 2004). Yet, in some collectivistic cultures, the pursuit of pleasure could indicate failure in achieving such cultural ideals as selflessness and harmony (Joshanloo & Weijers, 2014; Suh, 2000).

It is acknowledged that positive emotions and physical sensations are universally cherished (Tsai, Knutson, & Fung, 2006). Nonetheless, people in collectivistic societies seem to more strongly endorse other equally important values, which may necessitate a constant negotiation between hedonistic desires and collectivistic or religious aspirations (Joshanloo, 2013, 2014). This may be why a hedonistic conceptualization of well-being is regarded as less favorable in collectivistic cultures than in individualistic ones (Joshanloo & Weijers, 2014; Oishi & Gilbert, 2016). Hence, a better fit with ideals associated with individualism partly explains why hedonism is related to higher levels of happiness in individualistic cultures than in collectivistic cultures.

These results suggest that people in individualistic culture may benefit more from holding the view that pleasure should be actively pursued in life. Such results illustrate that the efficacy of endorsing certain values in producing happiness can be dependent on culture. Prior research has also shown that a potential moderator of the effects of happiness-enhancing activities on experienced happiness is the norms and traditions of the culture in which the individual lives (Layout, Sheldon, & Lyubomirsky, 2015). Based on the present results, it is suggested that activities in the service of personal achievement and enjoyment may be more conducive to happiness in individualistic cultures, whereas activities designed for serving collectivistic goals (such as harmony, loyalty to the collective, and religiosity) may be more effective in collectivistic cultures.

Given the dearth of empirical studies on the topic, the present findings should be considered preliminary, and need to be replicated before definitive conclusions can be drawn. In particular, future research will need to include samples from world regions that were underrepresented in this study (e.g., more Asian, South American, and African cultures). We only focused on how strongly people valued pleasure, and did not measure how often people actually engaged in pleasurable activities. Additional research is needed to examine the relationship between experienced pleasure and subjective happiness across cultures. Despite these limitations, the present study serves as a preliminary step toward understanding the importance of culture in determining the efficacy of happiness-enhancing activities.

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