

Happiness in Individualistic Culture: A Function of Freedom and Autonomy?

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*Laila Jama, Jenni Lee,
Monica Gamez-Perez, Whitney Sands*

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Introduction

Given its very nature, happiness is subjective, and the study of it has led to much debate over what it is that makes an individual, or a nation, happy. Based on the idea that happiness is tailored not by a universal standard, but specifically by a nation's culture, this paper will attempt to answer the question of whether individualistic cultures have higher reported levels of happiness due to the vast amount of freedom, autonomy, and opportunity it offers its people. Specifically looking to freedom and autonomy in individualistic societies as it relates to their social political rights, occupation, income, education, religion, and relationships in terms of marriage and home life, this paper will discuss the ways in which opportunity and capacity for choice allows for a happier society, and increased quality-of life.

Individualistic cultures—which encourage their members to pursue personal happiness over meeting the obligations of society as whole—tend to yield happier citizens with a higher level of subjective well-being. Veenhoven argues that individualism is measured by three key aspects: moral appreciation for individualism, the opportunity to choose, and the capability to choose. He states in his article *Quality of Life in Individualistic Society*:

At the individual level this [individualization] involves both greater awareness of ones own preferences and greater ability to act independently. At the societal level individualization involves greater freedom and a change in social regulation from normative prescription to negotiation (Veenhoven, 1999).

Considering this, individualized cultures hold less restrictions and offer more alternatives with which individuals can negotiate their wants and needs. Furthermore, the positive view holds that people thrive well in autonomy, and that the choices of self-seeking individuals will produce a favorable and balanced overall outcome—this view is rooted in the tradition of thought following Adam Smith’s liberal economic theory of the “invisible hand.” Therefore, as individualistic societies allow for more variation and autonomy for its people, there will ultimately be more choice, opportunity, and capability for people to take control of their own lives and strive for self-actualization. In turn, more choice leads to more social and political involvement, as well as increased levels of self-esteem, which, according to Veenhoven, “foster pro-social behaviors” in terms of relationships (Veenhoven,1999). Ultimately, these lines of thought support the idea that the more individualized the culture, the higher the level of subjective well-being for the society is as a whole.

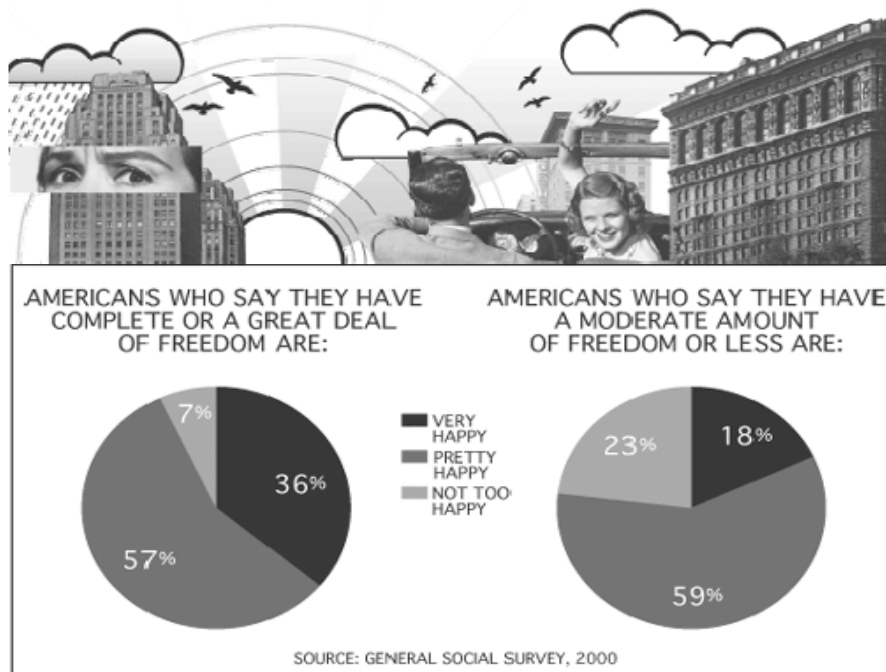
On the other hand, opposing views hold that individualism yields corruption as it entails ruthless competition and selfishness, ultimately leading to the individual’s alienation from society and even from him/herself. This counter view that man is not independent, but dependent on the whole, points to collectivism—a move toward community satisfaction rather than self-satisfaction—as a solution to this alienation.

Both arguments have been debated by researchers for decades, and depending on the mindset of the society at the time, popularity on either views have fluctuated. The study reported in this paper will lay out the positive influences of individualization on a people, beginning with how a culture conducive to furthering the autonomy and social, economic, political, and religious freedom of the individual can add to the subjective-

well-being of the people as a whole. Furthermore, we will discuss the concepts of relative and absolute income to correlate happiness with the higher levels of income reported for individualist societies than collectivist. Throughout the discussion, we will address how capacity and opportunity—such as for expanding education and division of labor—can also lead to increased levels of happiness.

Individualism in Relationships Fostering Pro-social Behavior

Much of the happiness that is visible in people who live in individualistic cultures is attributed to the freedom that they experience within their culture. One of the key aspects of such freedom that is offered is that which allows the individual to freely choose the type of relationship that best fits the individual’s needs and wants. Studies have shown that when people have the freedom to choose their partners, the number of children desired, and other aspects of family life, they score higher on various happiness measures:



Referencing the graph above, Arthur Brooks discussed the role of freedom in America and its implications on the happiness of Americans: “when holding income, sex, education, race, religion, politics, and family status constant, we find that people who felt free were about 18 percentage points more likely than others to say that they were very happy” (Brooks, 2008). Therefore, referring to a correlation between family status and freedom, Brooks holds that a higher percentage of Americans tend to be happier with higher levels of freedom.

On the other hand, highly collectivist countries such as China remain within a conservative sexual culture, which still exists in modern day China (Higgins et. Al, 2002). According to Higgins, Chinese culture implements profound limitations on the freedom of sexual relations and marriage choices to the point where they are crippling to the advancement of Chinese women. In terms of occupation, researchers have argued that idea of family offers people a reason to work, and provides a sense of meaning and purpose to their occupations in that they are consistently working to provide a better life for their families. This argument, made in favor of individualistic cultures furthering purpose in life in terms of family, goes along with Veenhoven’s argument in his article *Quality of Life in Individualistic Society*, in which she states that marriages in individualistic societies appear to be more satisfying and affectionate (Veenhoven, 1999); this is probably due to the freedom of choices regarding mating that are prevalent in modernized individualistic societies.

Furthermore, due to the fact that most individualistic societies are highly modernized, the concept of choice has come to encompass almost everything from marriage to procreation. As couples are able choose the amount of children they wish to

have, the appropriate time to have children, and whether or not to use methods of birth control, families have gained more control over their lives, which consequently makes them happier on average (Veenhoven, 1999). Also, as a result of this high level of freedom of choice and responsibility, individualism in families helps provide higher levels confidence, which furthers success in developing social networks—this has proven to be a great indicator of happiness. Therefore, as people of individualistic cultures are free to choose from the abundance of choices and alternatives their society offers them, the fact that individualistic cultures have higher reported levels of happiness, according to Veenhoven, is an expected outcome.

Life Satisfaction in Terms of Occupation in Individualist Cultures

Discussed briefly in the previous section, family and its role as a driving factor for pursuing a successful career bleeds into a discussion of the correlation between occupation and life satisfaction in individualist cultures.

Studies investigating the relationship between occupational status—including the employed, unemployed, and students—and general life satisfaction in Italy have shown that life satisfaction was lower among the unemployed than with students and employed peers (Martella and Maas, 2000). What is interesting about this study is that the results varied based on the different regions of Italy where either individualistic or collectivist norms prevailed. Life satisfaction was shown to be lower among the unemployed from northern Italy, whose inhabitants present a predominantly individualistic set of values, than from southern Italy, which was found to be more collectivist. These results suggest that unemployment, though definitely an overall negative contributor to life satisfaction,

may have less severe consequences for people living within a collectivist culture than those in an individualist culture.

Despite how unattractive or not self-fulfilling a vocational path may be, the fact remains that employment provides financial security, social identity, and status for all people. Employment, therefore, for individualistic societies—with their higher levels of financial affluence and freedom of opportunity to pursue individual social identities within their culture—becomes a highly self-actualizing factor for overall happiness and subjective well-being. Not surprisingly then, the absence of employment, which leads to a loss of financial security, status, social identity, and purpose in life, can have especially devastating effects on the subjective psychological well-being of people who are part of an individualistic society; a society that defines itself with its freedom of opportunity for self-advancement and individual actualization.

Though the positive correlation between individualism and life satisfaction continues to be strongly positive when dealing with variables such as controlled income, social and political equality, and human rights, studies have shown that this pattern may be reversed in moments of distress (Martella and Maas, 2000). The relationship between individualism and subjective well-being changes radically when people are confronted with difficult situations, such as unemployment, that directly infringes on their individualistic values. Such observations point to the extreme nature to which individualist societies respond to hardship due to their strong commitment to freedom and need for self-actualization as a means of gaining subjective-well-being. According to Veenhoven, individualistic society's encouragement of the development of identity, self-esteem, and self-actualization help foster pro-social behaviors such as social involvement

and moral responsibility, which can in turn yield a higher sense of satisfaction with career and life purpose for members of individualist societies (Veenhoven, 1999).

Income and Economic Affluence in Individualistic Societies

According to observed statistical relationships—though results could be spurious and may very well reflect the attributes of other nation's qualities that happen to relate to individualism—economic affluence is shown to be typically higher in individualistic societies. In looking to how a higher concentration of prosperous nations are individualism-based societies, Veenhoven, in *Quality-of-Life in Individualistic Society*, studied the correlations among poor countries and rich countries based on the respective relationship between their economic affluence and happiness as a means to explore cross-cultural differences in happiness—particularly with the subjective well-being and quality-of-life of individualistic societies (Veenhoven, 1999). Consequently, these split-up cases reveal a zero-order correlation among poor countries, and a positive correlation among rich countries. Although few of the correlations reached an ample level of statistical significance, the pattern of results are no doubt suggestive: the more individualized the society, the happier its members appear to be, therefore revealing a positive correlation between the amount freedom a people are given in society and their happiness.

Income has also often served as a control in checking for spurious correlation in studies such as this. Universally, income as an individual factor proves to be a powerful predictor of cross-national happiness differences (Welsch, 2003). Yet, when income is controlled, such correlates of happiness that point to richer and therefore happier nations

become insignificant. This, by no means, implies the irrelevance of freedom for happiness. Rather, it suggests prosperity as a function of freedom and wider array of choice, for free individualistic societies tend to generate higher income levels. In the case for the increased level of national wealth in Japan, a predominantly collectivist culture, “Japanese citizens didn’t seem to become any more satisfied with their lives. According to one poll, the percentage of people who gave the most positive possible answer about their life satisfaction actually fell from the late 1950s to the early ’70s. They were richer but apparently no happier” (Leonhardt, 2008).

With this, the differences in average happiness levels stemming from cultural factors—such as the amount of freedom people enjoy to pursue their individual goals, exercise their civil and political rights, and experience a higher degree of gender equality—can be directly related to differences in national wealth, for wealth and income tend to be higher in individualistic societies (Schyns, 1998). Veenhoven goes further with this claim by reversing causation, stating that the happiness of citizens may also be able to stimulate the individualization of society. This claim suggests that although the effect of individualism may be negative, a small negative effect of individualism on happiness can be overpowered by a stronger positive effect of happiness on individualism. Various mechanisms may be involved, and the present data is difficult to distinguish. Therefore, it leads us to assume that both effects are involved in the correlation between individualism and happiness. Moreover repeated happiness surveys around the world have allowed for the observation of the evolution of G.D.P. and happiness through time — both over a longer period, and for more countries. On average, G.D.P. and happiness tends to move in sync, and with a positive correlation (Kahneman, 2002).

To look specifically to whether or not income has a positive influence on well-being, we will look to Easterlin's studies. Easterlin's studies on happiness, in terms of economic factors, have become well known as the Easterlin Paradox, which points to a positive correlation between life satisfaction and wealthier countries, while simultaneously observing that the world has grown richer, but not happier. One part of the paradox supports the argument that richer, individualistic societies are happier than collectivist societies, which tend to be statistically poorer. Comparatively, happiness will not rise as a consequence of economic growth in that a nation's affluence and individual happiness is defined as relative. Yet, Maslow's need theory explains the paradox in that it points to how a positive correlation between individualistic societies and happiness is a result of both better economic and cultural living conditions, which leads to more need-satisfaction and happiness.

The Easterlin Paradox is a juxtaposition of three observations:

1. Within a society, rich people tend to be much happier than poor people.
2. But, rich societies tend not to be happier than poor societies (or not by much).
3. As countries get richer, they do not get happier.

The figure below is example displaying the Easterlin Paradox:

Measuring Satisfaction

A new study shows that people in wealthier countries are more likely to be satisfied with their lives. Earlier research had suggested that satisfaction did not necessarily increase once basic needs were met.

Percent who rate themselves an 8, 9 or 10 on a 10-point scale of satisfaction



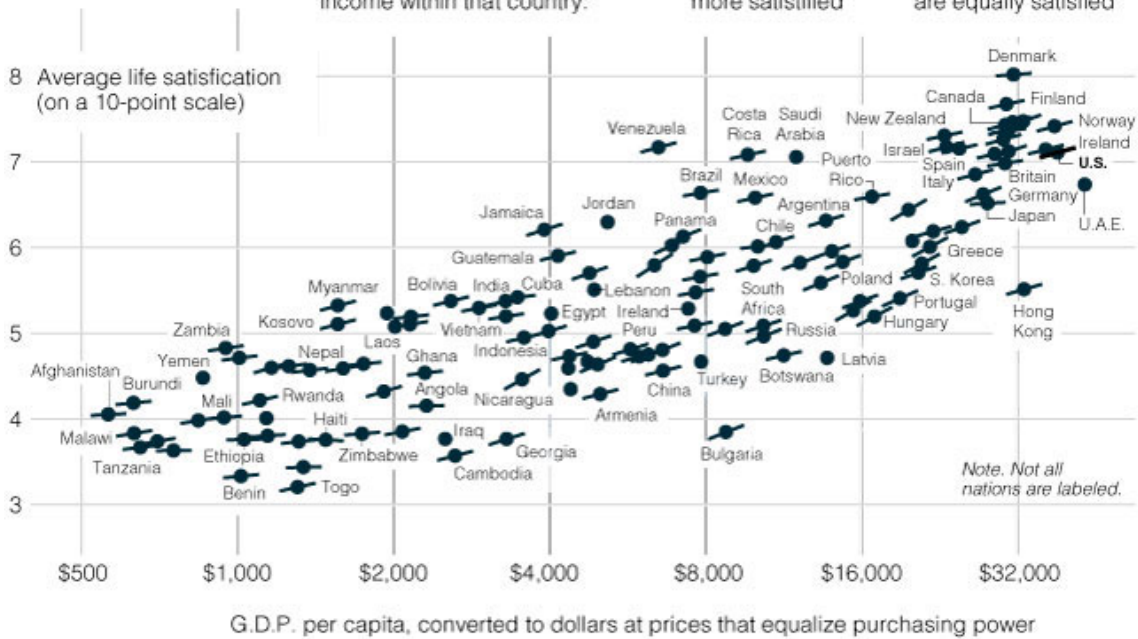
KEY:

● Each dot represents one country

The line around the dot shows how satisfaction relates to income within that country:

↗ Higher-income people are more satisfied

↔ Higher-income and lower-income people are equally satisfied



Source: Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania

THE NEW YORK TIMES

In looking to the above graph, the paradox is apparent in that there is robust evidence that within countries, those with more income are happier. These two seemingly discordant findings—that income is an important predictor of individual happiness, yet apparently irrelevant for average happiness—have spurred researchers to seek to reconcile them through models emphasizing reference-dependent preferences and relative income comparisons. Richard Layard offers an explanation: “people are concerned about

their relative income and not simply about its absolute level” there is more emphasis on keeping up with the Jones (Stevenson, 2007).

Easterlin’s findings indicate that that income and socioeconomic status have little to do with a person’s happiness. They also conclude that when a poor person experiences a change that improves their social status, happiness levels rise. Still, it is important to note that “happiness is not confined, of course to economic well-being” (Easterlin, 1974). We all have certain expectations in life and when we are asked the question of what we envision as a “happy life,” income level does indeed become an important part of the equation. People wish to have financial stability, for having money lends to a financially comfortable life, which is often seen as a prerequisite to striving for a higher level of happiness. Individualistic countries motivate the culture of productivity and, on a global assessment, tend to be wealthier nations. Consequently, as individualistic societies are happier, income is then positively correlated with happiness.

The correlation between higher levels of income and happiness also turns out to be positive in rich countries, and negative in poor. Veenhoven discusses a contributing factor for such positive correlation results in richer countries by introducing the capability factor. Capability—consisting of a nation’s ability to provide higher forms of education and information systems to its citizens—and affluence are presented as overlapping factors, according to Veenhoven, although it is possible that economic affluence may have an individual effect on happiness (Veenhoven, 1999). Still, considering how individualism requires choice and freedom, and therefore greater choice in occupation and consumption, the opportunity for individualistic societies to choose freely becomes a contributing factor to its higher reported levels of happiness.

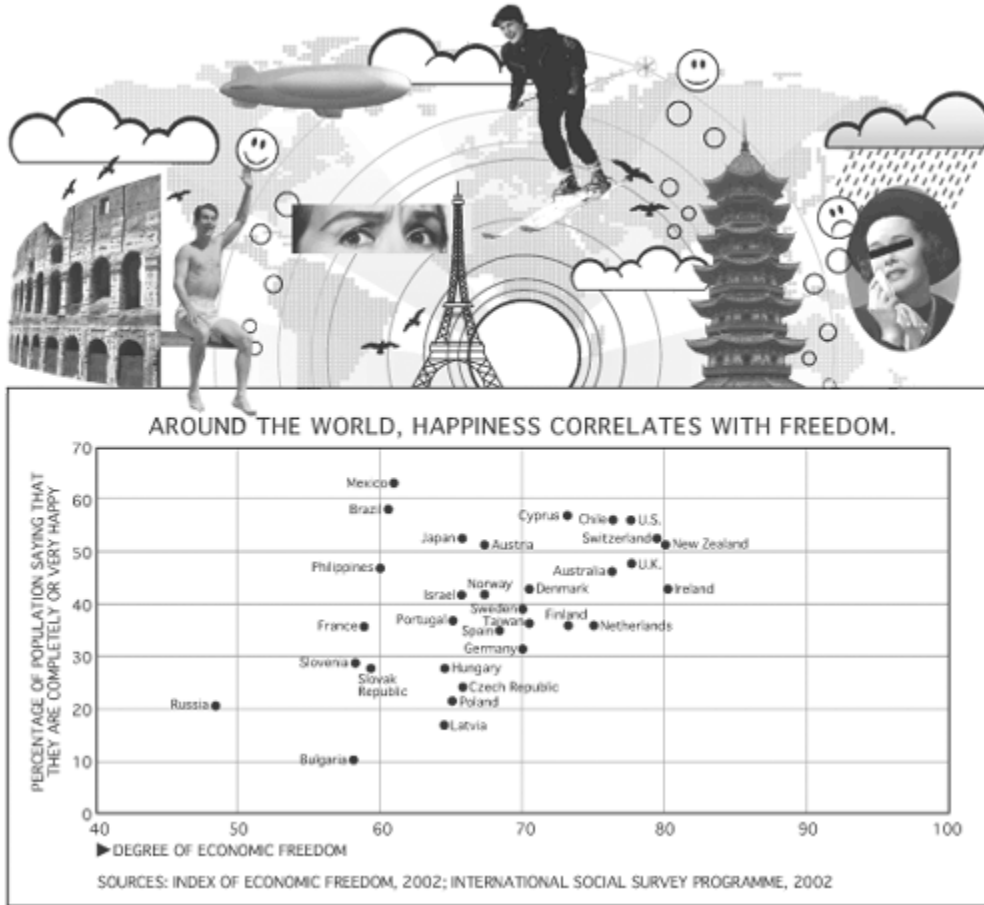
Positive Effects of Consumerism in Individualistic societies

Consumerism is an integral part of individualistic capitalist societies. It drives the economy as well as enriches the individualistic culture with the concept of consumer culture and materialism driven by unlimited freedom of choice. Although, some may argue that materialism negatively affects life satisfaction (Ryan and Dziurawiec, 2000), it is important to note that materialism is not a synonym for consumerism.

Csikszentmihalyi defines consuming as a “behavior whereby entropy is increased in exchange for existential or experiential rewards” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Therefore, as opposed to materialism—which refers to a preoccupation with material objects and comforts—consumerism encompasses the idea of individuals having the freedom choose what they want to consume.

Veenhoven believes that people live happier in individualistic societies and that happiness is strongly correlated with the opportunity to choose and having the capability to choose (Veenhoven, 2000). The freedom to choose is a very important indication of happiness within an individualistic culture, for with choice, especially in terms of consumerism, people can maintain peace of mind in knowing that they are not limited in their capabilities within society. As consumerism allows people to feel as if they belong, by conforming to the norm of materialism and providing people with more social capital (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), in essence, it offers individualist people living within a consumer culture to gain a sense of togetherness.

Furthermore, consumerism is vital for a country’s economy, and thus, many of the wealthiest countries have individualistic cultures.

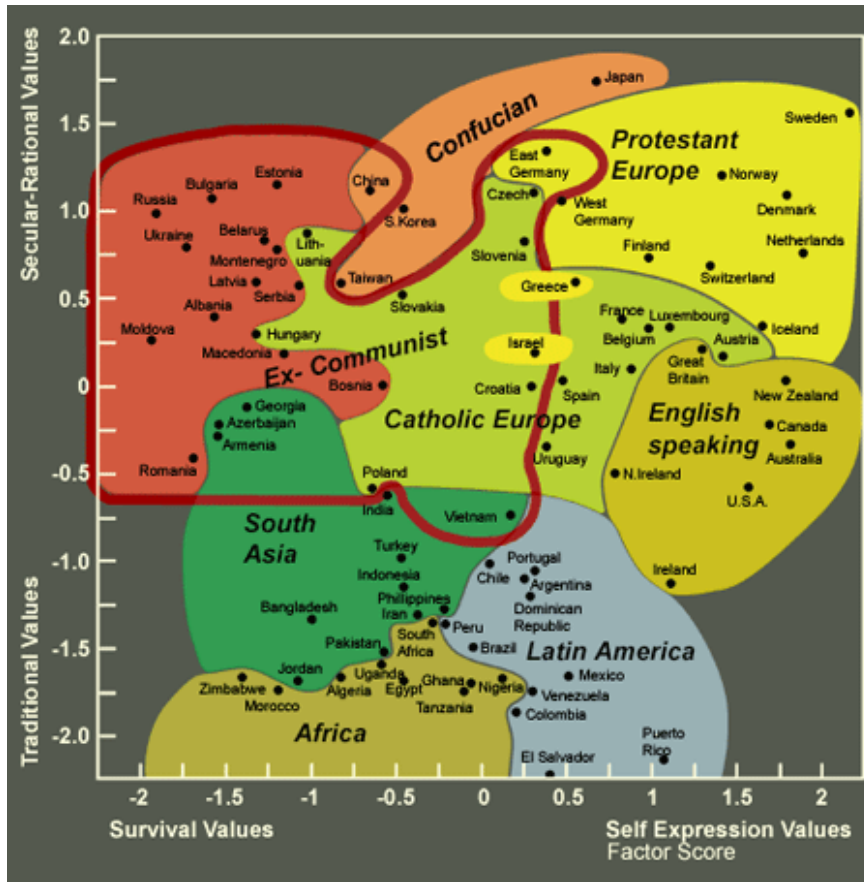


The graph above explains that if you “apply these data to the International Social Survey Programme’s nations, you will find that a 1-percentage-point increase in economic freedom is associated with a 2-point rise in the percentage of the population who say that they are completely happy or very happy” (Brooks, 2008). Therefore, as consumerism perpetuates economic freedom, the 2-point rise in happiness in correlation with the 1-point rise in economic freedom points to the assumption that consumer culture perpetuates happiness in individualist cultures.

Importance of Social Political Involvement in Individualist Culture

Social and political rights of people play a vital role in the subjective well being of a community. Opposing views—on how the amount of social and political rights a society should have—contribute to the debate on which society is happier: collective or individualistic? Individualistic cultures pride themselves in having an abundance of choices with regard to an individual's social and political rights. The United States was built on such rights that emphasize freedom, such as the freedom of speech, the right to bear arms and the freedom of life liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

However, those in support of a collectivist society argue that too much individual rights conflict with the needs of a community (Gorton, 2008). Veenhoven also shows that the correlation between political freedom and average happiness is +.45 (Veenhoven, 2000). However, collectivist societies will argue that too much freedom, especially in terms of the social and political, will allow a society to reject the values regarding sanctities of marriage, government, and religion. Still, it is shown that modernized societies that have endless amounts of social and political freedom such as the U.S and Western Europe, which have relatively high reported levels of happiness.



In the Inglehart's Worlds Values Map shown above, Inglehart points out that "This map reflects the fact that a large number of basic values are closely correlated; they can be depicted in just two major dimensions of cross-cultural variation," in which countries that lie within the "Self Expression Values" section are individualistic countries, such as the U.S., Great Britain, and most other Western countries. This suggests that the increase in wealth within these countries has shifted the emphasis of community, family, and survival to subjective-well-being and quality of life (Inglehart, 2009).

Eric Weiner studies the idea of happiness on a wide spectrum. In his article *Happy? Depends on where you live*, Weiner goes in-depth to discuss the idea of

happiness as something “out there,” meaning that “external factors such as quality of government, social interactions and, to an extent, money determine our happiness more than anything else” (Weiner, 2008). In this article Weiner describes the root of happiness as directly related to “quantity and quality of our relationships,” which further attributes to the trust an individual has with these external factors.

Now, with regard to Weiner’s definition of happiness as something external to us, a discussion on the social and political rights offered within a culture, based on the quality of its government, must follow. Veenhoven discusses in his article *Freedom and Happiness* that “political freedom in the broad sense requires that there be a political system. In the more limited sense the concept refers to restrictions on participation in the system” (Veenhoven, 2000). Although there will undoubtedly be restrictions regarding the political freedom of a certain culture, having a voice and a say in legislation, and governing policies—which directly affects the society in which an individual lives—political freedom is crucial to determining how content the people of a society feel with the political powers that hold precedent to their everyday lives. Their subjective-well-being is contingent on both participation and freedom of choice, for “the citizens’ well-being may also arise from their participation in the political decision-making process” (Dorn et. al, 505).

Relating these concepts and ideas of political freedom to individualism, it is said that a country or nation centered on an individualistic culture is one in which every facet of one’s private and public life—the economic, social, and political—works toward the good of the individual. In this way, even in cultures defined by individualism, the good of the community becomes a consequence of pursuing the good of the individual, for the

idea of pursuing one's personal obligations and duties are closely related with the concept of individualism on a national level. With this, the Marxist ideal of the individualist pursuit of livelihood, in terms of one's own self interest, is a model which frames the general individualist culture. The subjective-well-being of that particular culture is dependent on the people's ability to feel directly involved with the social and political influences of the nation, specifically in terms of how their opinions factor into the construction of these social and political policies. Although "Individualism may be defined as emphasis on pursuit of one's own goals rather than commitment to the aims or interest of a group" (Gorton, 2008), this sense of membership leads to the higher subjective-well-being of the individual, and therefore, of the group.

To offer an example, the United States is one of the world's leading nations thriving in an individualist culture. Polls and surveys taken over the last five years in the U.S. show an overall increase in the level of happiness in the U.S. Interestingly, "These findings provide empirical support for theoretical work in the field of political economy which suggests that higher levels of democracy will, *ceteris paribus*, lead to procedures and policies that correspond more closely to voters' preferences and thus increase people's happiness" (Dorn et. al, 517). Therefore, according to Dorn, higher levels of democracy, which promotes individual rights and the citizen's role in shaping governmental policies, have shown to be related to higher reported level of happiness, supporting the argument that the more individualized a culture, the happier.

Individualism and Religious Freedom

Religious autonomy in an individualist culture allows people to choose that which they

want to devote themselves spiritually. There are a number of countries that do not have the agency of Religious freedom, and are forced to practice religion within the confines of a set state religion.

In opposition to this, Garvey states in *The Real Reason for Religious Freedom* that "The autonomy theory is in one sense too powerful. It holds that a just society must let its citizens choose how to live their own lives. Some of the relevant choices are religious, so it follows that the government must not interfere with them" (Garvey, 1997). When a society provides its individuals the agency to freely practice or change their religion, or not to prescribe to any religion at all, it simultaneously supports a crucial fundamental human right that people have the ability to make good choices even as citizens of a larger community. In cultures where there is a separation of church and state, one can be free to maintain a religious and spiritual quest which make them happiest without fear of persecution in terms of the law. This toleration recognizes the importance of the individual's choice in deciding which ideal and morals should be central to living life, and making the best choice based on one's own conviction, and not on the convictions and morality of a prescribed religion.

Freedom works hand in hand with happiness, specifically with regards to choice. "There is nothing unique about religious autonomy. It is a name for one set of choices people make about how to live, but there are other sets of choices within the field of autonomy: choices about reproduction, risk taking, vocation, travel, education, appearance, and sexual behavior" (Garvey, 1997). Here, Garvey regards religious freedom as one of many choices for living life freely, placing it as of equal importance to other freedoms emphasized in individualist cultures.

Conclusion

Freedom in individualist cultures as a notion, a feeling, a right, and, most of all, an opportunity for self-actualization is the foundation for the argument that individualism allows for a happier people and society. The nature of individualism lends itself to providing the individual with greater ability to act independently, with less limitation on self-expression and pursuing wants and needs.

In terms of the social aspect, regarding relationships and family, the freedom to choose the type of relationship that best fits individual needs and wants is emphasized in individualistic cultures. And, this freedom of choice, as it relates to sexual relations and marriage/family, has led people who experience it to score higher on happiness measures. This aspect on family also bleeds into how individualistic cultures foster pro-social behaviors, and therefore, yield a higher sense of satisfaction with career and life purpose in terms of occupation, which furthers the subjective well being of a people.

In terms of the economic aspect, prosperity is discussed as a function of freedom and choice, and that because individualistic cultures tend to generate higher income levels and have higher reported levels of happiness, there is a positive correlation between individualistic cultures and happiness. With regard to the political aspect, the freedom of a people to participate in the construction of the political policies greatly affects the overall subjective-well-being of a people, for such policies directly affect their livelihood and happiness within the society.

Freedom and autonomy with regards to religion has also proven to have a positive effect on the happiness of a people, for religious freedom reduces the risk of religious persecution, and prevents the individual from feeling restricted by a religion he or she

wishes not to ascribe to. Therefore, as freedom has shown to have a positive correlation with happiness, religious freedom and autonomy, as it is implemented in individualistic cultures, must further the subjective-well-being of a people as it is related to individual choice and the capability to choose alternative religions, or none at all.

With regard to these aspects of freedom and autonomy in individualistic cultures, and how there is evidence of numerous positive correlations between them and happiness, individualist cultures have indeed shown to create an environment in which people experience a higher level happiness due to individualist ideologies supporting free choice and greater opportunity to pursue happiness. There are indeed limitations to this conclusion, such as the idea that though studies have shown individualistic cultures to breed happier people, individualism is no guarantee for the overall happiness of a people. Other factors are of course involved. For instance, having a superfluous amount of choice, where one is, as Veenhoven puts it, “constantly at risk of making wrong choices,” is a counterargument in that there is a great price and risk factor to autonomy. Furthermore, individualization is seen to have a disregard for tradition lends itself to reducing quality-of-life for those who regard tradition highly.

For these reasons and more, we have seen, based on our findings, that individualism should not be considered a required ingredient for happiness—that is a narrow view of our argument. Rather, we have learned that happiness is an evident consequence of individualism. The positive correlations between the freedom of a people living within a culture, and the individualistic nature of that culture, leads us to the conclusion that the more individualistic a culture is, the happier it tends to be.

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