



الجامعة الإسلامية العالمية ماليزيا  
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RELATIONS WITH OTHERS AND SUBJECTIVE  
WELLBEING: CULTURE AS MODERATOR

BY

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Human  
Sciences (Psychology)

Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human  
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DECEMBER 2009

## ABSTRACT

The present research examined the relationship between relations with others and subjective wellbeing in a cross-cultural context. The data were utilized from the World Values Survey (2000-2001) which sampled more than 80% of the world's population and covered a full range of cross-cultural variations. This study focused on four countries only, namely US, Spain, Japan and India, in order to evaluate the hypothesized relationships. Two hypotheses were tested: (i) individualist cultures would report higher subjective wellbeing compared to collectivist cultures; (ii) culture would moderate the relationship between relations with others and subjective wellbeing, such that lack of positive relations with others would be a better predictor of SWB in collectivist cultures. A one-way analysis of variance and hierarchical multiple regression analysis were used to test the two hypotheses. Results confirmed the expectation that individualist cultures would report higher ratings of subjective wellbeing. Results revealed that time spent with colleagues at work and with people at church/religious places, were better predictors of subjective wellbeing in individualist culture. However, time spent with people at sports was found to be a better predictor of subjective wellbeing in collectivist cultures as compared to individualist cultures. These findings are discussed with respect to past studies in cross-cultural context.

## ملخص البحث

يتناول هذا البحث بالدراسة الصلة بين العلاقات العامة مع الآخرين والاهتمام الذاتي عبر مفهوم التبادل الثقافي. وقد أخذت عينات الدراسة من دراسات مسحية لقيم عالمية سنة (2000-2001م)، وهي تمثل نسبة 80% من سكان العالم، وتغطي معظم التباينات الثقافية المتبادلة بين الشعوب. تركز هذه الدراسة على أربع دول، وهي: الولايات الأمريكية المتحدة وإسبانيا واليابان والهند، وذلك من أجل تقييم طبيعة العلاقات بينها. وقد أجريت دراسات بحثية على اثنتين من هذه العلاقات رأت: أولاً أن الثقافات الفردية قد سجلت نسبة عالية من مفهوم التبادل الثقافي مقارنة بالثقافات الجماعية، ثانياً أن الثقافة سوف توثق الصلة بين العلاقات مع الآخرين وبين مفهوم الاهتمام الذاتي، وهذا من ثم يقلل من عدم وجود علاقات إيجابية مع الآخرين في الثقافات جميعها. وثمة تحليل للاختلافات ومراتبها المتنوعة، حيث استخدم تحليل معامل التراجع لبيان مدى الانحدار في العلاقات كما ذكر في فرضيات الدراسة هذه. أكدت نتائج الدراسة على أنه يتوقع أن تأخذ الثقافات الفردية نسبة عالية في الاهتمام الذاتي، وأن الوقت الذي يقضيه الزملاء في العمل مع الناس أو في الكنيسة أو في دور العبادة من أفضل وسائل التنبؤ عن الاهتمام الذاتي في ثقافة الفرد، بينما كان الوقت الذي يقضيه الناس في مجال الرياضة من أفضل التنبؤات عن الاهتمام الذاتي لجميع الثقافات مقارنة بالثقافة الفردية. وقد تم مناقشة هذه النتائج في دراستنا عن مفهوم التبادل الثقافي.

## APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Psychology).

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## DECLARATION PAGE

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Elma Berisha

Signature .....

Date .....

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**RELATIONS WITH OTHERS AND SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING:  
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This research is dedicated to my dear parents,  
Avdi Berisha and Fatime Krasniqi,  
my husband Naim Berkolli  
and my children Ensar and Era Berkolli

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Alhamdulillah and All Thanks to Almighty Allah for bestowing me patience and endurance in completing this research. Without Him granting me unconditionally loving and supporting people around, this dissertation would not have been completed successfully.

First and foremost this master would not have been completed without the guidance and continuous help from my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Noraini Mohd Noor. She was there for me with her extraordinary professional and understanding personality, offering support from any possible aspect needed. I think it's necessary to mention here that I even had registered this master program in IIUM being backed up by her generous material assistance.

Secondly, I am very thankful to Prof. Malik Badri, Dr. Haryatti Shahrina Abdul Majjid, Dr. Mariam Adawiah Dzulkifli and Prof. Dato' Dr. Wan Rafaei Abdul Rahman for their continuous support and motivation to carry on with this research.

Thirdly, sincere appreciation goes to Amy Mardhatillah, my friend and ex-student of Department of Psychology, IIUM, for her assistance and motivational urge given to pass various phases of this research.

Finally, warmest gratitude and appreciation to my dear family for being there for me during study time and offering the love and support to carry on.

*Jazakallahu khairan kathiran.* I pray tomorrow will be more personalities in our *ummah* similar to my ex-lectures in Department of psychology; I pray Allah accepts our deeds and improves the condition of *ummah*. *Amin.*

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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

The cultures of societies are underestimated determinants of their population health and wellbeing throughout the world (Eckersley, 2005). Culture is to society what memory is to individuals. Culture refers to tools and ideas that are shared and transmitted to succeeding generations because they were once practical at some point in time (Diener & Suh, 2000). A common reasoning in this line is that subjective wellbeing depends on shared notions about life and its pursuits and that these collective notions frame individual appraisals (Veenhoven, 2008). Amongst the most commonly studied indicators of culture are individualist and collectivist values. The question of whether individualist and collectivist dimensions of culture influence subjective wellbeing in interpersonal perspective forms the basis of this study.

The idea of subjective wellbeing or happiness has intrigued thinkers for millennia, although it is only in recent years that it has been measured and studied in a systematic way (Diener, Suh & Oishi, 1997). On a more general level, increased interest in the study of subjective wellbeing (commonly abbreviated as SWB) follows from the recognition that the field of psychology, since its inception, has devoted much more attention to human unhappiness and suffering than to the causes and consequences of positive functioning (Diener, 1984; Jahoda, 1958, in Ryff, 1989). The breakthrough came in the 1950s. Psychologists – until then mainly interested in negative emotional states such as depression and anxiety – became interested in positive emotions and feelings of wellbeing. Within the discipline a consensus grew

that self-reports on how well life is going can convey important information on underlying emotional states, and so the field pushed ahead with measuring what is best referred to as subjective wellbeing (Van Hoorn, 2007).

Although subjective quality of life (QOL) measures originated in social indicators research in the mid 1970s, they have been used most extensively within healthcare. Thus, QOL measures have grown exponentially over the past decade, funded by national health services, pharmaceuticals and the US health insurance industry. Medline, the main index for medical papers, first used the phrase “quality of life” as a heading in 1975. Since then tens of thousands of papers have been published, nearly 18,000 between 2000 and 2003 alone, and there has been a proliferation of study groups, conferences and special journal issues (Camfield, 2003).

Generally, SWB is defined as a subjective measurement that combines the presence of positive emotions and absence of negative emotions with overall satisfaction with life (Diener, 1984, in Camfield, 2003). SWB represents the individual’s satisfaction with their quality of life (QOL), and is an alternative to the objective measures of the QOL construct, such as wealth, employment rates, and life expectancy (Ferriss, 1988, in Caras, 2003). According to Keyes, Shmotkin and Ryff (2002) the relevance of subjective wellbeing measures was emphasized by Andrews and Withey (1976) and Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers (1976). They clarified that although people live in objectively defined environments, it is their subjectively defined worlds that they respond to, thus giving prominence to SWB as a relevant index of quality of life people lead.

While QOL and SWB are often treated as interchangeable, both concepts are multi-dimensional, context specific, and incorporate things people have reason to value, as well as their wants and needs (Camfield, 2003). The cultural weightage on

subjective wellbeing is best emphasized by the World Health Organization Quality of Life (WHOQOL) group's definition of QOL as "*an individual's perceptions of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns*" (as cited in Camfield, 2003, p.9). The WHOQOL group was formed in 1991 by WHO to develop a measure that would assess QOL. This measure would combat "the increasingly mechanistic model of medicine" and use QOL assessments to introduce a "humanistic element into healthcare". It also enables it to fulfill the promise of its original definition by setting individual perceptions of quality of life in their cultural and social context. Kahneman, Diener and Schwarz (1999) in their preface to "Well-being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology" suggest that analyses of QOL should include cultural and social context, individual values, capabilities and objective circumstances, and SWB. They claim that "any evaluation of QOL is embedded in the cultural and social context of both the subject and the evaluator... [and] cannot be reduced to the balance of pleasure and pain, or to assessments of subjective life-satisfaction" [ibid, p. x](Camfield, 2003).

The majority of culture-related studies have focused on the individualism-collectivism dimension of cultures (Diener & Suh, 2000; Hampton & Marshall, 2000; Hofstede, 1984; Triandis, 1995). It was found that people in individualistic cultures tend to give priority to the goals of individuals, feel personally responsible for their successes and failures, and experience some separation and distance from their ingroups. In contrast, people in collectivistic cultures tend to give priority to the goals of collectives, share both successes and failures with others, and have close relationships with members of their ingroups (Triandis, 2000). Accordingly, satisfaction with relationships should be a better predictor of overall subjective

wellbeing for collectivist cultures. Radhakrishnan and Chan's (1997, in Oishi, 2000) findings supported the view that at the individual level, quality relationships with others plays a more central role in collectivist cultures than in individualist cultures. Kwan, Bond and Singelis (1997, in Suh, 2000) found that relationship harmony, or the degree to which individuals have harmonious relationship with others, had a significant predictive power, above and beyond self-esteem in Hong Kong, but not in the United States. However, at the cultural level, collectivism is negatively related to SWB (Diener & Suh, 2000). Consequently, it is crucial to distinguish analyses at the cultural level from analyses at the individual level. At the cultural level, we deal with attributes that refer to entities such as gross national income per capita, average longevity, etc. whereas at individual level we deal with values, beliefs, attitudes of individuals. For example, Hofstede (1980) identified individualism and collectivism at the level of culture by summing up the responses of individuals in each country (Triandis, 2000).

On the other side, results from various sources supported a finding which is best known as the "Easterlin paradox" (Pugno, 2004; Van Hoorn, 2007). According to this paradox, within a country richer people on average report higher SWB than poorer people in the same country do, whereas wellbeing in the advanced countries does not increase over time, or even decline in spite of the rising trend of income. Japan has been often cited as a striking case, because real income per head rose sixfold in that country between 1958 and 1991, while the proportion of people rating themselves as 'very happy' did not seem to change over the same period (Frey-Stutzer 2002, in Pugno, 2004). Several researchers have hypothesized that there is an inverse relationship between income growth and close interpersonal relationships (Bruni & Stanca, 2005; Gui & Sugden, 2005; Pugno, 2004; Uhlaner, 1989), with several indices

showing that close interpersonal relationships have been deteriorating in advanced countries. Sagan (1987, in Triandis, 2000) also argues that shifts towards individualism in advanced countries, with decreases in family cohesion attenuate the positive affects of affluence on SWB. However, notwithstanding the research thread referred above, there is still a very solid conclusion which the majority of studies pointed at, confirming that economically developed countries have higher SWB and less developed countries lower SWB (Bruni & Stanca, 2005; Diener & Suh, 2000; Veenhoven, 2008). In turn affluence is closely linked to individualist countries. Individualism is shown to be an important component of SWB even after income is controlled statistically (Triandis, 2000). Diener, Diener and Diener (1995) showed that at the cultural level there is a positive relation between individualism and SWB. Similarly, at the individual level of analysis, Diener and Diener (1995) found that the correlation between satisfaction with different aspects of life, such as self, family, and friends, and SWB, was higher in individualist than in collectivist countries.

In sum, the research findings show that at the individual level of analysis, positive relations with others have a strong predictive power for SWB in both individualist and collectivist countries. At the cultural level, however the research findings are somewhat contradictory due to a complexity of factors involved. According to Triandis (2000), it is very important to keep these two levels of analysis separate. The focus of the present study is on SWB from the perspective of its contribution to the enhancement of development programs introduced at the country level, especially in the third world. Specifically, the relationship between relations with others and SWB at the cultural level of analysis has been investigated. The specific hypothesis of the study is that there is a relationship between relations with others and SWB at the cultural level, such that in general, positive relations with

others are a better predictor of SWB in individualist cultures rather than in collectivist cultures.

## **1.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

Current developmental programs implemented by WHO in third world countries are economically biased and not fully sensitive to peoples' cultural backgrounds (Camfield, 2003). The main objective of this study is to bring psychological concepts to be used in these programs as well as enhance its benefits for people of different nations in their own cultural contexts.

Firstly, the premise of this study is that happiness and subjective wellbeing are the primary aim of every individual and collective pursuit. Studies show that subjective wellbeing is a strong predictor of physical health and longevity (Diener & Suh, 2000). Thus, this study will contribute to the literature in Positive Psychology.

Secondly, there has been particular neglect in this realm, namely, the task of highlighting the role of cultural contexts on subjective wellbeing. Since notions about the good life vary across time and culture, subjective wellbeing is also seen to be culturally relative (Veenhoven, 2008). Measures of peoples' quality of life used in medical and social research are not sufficient when it comes to meeting the WHO objectives in terms of intervention programs for developing countries. The QOL research should be attempting to produce both a universal measure that is grounded in local realities, and supplement it with qualitative investigations of people's understandings of good QOL and strategies for achieving it (Van Hoorn, 2007). In the field of SWB, a person's beliefs about his or her own wellbeing are of paramount importance (Diener, Suh & Oishi, 1997).

Third, subjective measures of wellbeing would be a useful complement to traditional welfare analysis which is based mainly on the objective measures at the expense of subjective perceptions. SWB emerged in the late 1950s in the search for useful indicators of quality of life to monitor social change and improve social policy (Keyes, Shmotkin & Ryff, 2002). A focus on subjective wellbeing could lead to a shift in emphasis from the importance of income in determining a person's wellbeing toward the importance of his or her rank in society. Another eventual development could be acceptance of a national wellbeing index, as a complement to the National Income and Product Accounts. Indeed, the Kingdom of Bhutan has proclaimed the goal of measuring Gross National Happiness, and other governments, including the United Kingdom and Australia, are committed to producing national measures of subjective wellbeing (Kahneman & Krueger, 2006). More concretely, several ideas exist for the construction of 'a national index of subjective wellbeing' or a related indicator, which would subsequently serve as a key policy goal. Typically, current wellbeing frameworks include only objective indicators; GDP or related measures of economic activity, water quality or telephone connections, illiteracy rates or patent applications, suicide numbers or victimization rates, traffic accidents or life expectancy, etc. At the same time, there is growing recognition that, though insightful, there is more to wellbeing than these measures are able to capture (Van Hoorn, 2007).

Fourth, currently available research suggests that those interested in maximizing society's welfare should shift their attention from an emphasis on increasing consumption opportunities to an emphasis on increasing social contacts. Auguste Comte's notion of '*bonheur*' (happiness) denotes a state of intellectual enlightenment combined with sacral feelings of inclusion and consensus that results from social progress (Plé 2000, in Veenhoven, 2008). According to Vennhoven

(2000), if, for example, subjective wellbeing is defined as the feeling of connectedness that accompanies social integration, social integration is by definition a condition for subjective wellbeing, thus, enhancing positive relations with others is of paramount importance.

Based on the above reasoning, it would be worthwhile to investigate the relationship between relations with others and subjective wellbeing in a cross-cultural context. Strong variations of results across various cultural communities with individualist and collectivist tendencies would contribute to the emphasis of the need to integrate people's subjective appraisals of their lives and cultural values into WHO QOL programs.

### **1.3 OBJECTIVES**

1. To examine the relationship between relations with others and SWB across individualist and collectivist cultures.
2. To examine whether the cultural values of individualism vs. collectivism can moderate the relationship between relations with others and SWB.

### **1.4 RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS**

1. Individualist cultures will report higher SWB compare to collectivist cultures.
2. Individualist/collectivist values will moderate the relationship between relations with others and SWB, such that lack of positive relations with others will be a better predictor of SWB in collectivist cultures compare with individualist cultures.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A brief outline of relevant findings pertaining to SWB is presented below. Studies which highlighted the relationship between relations with others and SWB are quoted first, followed by studies examining SWB in cross-cultural context. Finally, relevant literature on relations with others and SWB in a cross-cultural context has been reviewed.

#### **2.1 RELATIONS WITH OTHERS AND SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING**

In psychology there is extensive evidence on the link between relations with others and happiness. According to Ryan and Deci, *“Evidence supporting the link of relatedness to SWB is manifold. Studies suggest that, of all factors that influence happiness, relatedness is at or very near the top of the list. Furthermore, loneliness is consistently negatively related to positive affect and life satisfaction”* (2001, p. 154). Whereas Ryan and Deci’s approach treats relationships as a source of wellbeing, Ryff and Singer (2000) treat it as a defining element of Personal Well-Being (PWB), viewing positive relations with others as an essential element in human flourishing (Bruni & Stanca, 2005).

Positive social relationships are necessary for wellbeing. There are data suggesting that good social relationships lead to wellbeing and does not merely follow from them. In addition, experimental evidence indicates that people suffer when they are ostracized from groups or have poor relationships in groups. The fact that strong social relationships are critical to wellbeing has many policy implications. For

instance, corporations should carefully consider relocating employees because doing so can sever friendships and therefore be detrimental to wellbeing (Diener & Seligman, 2004).

The quality of people's social relationships is crucial to their wellbeing. People need supportive, positive relationships and social belonging to sustain wellbeing. Baumeister and Leary (1995) reviewed evidence showing that the need to belong, to have close and long-term social relationships, is a fundamental human need, and that wellbeing depends on this need being well met. People need social bonds in committed relationships, not simply interactions with strangers, to experience wellbeing. According to them, in some cases, policies based solely on economic analyses can harm social relationships and thereby decrease wellbeing.

Numerous other studies also support the conclusion that social relationships are essential to wellbeing. In their study of very happy people, Diener & Seligman (2002) found that every single respondent in the happiest group had excellent social relationships. In this study it was also found that not all their relationships were good ones, but they all perceived their relationships in at least two important areas out of three (family, friends and romantic partner) to be very positive. Quality social relationships were crucial for SWB in that not a single individual in the happiest group was deprived of them. However, good social relationships were not sufficient for SWB because even some very unhappy people had them (Diener & Scollon, 2003).

Similarly, Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2003) found that of 24 character strengths, those that best predict life satisfaction are the interpersonal ones. People experience more positive emotions when they are with others than when they are alone (Pavot, Diener, & Fujita, 1990); although people have slightly more negative emotions when in social than in nonsocial situations, both extraverts and introverts

experience a higher amount of pleasant emotions in social situations. A study by Kahneman et al. (2004, in Bruni & Stanca, 2005) found that in only 1 of 15 activities of daily living (i.e., praying), affect balance (positive minus negative emotions) was found to be greater when people were alone rather than with others. People enjoyed the other 14 activities (such as exercising, resting, commuting, and working around the house) more when others were present than when they were alone. This dimension is so important that some theorists have defined “relatedness” as a basic human need that is essential for wellbeing. Menec (2003) found that frequency of participating in social activities is associated with greater happiness, better functioning, and lower mortality in the elderly.

Taylor, Chatters, Hardison and Riley (2001) analyzed the cross-sectional relationship between social network and happiness. Using the national survey of black Americans, the authors find that, in addition to demographic and economic factors, social relations and network factors (i.e., subjective family closeness, support from family, number of friends, the presence of kin, church attendance, and frequency of contact with neighbors) are significantly associated with self-rated happiness and life satisfaction scores.

Not only does companionship predict more positive outcomes, lack of it may also predict diverse problems. Hintikka, Koskela, Kontula, Koskela and Viinamaeki (2000) found that both men and women with more friends had lower levels of mental distress than men and women with fewer friends. In a national survey on rates of mental illness in Great Britain, Jenkins, Lewis, Bebbington, Brugha, Farrell, Gill and Meltzer (1997) found that the highest rates of mental problems were found among unmarried people, single parents, and people living alone.

On the other hand, theories have only recently started to acknowledge that the quality of interpersonal relationships influences economic performance, welfare and happiness (Gui & Sugden, 2005). Cross-sectional studies have shown that key aspects of social capital - such as trust and membership in voluntary associations - contribute greatly to higher individual wellbeing (Helliwell, 2003; Powdthavee 2006; Putnam, 2001). Putnam (2001) suggested that people prosper in neighborhoods and societies where social capital is high, that is, where people trust one another and are mutually helpful. Putnam reviewed evidence showing that communities with high rates of volunteer activity, club membership, church membership, and social entertaining all had higher wellbeing than communities that were low in these characteristics.

Helliwell (2003) reported that wellbeing is high and suicide rates are low where trust in others is high, and he also found that wellbeing is high where memberships in organizations outside of work are at high levels. Thus, there is evidence that individuals are more likely to experience high wellbeing when they live in nations with high social capital than when they live in nations with low social capital. Bruni and Stanca (2005) found that non-instrumental interpersonal relationships such as voluntary activities have an important independent effect on life satisfaction, after controlling for individual demographic and socio-economic factors, personality characteristics and environmental and societal differences. Using individual data from the World Values Survey, they found a positive relationship between indicators of relationality and life satisfaction. According to Bruni and Stanca (2005), time spent in relational activities also has a large positive effect on life satisfaction. In particular, time spent with parents and relatives has the largest effect on life satisfaction. According to them, a relational theory of happiness would explain the Easterlin paradox arguing that higher income levels are associated with a tendency