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Happiness Maximization Is a WEIRD Way of Living

Kuba Kryś^{1*}, Olga Kostoula^{2*}, Wijnand A. P. van Tilburg^{3*}, Oriana Mosca⁴, J. Hannah Lee⁵, Fridanna Maricchiolo⁶, Aleksandra Kosiarczyk⁷, Agata Kocimska-Zych⁷, Claudio Torres⁸, Hidefumi Hitokoto⁹, Kongmeng Liew^{10,11}, Michael H. Bond¹², Vivian Miu-Chi Lun¹³, Vivian L. Vignoles¹⁴, John M. Zelenski¹⁵, Brian W. Haas¹⁶, Joonha Park¹⁷, Christin-Melanie Vauclair¹⁸, Anna Kwiatkowska¹, Marta Roczniowska^{7,19}, Nina Witoszek²⁰, İdil Işık²¹, Natasza Kosakowska-Berezecka²², Alejandra Domínguez-Espinosa²³, June Chun Yeung¹, Maciej Górski¹, Mladen Adamović²⁴, Isabelle Albert²⁵, Vassilis Pavlopoulos²⁶, Márta Fülöp^{27,28}, David Sirlopu²⁹, Ayu Okvitawanli³⁰, Diana Boer³¹, Julien Teyssier³², Arina Malyonova³³, Alin Gavreliuc³⁴, Ursula Serdarevich^{35,36}, Charity S. Akotia³⁷, Lily Appoh³⁸, Arévalo Mira D.M.³⁹, Arno Baltin⁴⁰, Patrick Denoux³², Carla Sofia Esteves⁴¹, Vladimer Gamsakhurdia⁴², Ragna B. Garðarsdóttir⁴³, David O. Igbokwe⁴⁴, Eric R. Igou⁴⁵, Natalia Kascakova^{46,47}, Lucie Klůzová Kračmarová⁴⁸, Nicole Kronberger⁴⁹, Pablo Eduardo Barrientos⁵⁰, Tamara Mohorić⁵¹, Elke Murdock²⁵, Nur Fariza Mustaffa⁵², Martin Nader⁵³, Azar Nadi¹, Yvette van Osch⁵⁴, Zoran Pavlović⁵⁵, Iva Poláčková Šolcová⁴⁸, Muhammad Rizwan⁵⁶, Vladyslav Romashov¹, Espen Røysamb⁵⁷, Ruta Sargautyte⁵⁸, Beate Schwarz⁵⁹, Lenka Selecká⁶⁰, Heyla A. Selim⁶¹, Maria Stogianni⁶², Chien-Ru Sun⁶³, Agnieszka Wojtczuk-Turek⁶⁴, Cai Xing⁶⁵, & Yukiko Uchida⁶⁶

¹ Institute of Psychology, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Poland

² Institute of Psychology, Johannes Kepler University Linz, Linz, Austria

³ Department of Psychology, University of Essex, Colchester, UK

⁴ Department of Education, Psychology, Philosophy, University of Cagliari, Italy

⁵ Department of Psychology, Indiana University Northwest, Gary, Indiana, United States

⁶ Department of Education, University of Roma Tre, Rome, Italy

⁷ SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Wrocław and Sopot, Poland

⁸ Institute of Psychology, University of Brasilia, Brasilia, Brazil

⁹ Department of Psychological Sciences, Kwansei Gakuin University, Osaka, Japan.

¹⁰ Graduate School of Human and Environmental Studies, Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan,

¹¹ School of Psychology, Speech and Hearing, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

¹² Department of Management and Marketing, Faculty of Business, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, S.A.R., China

¹³ Department of Applied Psychology, Lingnan University, Hong Kong, S.A.R., China

¹⁴ School of Psychology, University of Sussex, Brighton, United Kingdom

¹⁵ Department of Psychology, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada

¹⁶ Department of Psychology, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, United States

¹⁷ Graduate School of Management, NUCB Business School, Nagoya, Japan

¹⁸ Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), CIS-IUL, Lisboa, Portugal

¹⁹ Karolinska Institutet, Medical Management Centre, Department of Learning, Informatics, Management and Ethics, Stockholm, Sweden

²⁰ University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

²¹ Organizational Psychology Master's Program, Istanbul Bilgi University, Istanbul, Turkey

²² Institute of Psychology, Gdansk University, Gdansk, Poland

²³ Psychology Department, Iberoamerican University, Mexico City, Mexico

²⁴ Monash Business School, Monash University, Clayton, Australia

²⁵ Research Unit INSIDE, University of Luxembourg, Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg

²⁶ Department of Psychology, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece

²⁷ Institute of Psychology, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church, Budapest, Hungary

²⁸ Research Centre of Natural Sciences, Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience and Psychology, Eötvös Loránd Research Network, Budapest, Hungary

²⁹ Faculty of Psychology and Humanities, Universidad San Sebastián, Concepción

³⁰ Universitas Brawijaya, Malang, Indonesia

³¹ Institute of Psychology, University of Koblenz, Koblenz, Germany

³² Département Psychologie Clinique Du Sujet, Université Toulouse II, Toulouse, France

³³ Department of General and Social Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, Dostoevsky Omsk State University, Omsk, Russia

³⁴ Department of Psychology, West University of Timisoara, Timisoara, Romania

³⁵ Universidad Nacional del Oeste, Ituzaingó, Buenos Aires, Argentina

³⁶ Universidad Nacional de Hurlingham, Villa Tesei, Buenos Aires, Argentina

³⁷ Department of Psychology, School of Social Sciences, University of Ghana, Ghana

³⁸ Faculty of Nursing and Health Sciences, Nord University, Norway

³⁹ HULAB, Comprometidos con tu desarrollo, San Salvador, El Salvador

⁴⁰ School of Natural Sciences and Health, Tallinn University, Tallinn, Estonia

⁴¹ Universisade Católica Portuguesa, Católica Lisbon School of Business and Economics, Portugal

⁴² Department of Psychology, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia

⁴³ Faculty of Psychology, University of Iceland, Iceland

⁴⁴ Baze University Abuja, Federal Capital Territory, Nigeria

⁴⁵ Department of Psychology, University of Limerick, Limerick, Republic of Ireland

⁴⁶ Olomouc University Social Health Institute, Palacky University, Olomouc, Czech Republic

⁴⁷ Psychiatric Clinic Pro Mente Sana, Bratislava, Slovakia

⁴⁸ Institute of Psychology, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague, Czech Republic

⁴⁹ Institute of Psychology, Johannes Kepler University Linz, Linz, Austria

⁵⁰ Psychology Department, Universidad del Valle de Guatemala, Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala

⁵¹ Department of Psychology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Rijeka, Rijeka, Croatia

⁵² Department of Business Administration, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

⁵³ Department of Psychological Studies, Universidad ICESI, Cali, Colombia

⁵⁴ Department of Social Psychology, Tilburg School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Tilburg University, The Netherlands

⁵⁵ Department of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia

⁵⁶ Department of Psychology, University of Haripur, KPK, Pakistan

⁵⁷ Department of Psychology, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

⁵⁸ Institute of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy, Vilnius University, Vilnius, Lithuania

⁵⁹ Department of Applied Psychology, Zurich University of Applied Sciences, Zurich, Switzerland

⁶⁰ University of St. Cyril and Methodius of Trnava, Trnava, Slovakia

⁶¹ King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

⁶² Department of Culture Studies, Tilburg University, The Netherlands

⁶³ Department of Psychology, National Chengchi University, Taiwan, Republic of China

⁶⁴ Warsaw School of Economics, Warsaw, Poland

⁶⁵ Department of Psychology, Renmin University of China, Beijing, China

⁶⁶ Institute for the Future of Human Society, Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan

* **Corresponding authors:** Kuba Kryś, Institute of Psychology, Polish Academy of Sciences, Jaracza 1, 00-378 Warsaw, Poland, e-mail: kuba@krys.pl; Olga Kostoula, Institute of Psychology, Johannes Kepler University Linz, Altenberger St. 69, 4040 Linz, Austria, e-mail: olga.kostoula@jku.at. Wijnand A. P. van Tilburg, Department of Psychology, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Valley Rd, Colchester CO4 3SQ, UK, email: wijnand.vantilburg@essex.ac.uk

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Abstract

Psychological science tends to treat subjective wellbeing and happiness synonymously. We start from the assumption that subjective wellbeing is more than being happy to ask the fundamental question: what is the *ideal* level of happiness? From a cross-cultural perspective, we propose that the idealization of attaining maximum levels of happiness may be especially characteristic of WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic) societies, but less so for others. Searching for an explanation for why “happiness maximization” might have emerged in these societies, we turn to studies linking cultures to their eco-environmental habitat. We discuss the premise that WEIRD cultures emerged in an exceptionally benign ecological habitat, i.e., compared to other regions, they faced relatively light existential pressures. We review the influence of the Gulfstream on the North-Western European climate as a source of these comparatively benign geographical conditions. We propose that the ecological conditions in which WEIRD societies emerged afforded them a basis to endorse happiness as a value and to idealise attaining its maximum level. To provide a nomological network for “happiness maximization”, we also studied its several potential side-effects: alcohol and drug consumption and abuse, and the prevalence of mania. To evaluate our hypothesis, we re-analyse data from two large-scale studies on ideal levels of personal life satisfaction—the most common operationalization of happiness in psychology—involving respondents from 61 countries. We conclude that societies whose members seek to maximize happiness tend to be characterized as a WEIRD, and generalizing this across societies can prove problematic if adopted at the ideological and policy level.

Keywords: culture, society, subjective wellbeing, happiness, life satisfaction

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Happiness isn't good enough for me. I demand euphoria!!!
Calvin talking in "Calvin and Hobbes" by Bill Watterson

Umm... I never thought about such a thing in my whole life.
Japanese adult, asked whether he is happy (from field studies of Hideo Hitokoto)

Psychological science generally understands happiness as a sense of satisfaction, combined with the presence of positive feelings and absence of negative feelings (Kim-Prieto et al., 2005). It treats happiness as tantamount to subjective wellbeing. However, enquiring people's desired levels of happiness may reveal a distinction between the two. Specifically, the possibility that people seek moderate rather than extensive levels of happiness would suggest that subjective wellbeing and happiness are not interchangeable. How important do people across the globe find it to be happy? Do people universally wish to maximize their happiness, or do people in some societies prefer intermediate levels? How important is happiness relative to meaning, spirituality, harmony, and what cultural or ecological factors might influence their relative prioritization?

The interchangeability of happiness and subjective wellbeing is a hallmark feature of the majority of contemporary subjective wellbeing and happiness research, especially that within the framework of Diener and colleagues' (1995) theory of subjective wellbeing. The empirical basis of Diener's theory originates primarily from 'WEIRD' societies—those societies that feature high levels of Westernization, Education, Industrialisation, Richness, and Democracy (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Accordingly, insights into the structure of subjective wellbeing, the importance of happiness relative to other components of subjective wellbeing, and the degree of happiness pursued by groups and their individual members reflects views that may not necessarily generalize to other societies. While Diener and colleagues' model has been tremendously helpful in guiding the study of subjective

wellbeing and happiness and raising their profile as variables of interest to psychologists and policy makers, we contend that it is time to re-evaluate some of basic assumptions of subjective wellbeing research in light of emerging findings in cross-cultural psychology.

First, we examine the differentiation between subjective wellbeing and happiness. Many theoretical and empirical treatises of subjective wellbeing equate it with happiness, and this arguably represents the dominant view in psychological literature (e.g., “*The empirical science of subjective wellbeing, popularly referred to as happiness or satisfaction...*” on p. 253 in Diener, Oishi, & Tay, 2018; see also Das et al., 2020; Dolan et al., 2008; Luhmann, 2017; Schimmack, 2006; cf. Joshanloo, Van de Vliert & Jose, 2021). We contend that subjective wellbeing is more than being happy in many societies. Treating happiness as a tantamount to subjective wellbeing may represent too narrow an understanding of subjective wellbeing that overlooks other potentially important components. To address this problem, we propose a broader model of subjective wellbeing, which recognises happiness as one of several interdependent components constituting subjective wellbeing.

Second, we suggest that the cultural variation in ideal levels of happiness warrants theoretical integration into contemporary models of subjective wellbeing. We review research that highlights important cultural differences in the positioning of happiness as superordinate outcome among various components of subjective wellbeing. The resultant implication is that people seek to increase their levels of happiness to various levels. Furthermore, not all people prioritize happiness over other components of subjective wellbeing. We argue that this cultural variation is both wide-spread and systematic. To lend empirical support to our reasoning, we re-analyse data on ideal levels of personal life satisfaction—the most common operationalization of happiness in psychology—from 61 countries, and we also consider cultural and ecological factors as possible drivers of this variability.

Happiness and Subjective Wellbeing

Subjective Wellbeing, Happiness, and Life Satisfaction in Most Prior Work (Narrow Model)

Subjective Wellbeing. Researchers tend to define subjective wellbeing as a construct that refers to subjective evaluations of one's quality of life (Armenta, Ruberton, & Lyubomirsky, 2015; Diener et al., 1995). The adjective "subjective" distinguishes the psychological essence of wellbeing from favourable circumstances (Raibley, 2012) and from objective qualities of one's life (e.g., physical health). Thus, subjective wellbeing carries the potential to accommodate a variety of concepts. Indeed, a large number of variables has been used to predict or operationalize subjective wellbeing, including happiness, life satisfaction, contentment, positive affect, lack of negative affect, relationship flourishing, belongingness, family life, meaning, harmony, self-autonomy, self-actualization, strong relationships, optimism, achievement, health, leisure, hedonism, eudaimonia, spirituality, and psychological richness (Delle Fav et al., 2016; Fowers et al., 2016; Krys et al., 2019; Uchida & Oishi, 2016).

Yet, these tentative markers have not been treated as equally diagnostic of subjective wellbeing. The dominant approach to subjective wellbeing in psychological science, building on Diener (1984, 2000), is to focus on specifically three core facets of subjective wellbeing: its cognitive evaluation, called life satisfaction, the frequent experience of positive emotions, and the infrequent experience of negative emotions. This model—and in particular the facet of life satisfaction—has arguably become hegemonic in subjective wellbeing research. Accordingly, other important markers of subjective wellbeing are frequently treated as feeding into this overarching set of three variables rather than being pursued as end-states in their own right (Figure 1, left pane).

Happiness. Over time, much of psychological science has treated subjective wellbeing as equivalent to happiness. Indeed, recent definitions of these two concepts are very close—perhaps effectively indistinguishable. For instance, the *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research* (Michalos, 2014) states that subjective wellbeing is “a person’s cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life”, and that happiness is “the degree to which a person evaluates the overall quality of his/her own life as a whole positively”; happiness and subjective wellbeing essentially became synonyms in past work.

Life Satisfaction. While life satisfaction is just one of three independent components of subjective wellbeing in the model developed by Diener and colleagues, psychological literature nonetheless often uses life satisfaction as placeholder for happiness and subjective wellbeing as a whole (Armenta, Ruberton, & Lyubomirsky, 2015; Diener, Oishi, & Tay, 2018; Diener et al., 1995). Indeed, life satisfaction is cross-defined with happiness and subjective wellbeing definitions mentioned above, with the *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research* (Michalos, 2014) stating that it “refers to subjective wellbeing and constitutes a cognitive, overall judgement”. The same encyclopaedia defines subjective wellbeing as “a person’s cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life”. Life satisfaction has become such a popular placeholder for subjective wellbeing and happiness that it is a core index for policymakers (Fabian & Pykett, 2022). For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports that as of 2018, many countries use National Accounts of Wellbeing (NAWB; Diener 2000; Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2015), of which the majority operationalizes subjective wellbeing with a life satisfaction measure (Durand, 2018).

The way Diener and colleagues’ model of subjective wellbeing is often applied in psychological research can be considered a narrow model of subjective wellbeing (Figure 1, left pane), where putative sources of subjective wellbeing—such as meaning, harmony, and

spirituality—contribute to it through shaping positive affect, negative affect, and, especially, life satisfaction. Thus, factors such as meaning, harmony, and spirituality only contribute to subjective wellbeing to the extent that they elevate one or more of its three components that are frequently interpreted as different forms of personal happiness. So, for example, a meaningful life, in the narrow model, cannot reflect high subjective wellbeing if that life is simultaneously mediocre in happiness.

>>> Please kindly insert Figure 1 about here <<<

Narrow vs Broad Models of Subjective Wellbeing

The narrow model of subjective wellbeing, where happiness effectively substitutes the superordinate subjective wellbeing construct to which subordinate variables contribute, carries an important theoretical implication: it casts happiness as the “ultimate dependent variable” with other factors (e.g., meaning, harmony, spirituality) as contributors to this overarching outcome. For example, the narrow model of subjective wellbeing predicts that a person would engage in, say, virtuous action because it contributes to happiness, and not because being virtuousness is itself considered the primary outcome sought. Accordingly, the narrow model suggests that people will prioritize their levels of happiness both in absolute terms and relative to any of its specific subordinate facets. What is more, the foregrounding of happiness as the ultimate criterion of subjective wellbeing especially reflects individualistic worldviews (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Joshanloo et al., 2021) and independent self-construals (Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Zhu et al. 2007). One could be tempted to regard this a minor issue by arguing that any subjective wellbeing conception can ultimately be measured by the extent it leads to individual’s happiness and positive affect. This, however, appears erroneous, given the reduced value placed on positive affect by

various cultural norms (Tsai et al. 2006; Tsai, 2007), the non-WEIRD definitions of the self as interdependent (Markus & Kitayama, 2010), or the Buddhist non-self-notion which emphasizes that an ‘unquenchable’ pursuit of happiness may prove unattainable or even harmful, because it leads to neglecting others, thus harming both the others and the self (Gowans, 2016; Olendzki, 2005).

The popularity of Diener’s (1984) narrow approach to subjective wellbeing does not imply that there is no room for alternatives. Indeed, as they clarify themselves, “scientists in the field of subjective wellbeing do not say that the other approaches to a good life are incorrect” (Diener, Oishi & Tay, 2018, p. 253). If so, what alternative approaches to understanding subjective wellbeing may prove worthwhile? One attractive alternative is to consider subjective wellbeing as a network of interdependent concepts (Figure 1, right pane), with each of its constituents varying in their relative importance person-to-person, and society-to-society. In such a model, happiness would be one of many components of subjective wellbeing rather than its synonym. The attractiveness of such a network model of subjective wellbeing lies in its potential to accommodate individual and cultural variations in what, at any given moment, is more central to one’s subjective wellbeing. For some people and cultures, happiness may be central (Diener, et al., 2018), while for others, meaning might be equally or more important than happiness (Baumeister et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2001); while others might prioritise factors such as autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), and yet others may emphasize harmony (Kjell, Daukantaitė, & Sikström, 2015; Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1997), spirituality (Delaney, 2005), or family and close relationships (Delle Fave et al., 2016).

Our proposal to define subjective wellbeing more broadly resonates with propositions made previously about the significance of other-than-happiness components in the

conceptualisation and measurement of subjective wellbeing (Joshanloo et al., 2021; Joshanloo & Weijers, 2014; Lu, 2008; Lyubomirsky, 2007; Raibley, 2012; Ruggeri et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 2008; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). We join these previous voices by echoing their call for employing a broader understanding of subjective wellbeing, and propose a further elaboration of Diener et al's (1995) model. Furthermore, we present new empirical evidence to support the reasoning that happiness maximization seems a WEIRD society specific legacy in research and policy making. By doing so we aspire to move the subjective wellbeing research a step further toward accommodating a more culturally sensitive perspective (Krys et al., 2020).

Whether to approach subjective wellbeing narrowly—by equating it to happiness—or broadly—by treating happiness as one of many tentative components—is not merely matter of definition; it is an assumption that produces different empirical predictions. If subjective wellbeing is a network of interdependent components, then various “ideal mixtures” of these components are plausible. Some people may idealize happiness above all, others may idealize sense of meaning over happiness, and yet others may idealize spirituality over happiness. We contend that, in recent years, evidence has accumulated, especially in cross-cultural and ecological psychology, that a broader network model of subjective wellbeing is more suitable than the comparatively narrow alternative. Furthermore, this evidence suggests that cross-cultural departures from the narrow model of subjective wellbeing are not lone exceptions to an otherwise complete and accurate model, but rather represent substantial deviations that are widespread. In the ensuing sections, we review this work.

Positioning Subjective Wellbeing, Happiness, and Other Factors in the Current Work (Broad Model)

With the current paper we seek to make an incremental step towards fashioning a more culturally sensitive perspective (Krys, Capaldi et al., 2020) in subjective wellbeing

research, arguing for the broad model of subjective wellbeing. We understand subjective wellbeing as a person's sense of living a good life, happiness as a sense of satisfaction, meaning as a sense of existential mattering, harmony as a sense of balance, and spirituality as a sense of connection with the Greater Power (however one defines it—as God, Energy, Evolution, Nature, or any other way). Because it has been quite common to use concepts of subjective wellbeing and happiness inconsistently—with theory and empirical practice diverging on occasion (e.g., by theoretically identifying life satisfaction as one component of subjective wellbeing, but empirically using life satisfaction as the sole operationalization of subjective wellbeing)—and to avoid ambiguity as much as possible, we pay special efforts to clarify our understanding of subjective wellbeing and happiness.

We make the following observations for our broad model of subjective wellbeing:

(1) we hypothesize that people are guided by different conceptions of what kind of life is worth living; life guided by happiness maximization is only one of such conceptions;

(2) we employ subjective wellbeing as overarching concept covering various phenomena (e.g., happiness, meaning, harmony, spirituality) that we propose as putative components of subjective wellbeing;

(3) the various components constituting subjective wellbeing are expected to be interdependent—in many contexts, change in one component can and will involve change in of similar direction (but not necessarily of similar strength) in other;

(4) the various components constituting subjective wellbeing are conceptually and empirically distinct. Specifically, while related, the components that constitute subjective wellbeing operate with partial independence, so that a high score on one component does not necessitate a high score on another (e.g., exhausting prosocial activities may boost one's sense of meaning but may decrease one's own happiness [Myslinska-Szarek, 2022]; at the

culture level, one may find that citizens of happier nations report a lower sense of meaning, as in Table 1 of Oishi & Diener [2014]);

(5) it is possible that the “recipe” for subjective wellbeing differs across people, cultures, and historical periods. There can be substantial and meaningful variation in ideal levels of each component constituting subjective wellbeing. While it seems reasonable that people will likely strive for some positive level of all the subjective wellbeing components, the pursuit of the highest levels for each need not be a universal goal (Hornsey et al., 2018), and satiation points for various components constituting subjective wellbeing may differ between cultural clusters (Jebb, Tay, Diener, & Oishi, 2018)¹.

For happiness, we make the following additional clarifications:

(1) we consider happiness as one of several components constituting subjective wellbeing. It may or may not be the ultimate, sole, or most important in our lives; its position may vary from individual to individual, across contexts, across times, and across cultures;

(2) happiness may have various facets; in the broad model, life satisfaction, positive affect and infrequent/low negative affect are considered facets of happiness (empirical research commonly treats life satisfaction as happiness, so in the broad model we cohere theorizing with empirical research); according to the broad model also the currently understudied concepts of happiness that are less typical for WEIRD cultures (e.g., interdependent happiness, family happiness) are facets of happiness; however

¹ For the following two articles referred to in this paper—Oishi and Diener (2014) and Jebb, Tay, Diener, and Oishi (2018)—we relate findings that were not presented by authors of these papers as their main findings. We “spotted” on our own these particularly interesting patterns of findings. Oishi and Diener (2014) reported, as secondary finding, that residents of happy countries report lower sense of meaning overall, $r = -.33^{**}$ (whereas Oishi and Diener discussed in their paper the negative association between GDP *per capita* and meaning). Jebb, Tay, Diener, and Oishi (2018) report as part of secondary findings that across cultures satiation points differ in terms of happiness level (whereas they predominantly discuss differences of satiation points in terms of the income level in main analyses). In order to spot what we refer to, our readers may need to re-read these two papers through the lenses of the presented here reasoning.

(3) although various facets of happiness can be theorised as largely overlapping with each other, the broad model does not determine the specific relations between them—these relations can differ between individuals, cultures, contexts, and times, and remain to be studied empirically.

In the empirical analyses presented in this paper we focus on the most popular facet of happiness—life satisfaction. There are two reasons behind this approach. The first reason is that up till now, the field has zeroes in predominantly on life satisfaction as a facet of happiness, with other facets of happiness being studied much less frequently. Accordingly, most insights into happiness, and most policy recommendations based on happiness research, come from research on life satisfaction. Testing our reasoning for the most popular facet of happiness corresponds therefore with the largest body of the currently available literature on happiness. The second reason was pragmatic: at the time of running the empirical analyses presented here, two independent large-scale datasets were available that featured idealization of life satisfaction, but we were not aware of comparable two (or more) large-scale datasets with the other facets of happiness. Importantly, one of the two datasets we employ in our analyses came from Diener and colleagues (2000).

Please note that other perspectives than ours on subjective wellbeing are possible and may well be justified—as Diener, Oishi and Tay (2018) noted as well. We see ours as helpful in shedding new light on WEIRD happiness maximization, and in resultant advocating for the broad model of subjective wellbeing in social sciences; we do not intend to claim that our approach is the only one possible.

The Conceptualization of Subjective Wellbeing Is Varied

Our recent study of 13,000 people across 49 countries investigated what people considered to be their ideal level of happiness by asking about their ideal level of life satisfaction. Of these individuals, 97% indicated that their ideal level of happiness was to be

at least ‘a little happy’ or greater (Krys et al., 2021; 2022; 2023). Participants also indicated whether they wished to be happier than they currently were; as many as approximately 25% of the same participants indicated that they did not, *despite* their actual levels of happiness being below the maximum possible. People want to be generally happy, but for many, only up to a certain point. In fact, only around 15% of these participants indicated that their ideal level of happiness was the maximum possible. These findings are consistent with research showing that people can feel anxious (Joshani & Weijers, 2014) or uncomfortable (Miyamoto, Uchida, & Ellsworth, 2010) about being very happy.

Why do such differences exist, and what factors might explain this variability in attitudes towards happiness? One possibility is that the relative positioning and prominence of happiness, and other components of subjective wellbeing, may vary systematically across groups. In fact, the central positioning that happiness seems to occupy in conceptualizations of subjective wellbeing may itself reflect a cultural idiosyncrasy, one especially endorsed within ‘WEIRD’ societies.

Subjective Wellbeing in WEIRD Societies

From a historical point of view, the foundation of the Western study of happiness derives from Aristotle’s notion of *eudaimonia* (Nicomachean ethics, Book 1, transl. 1934; Kesebir & Diener, 2008; Kraut, 2015). *Eudaimonia* is often translated as happiness and was described by Aristotle as the ultimate goal of human life, a goal that cannot be attributed to any other superordinate goal and towards which all other strivings are instrumental. There are important differences between Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* and contemporary accounts of happiness—Aristotle considered virtuous activity a particularly important facet (Kraut, 2015) and the Greek term suggests a role for the divine (*eu* means “well”, *daimon* means “divinity” or “spirit”). Nonetheless, contemporary definitions of happiness are more centred around its hedonic aspects.

The topic of happiness featured prominently in the philosophy of the Enlightenment. In *Utilitarianism*, John Stuart Mill argued in work currently considered the philosophical articulation of liberal humanism, that “We are morally obliged to follow those social rules and precepts the observance of which promote happiness in the greatest extent possible” (Mill, 2014, p.17). In its original form, utilitarianism proposes that pleasure is a quantifiable positive result for the greatest possible number of people and constitutes the criterion for making decisions. This consideration of happiness, which accompanied the technological and intellectual developments of the Enlightenment, even left its mark on the American Declaration of Independence. Therein, the right to pursue happiness is explicitly established, and the idea that happiness should be actively sought and promoted gained traction in much of modern psychological science (McMahon, 2008).

European and North American contemporary understandings of happiness are related to “feeling well”, which being primarily a subjective issue, lies within the control of the individual (McMahon in Kesebir & Diener, 2008). Oishi, Graham, Kesebir, and Galinha (2013) proposed that these understandings of happiness emanate from the economic history of WEIRD societies, the rise in consumer culture within these societies, and the increased use of individual emotions in advertisement and discourse. Consistently, psychological studies feature happiness—operationalized most often using measures of life satisfaction—prominently in work on subjective wellbeing and elsewhere, as noted by Kwan, Bond, and Singelis (1997, p. 1038):

An ultimate dream for everyone in the field of psychology is to understand human behaviors, so that psychology can contribute to people’s wellbeing. On the basis of this common goal, a single construct of life satisfaction, which illustrates

“the highest good” and “the ultimate motivator” for all human behaviors, has drawn continuous attention for the past few decades.

Studies on happiness—operationalized as life satisfaction—are possibly among the most popular in psychology. According to the Scopus database, as of January, 2023 Diener and colleagues’ (1985) paper introducing the Satisfaction with Life Scale used to quantify subjective wellbeing has been cited over 16,000 times, making it one of the most impactful papers in the psychological literature (cf., Ho & Hartley, 2015).

Subjective Wellbeing in Non-WEIRD Societies

Examination of philosophical traditions other than Western reveals that the centrality of happiness for subjective wellbeing may be more tenuous than commonly assumed in the psychological literature. For example, Buddhist teachings from Eastern Asia emphasizes that the source of suffering is located in thirst or craving, and that an ‘unquenchable’ pursuit of happiness may prove unattainable (Gowans, 2016) or even harmful, because it leads to neglecting others, thus harming both the others and the self (Joshnloo & Weijers, 2014). To derive high subjective wellbeing in the Buddhist view, people must instead free themselves from wants and desires (Sundararajan, 2008). Thus, the Buddhist state of “desirelessness” stands in contradiction to the European emphasis on satisfaction, a term that originated from Latin “satisfacere” (*satis* = enough + *facere* = make) and literally meaning “meeting the expectations, needs and desires” (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010). What in European philosophy represents the ultimate life goal can from a Buddhist perspective be characterized as a pathway to an unfulfilled and frustrating life.

A similar contradiction of ideals about subjective wellbeing can be found through the study of the Japanese culture. Miyamoto et al. (2010) have shown that in the Japanese cultural context the experience of happiness can be accompanied by a fear of troubling

others. In Japan, the individual experience of happiness carries significant ambivalence unknown in WEIRD societies. Furthermore, being satisfied may entail a conflict with the important Japanese value of constant self-improvement (Kiran, 2017). Probably one of the most common sayings in Japan is 頑張つて (Gambatte), which means “strive to do your best!”. Japanese culture emphasizes the value of interpersonal harmony, ordinariness, and quiescence which are regarded as components of interdependent happiness (Hitokoto & Uchida, 2015).

Joshanloo (2013) carried out a comparison of Western versus Islamic traditions, finding that the Islamic conception of subjective wellbeing is more related to striving to do the right thing and is closely related to religiousness. Muslim theology endorses submission to the divine will and encourages an ascetic way of life in order for the soul to be kept aligned to ‘the right way.’ According to the Islamic worldview, human nature has an innate tendency to forget the right path and wander if not continuously reminded. Succumbing to happiness bears the risk of distracting people from following ‘the right way.’ Similar to Islam, among various interpretations of the Talmud (i.e., in Judaism), subjective wellbeing is related to following the precepts of God (Levi, 2014).

In another study, Joshanloo (2014) analysed differences between Eastern (i.e., Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist, Confucian, and Sufi) and Western concepts of subjective wellbeing, and described six major contrasts between these two cultural groupings. Subjective wellbeing is associated with self-transcendence or self-enhancement, eudemonism or hedonism, harmony or mastery, contentment or satisfaction, valuing or avoiding suffering, and relevance or irrelevance of spirituality and religion. Joshanloo acknowledged that both Eastern and Western philosophical traditions recognise all twelve tendencies but noted that their relative importance vary. Happiness—as is commonly studied by psychological science—is closer to life satisfaction, hedonism (e.g., positive affect), and avoiding suffering (e.g., absence of

negative affect), which in Joshanloo's classification are priorities characteristic of Western societies.

Some African conceptualizations of subjective wellbeing stress the importance of harmony. Harmony can be understood as the result of directing human action to achieve a transcendence that is derived from being in synchrony with the physical and the social world. (Asante, 1984). According to several strands of African thought, directing one's action toward harmony with the social world (Mandela's "ubuntu") is necessary to achieve a state of godly 'possession'—perceiving oneself to be living and acting in accordance with the will of the gods. It also involves a cleansing of one's spirit, a state that is believed conducive to euphoria, entailing a sense of peace with others (Asante, 1984).

Furthermore, Joshanloo and Weijers (2014) proposed that some individuals, mainly from non-WEIRD cultures, are averse to happiness. They identified four beliefs that underlie an aversion to happiness: (1) achieving happiness makes it more likely that bad things will happen; (2) pursuing happiness causes a happy person to become a bad person; (3) attaining happiness is bad for the happy person and others; and (4) pursuing happiness is bad for others. However alien these four beliefs may seem to many from WEIRD cultural backgrounds, the existence of aversion to happiness in non-WEIRD cultures lends another line of support to our argument that, in non-WEIRD cultural traditions, happiness is not the key component of subjective wellbeing, and may in some cases or at some levels even be considered detrimental to it.

Happiness Does Not Rank Among the Most Important Values

Schwartz's value taxonomy research (2009) offers further insights about the putative central position of happiness in context of subjective wellbeing. Although the 57 values studied by Schwartz did not refer to happiness *per se*, certain values analysed by Schwartz (i.e., "enjoying life" or "pleasure") overlap with happiness, whereas other values (i.e.,

“meaning in life” or “inner harmony”) overlap with other types of subjective wellbeing. Importantly, in Schwartz’s mapping, these happiness-related values are located on the opposite side of his value circumplex from those values related to other types of subjective wellbeing. From this perspective, happiness-related values, at least to the extent that they reflect enjoying life and pleasure, constitute only a part of the universal values circumplex, and other types of subjective wellbeing are valued as different, if not opposite, to happiness.

Of Schwartz’s seven cultural orientations, “egalitarianism” received the highest endorsement from among all seven Schwartz’s cultural orientations. “Affective autonomy,” which reflects a happiness-related value, is the second *least* endorsed cultural orientation. Importantly, endorsement for Schwartz’s “affective autonomy” is correlated with cultural individualism (Inglehart, & Oyserman, 2004; Krys, Uchida, Oishi, & Diener, 2019). Thus, Schwartz’s mapping of cultural values lends further support for questioning that happiness is the ultimate aim and the highest type of subjective wellbeing universally, and may in fact be a distinctive feature of WEIRD societies.

Ideal Levels of Happiness Vary Systematically along WEIRD Cultural Factors

As discussed above, there is considerable variation in the degree to which people strive for maximum happiness, and these differences seem in part rooted in various socio-cultural sources, such as worldviews and religions, languages, and cultural beliefs. Furthermore, people’s ideal levels of happiness vary systematically along WEIRD cultural factors (Westernization, Education, Industrialization, Richness, and Democratization).

We examined two large cross-cultural datasets in which people reported their ideal levels of personal life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1985)—the most common operationalization of happiness in psychology—and correlated these ideal levels of happiness with macro-level indicators of WEIRD cultural factors. The data we employed were from Diener and

collaborators (2000; 7,167 participants across 41 countries), and from Krys and collaborators (2021, 2022, 2023; 12,819 participants across 49 countries).

For both datasets, participants rated their happiness using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) and their ideal level of SWLS. Specifically, we, and Diener before us, asked how participants thought the ideal person would complete SWLS items. Krys et al. (2021; 2022; 2023) instruction for ideal SWLS read as follows: [...] *instead of answering how much you agree with the statements, we would like you to indicate how much you think the ideal or perfect person would agree with each statement.* Participants answered these questions about their actual SWLS and their ideal SWLS on a nine-point scale (1 = *doesn't describe him/her at all*, 3 = *describes him/her a little*, 5 = *describes him/her moderately*, 7 = *describes him/her very well*, 9 = *describes him/her exactly*), as per Vignoles et al. (2016). The Diener et al. (2000) dataset featured the same actual and ideal SWLS measures, but the response scale ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). We present analyses for both datasets separately, but also for their combination, i.e., we standardized scores within each dataset, and then for each country we calculated means from these standardized scores.

We obtained WEIRDness indicators at the macro (i.e., country) level. Accordingly, we operationalized Westernization using two indexes of individualism (Hofstede, 2017; Minkov et al., 2017). We used the expected and mean duration of schooling in a country from the corresponding United Nations Development Programme index (UNDP, 2017) as an indicator for Education. Further, we operationalized industrialization through the technological advancement index established by Welzel (2013). GDP per capita, estimated by the World Bank (2017) served in our analysis as marker of richness. Finally, as a measure of the level of democracy we used the 2019 Democracy Index (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019).

WEIRD Societies Set Higher Happiness Ideals

Our two datasets showed that countries that feature high happiness ideals also feature relatively higher average citizen happiness ($r_{\text{Diener et al.}} = .68$, $r_{\text{Krys et al.}} = .83$, $p_s < .001$). Given their correlation, we controlled for actual happiness when analysing the associations between ideal happiness and WEIRD factors. We summarize these partial correlations in Table 1. Strikingly, in both datasets, six out of seven indicators of WEIRDness—individualism, education, technological advancement, GDP per capita, and level of democracy—were positively and significantly partially correlated with ideal happiness (level of significance was not reached by Minkov’s individualism analysed with the Diener et al. dataset, nor for the democracy index analysed with the Krys et al. dataset).

When we combined both datasets, we found no exceptions. Thus, the stronger a country was characterized by WEIRD factors, the more its inhabitants subscribed to high happiness ideals independent of their actual levels of happiness. These data provide a compelling case that the relatively strong idealization of happiness is specific to WEIRD societies. Accordingly, assuming the pursuit of happiness to be at the centre of subjective wellbeing, superordinate to other facets of subjective wellbeing, may not be as uncontroversial as has been assumed in subjective wellbeing research.

Both North-Western European and Latin American societies tend to occupy top ranks in actual happiness rankings (e.g., Minkov, 2009; Veenhoven, 2015). However, while North-Western European societies tend to be WEIRD, Latin American societies tend not to be. In supplementary online material, we document that Latin America and North-Western Europe scored comparatively high on average actual happiness, but that at the same time the average ideal happiness was significantly lower in Latin American countries than in North-Western European countries. These findings further emphasize our theorising that idealization of high

happiness is more cross-culturally variable than typically theorized, and that the ideal levels of happiness depend on a country's WEIRD status.

Cultures differ in the extent to which individuals are willing to select extreme responses. With happiness scores tending to fall above midpoint, country differences in extreme responses could bias scores towards higher levels of average happiness. Studies show that WEIRD cultures are characterised by low bias, with extreme responses more prevalent in the less developed countries (Smith, 2004; Meisenberg & Williams, 2008). In the empirical analyses we present in this paper, North-Western Europe is on the top of “happiness maximization” ranking, and the regions characterized as gravitating towards high extremity in responses are occupying bottom to middle positions (see supplementary online materials). Therefore, we found support for our predictions *despite* any potential impact of extremity in response style.

>>> Please kindly insert Table 1 about here <<<

Possible Drivers of Happiness Idealization in WEIRD Societies: Ecology, Geography, and Economy

Previous sections emphasized that specific worldviews, religions, ideologies, languages, and sociohistorical contexts affect how happiness and subjective wellbeing are conceptualized, and furthermore showed that ideal levels of happiness—operationalized as life satisfaction—vary systematically along factors characterizing WEIRD societies. Why do such systematic differences, and especially those between WEIRD and non-WEIRD societies, exist? A growing body of research links cultural differences, including the psychology of happiness, to ecological and socioeconomical conditions (Kim, 1995; Welzel, 2013). Specifically, the proliferation of happiness as central and as a subordinate feature of

subjective wellbeing in WEIRD (vs non-WEIRD) societies may be cultivated by these societies' historical interaction with their ecological environment.

Ideal Happiness Varies by Existential Pressures

Previous studies have linked ecological pressures to societal subjective wellbeing. Specifically, they found low existential pressures (manifested as a climatic configuration called the cool-water condition² and high pathogen security) predict high levels of actual happiness (Welzel, 2013; Welzel et al., 2021). Previous research also indicates that a sense of freedom—comparatively common in WEIRD societies—is a mediator between existential pressures and happiness (Welzel, 2013). Liberating people from existential pressures enhances opportunities to pursue happiness and focuses governing bodies on promoting citizen happiness (Welzel, 2013).

Thus, low existential pressures may lead to higher levels of happiness idealization. If so, then showing this relationship would provide further support for the notion that the centrality and prominence of happiness as a superordinate outcome in models of subjective wellbeing is questionable.

We propose that societies may be more likely to develop a “happiness maximization” principle if set in comparatively benign ecological conditions, or as Welzel (2013) has framed it, in cultures that faced the smallest existential pressures. Societies inhabiting the most convenient ecological habitats can allocate their resources—time, work-force capacities, materials—not only for everyday survival (i.e., “escape from suffering”), but also for *joie de vivre*. This is, they can afford to idealise “happiness maximization”.

² The cool water condition is a specific climatic configuration that combines periodically frosty winters with mildly warm summers under the ubiquitous accessibility of fresh water. Cool-water index (Welzel 2013, after Gallup, Mellinger, and Sachs [2010]) combines data on (a) the average annual temperature (inverted), (b) rainfall continuity across the seasons, and (c) the abundance of ice-free waterways on a society's territory.

We utilized the cross-cultural data on actual and ideal happiness gathered by Diener and colleagues (1985) and those collected by Krys and colleagues (2021, 2022, 2023) to examine if ideal levels of happiness might systematically vary across ecological indicators of existential pressure. We operationalized these ecological factors as (a) the cool-water index (Welzel 2013, after Gallup, Mellinger, and Sachs [2010]), (b) historical pathogen prevalence (Welzel 2013, after Murray and Schaller, 2012), (c) the risk of natural disasters (World Risk Report, 2019). As in our previous analyses, we correlated these three markers of benign ecology (cool-water index, pathogen safety, natural disasters security) with ideal levels of happiness (see Table 2), with and without controlling for differences in actual happiness.

The results of these analyses indicated that, indeed, ideal levels of happiness vary systematically along levels of the ecological factors, with the presence of cool and navigable waters, security from diseases, and absence of natural disasters each predicting higher ideal levels of happiness, even after controlling for actual happiness (with the exception of disease security not strongly predicting ideal happiness in Diener et. al dataset with actual happiness controlled, $p = .20$). This set of findings indicates that how strongly societies idealize high levels of happiness relates to the existential threats arising from the ecology they occupy (see also Figure 2).

>>> Please kindly insert Table 2 about here <<<

>>> Please kindly insert Figure 2 about here <<<

In order to further evaluate our reasoning that exceptional eco-environmental conditions might have fostered the emergence of cultural syndrome of WEIRDness, which in turn led to emergence of happiness maximization, we ran a mediation analysis using jamovi

(2022; medmod module; 5000 bootstrap samples) in which existential comfort (see Table 2) served as independent variable, cultural WEIRDness (see Table 1) as mediator, and ideal level of life satisfaction as dependent variable. A significant indirect effect supported our reasoning, $IE = .45$, $SE = .19$, 95% CI [.09, .86] (see Figure 3).

>>> Please kindly insert Figure 3 about here <<<

The Role of the Gulfstream in Shaping the North-Western European Habitat

Europe lies in the geographical latitude of the mild climate zone. Additionally, the climate of North-Western Europe is milder than in other regions of similar geographical latitude due to the North Atlantic drift of the Gulfstream (Palter, 2015; see Figure 4). The Gulf Stream is an exceptional phenomenon on a planetary scale (see Figure 4; see also the Deutsches Klima-Konsortium brochure on the Gulfstream [Latif et al., 2021]). Surface oceanic waters provide a regular pattern of currents, but the Gulfstream breaks out from this scheme, making European climate exceptionally agreeable for human life.

The general pattern of global oceanic currents works as follows: Along the Equator, surface-level oceanic waters flow from East to West, absorbing heat and humidity from the skies above. Next, when deflected by the Eastern coasts of continents, currents turn northwards in the Northern hemisphere and southwards in the Southern hemisphere, providing heat and increasing humidity along the Eastern coasts of adjacent continents. After reaching the latitude of the Tropics (Capricorn in the Southern hemisphere, and Cancer in the Northern hemisphere), currents start flowing from West to East. When currents reach the Western coasts of the continents, they are already carrying cold waters with dry air above. Finally, currents turn along Western continental coasts back towards the Equator. The whole process is one of constant, circular dynamics (see Figure 4). This process has important

consequences for climatic conditions of mid-latitude Eastern and Western coasts of continents. The climate of the Eastern coasts at the mid-latitudes tends to be humid and tropical; of Western coasts at the mid-latitudes, dry and desertic. The most striking examples of this process are Florida versus the Californian peninsula, East Asia versus the Sahara, Amazonia versus the Atacama Desert, Madagascar versus the Namibian Desert, and the Eastern versus the Western coasts of Australia.

>>> Please kindly insert Figure 4 about here <<<

The only exception from the above-described general pattern is the Gulfstream that carries warm water and humid air northward along the North-Western coast of the European continent. The Gulfstream warms and humidifies the North-Western European climate (in particular during winters that would otherwise be colder and dryer). Due to this exceptional oceanic current, North-Western European winters are up to 10°C warmer than the zonal mean at equivalent latitudes (Palter, 2015). To illustrate this difference: Paris is 5 degrees of geographical latitude closer to the North pole than Vladivostok (48.86°N vs 43.12°N), and so, Paris should be several degrees colder. Yet, the temperature in the coldest month is around plus 3°C in Paris, and around minus 18°C in Vladivostok. The Gulfstream also provides Europe with humidity—without humid air brought by the Gulfstream, Europe would be desertic and drier, particularly in winters.

In effect, due to exceptionally mild winters, the period for vegetable growing in Western Europe is much longer than in other regions of similar latitude. At the same time, the temperature in Europe remains milder than in Sub-Saharan Africa, Amazonia, or Sumatra. Therefore, in Europe, plagues of disease-provoking germs, bacteria, and insects were historically much rarer. Already before the modern era, the relatively pathogen-safe European

environment afforded more safe water, a decreased prevalence of communicable diseases, and reduced child mortality (Welzel et al., 2021), thus fostering the idealization of relatively higher levels of happiness.

In sum, the North-Western European climate is shaped by the exceptional oceanic current of the Gulfstream. For ages, it has made North-Western European, eco-environmental conditions easier for human life, i.e., it has lessened existential pressures (Welzel, 2013). Thus, we propose that these exceptional eco-environmental conditions might have fostered the emergence of cultures prioritizing happiness maximization. In North-Western Europe, it was easier to escape much human suffering and in consequence to idealize high levels of happiness.

Happiness Maximization as a Cultural Syndrome

The above sections showcase the wide-spread and systematic variation in the conceptualization of subjective wellbeing, the importance assigned to happiness, and in the ideal levels of happiness that people pursue. We also consider ecological and economic factors as possible drivers of this variability. The fact that happiness appears to be idealised in regions with comfortable ecological and economic conditions should not lead to the conclusion that it might be a goal suitable for universal pursuit. Our point is that happiness maximization may have developed as a cultural syndrome, but that as such, it may entail negative consequences as well. Cultural syndromes express variations of psychological constructs found in particular societies during certain time periods (Triandis, 1996). Following this rationale, if happiness maximization is a cultural syndrome, negative consequences may occur from the core elements of the concept and involve attempts to increase positive feelings and possibly attempts to suppress negative feelings (Oishi, Diener, & Lucas, 2007; Oishi, Tsutsui, Eggleston, & Galinha, 2014; Yeung & Lun, 2016). To

tentatively evaluate this idea, we analyzed the association of happiness idealization with two categories of negative consequences: side effects and opportunity costs.

Societal Correlates of Happiness Maximization

Societies in which comparatively many people strive for happiness maximization tend to feature a number of indicators that may be seen as problematic, such as the use of psychotropic substances (perhaps because these substances often aim at promoting positive feelings or suppressing negative ones), and heightened levels of mania (i.e., pathologically elevated, mood-enhancing behaviors)³.

Happiness Maximization and Substance Use. In supplementary online materials, we present the results of the country-level correlational analyses of association between happiness maximization and the use and abuse of nine drugs based on our data and data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2019). It turns out that cultural “happiness maximization” correlates with the general use and abuse of drugs at the level of country averages (we combined data on several drugs into a meta-factor) with the association varying from $r = .13$ to $r = .37$ (depending on the dataset, on how broadly we measure the drug meta-factor, and whether we control for actual levels of happiness); r oscillates around .30 for the analyses run on ideal happiness combined for both datasets. Among various substances analyzed, cannabis and tranquilizers—both associated with lessening stress and pressures—seem to play a special role in societies of “happiness maximization” (with $.25 < r_s < .43$ when both datasets are combined).

³ We tested also the reasoning that (1) a consumption-oriented lifestyle can be related to happiness-maximization and manifest itself in the magnitude of the ecological footprint caused by people striving for happiness maximization, and that (2) living in a culture characterized by personal happiness maximization may be related to lessening efforts towards nurturing and sustaining long-lasting relationships that no longer bring high levels of happiness (Wojciszke, 2002) and correlate with society-level averages in divorce. However, the data we analysed on ecological footprint and divorce rates presented a rather complex picture. Accordingly, we present these findings in online supplementary material.

Supplementary online material also presents results of country-level correlational analyses from five various data sets on alcohol use and abuse (WHO, 2019). As with drugs use, happiness maximization at cultural level is significantly associated with higher average alcohol use and abuse, with correlation coefficients for the meta-factor estimated $.27 < r_s < .60$, and for the ideal happiness combined for both datasets r_s reaching above $.40$. Living in “happiness maximization” cultures means, on average, higher alcohol consumption by members of that culture. When WEIRDness is being controlled for in these analyses, the associations between happiness idealization and the substance use fade away. These results suggest that WEIRDness, happiness maximization, and substance use are positively related to each other at the level of country aggregates. Thus, (WEIRD) societies in which people seek to maximize happiness more also tend to be societies where substance use is higher. Of course, the causal nature of this association, or indeed whether those who seek to maximize happiness are the same individuals to use substances, is not certain.

Happiness Maximization and Bipolar Disorder. Scholars have suggested that an increased prevalence of bipolar disorders may have roots in the pathoplastic (shaping) role of culture on mental disorders in general (Haroz et al., 2017; Kirmayer & Ryder, 2016; Koelkebeck et al., 2017; Kuo et al., 1989; Ryder et al., 2008). Happiness maximization may be a part of that process. Bipolar disorder, for example, encompass manic episodes of highly elevated mood (Carvalho et al., 2020), states that can be associated with pursuing states of maximum happiness. The country-level data confirmed our prediction that high ideal levels of happiness in a society relate positively to the prevalence of bi-polar disorder with $.16 < r_s < .62$; for both datasets combined $r_s > .40$ (see supplementary online material). Importantly, when the cultural syndrome of WEIRDness is being controlled for, the correlation between idealizations of high levels happiness on bipolar disorder maintains its significance, albeit weaker. Societies whose individuals pursue high levels of happiness thus tend to be societies

with relatively high occurrence of bipolar disorder, although the causal nature and whether or not these elevated levels occur in the same individuals is again an open question.

Beware of Committing the Ecological Fallacy. We call attention to the fact that we analyzed country-level phenomena. Our conclusions cannot be extended to the individual-level without the risk of committing the ecological fallacy (e.g., the fact that the country-level association between happiness maximization and substance use is positive does not mean that individuals who seek maximum happiness tend to use substances). We are dealing with societal-level, not individual-level phenomena; and ecology is different from psychology (Leung & Bond, 2007). We are aware that societal phenomena are shaped by multiple determinants and that happiness maximization represents but one among several variables therein. The reason we point to some perhaps overlooked associations is to raise awareness that happiness maximization as a cultural syndrome appears correlated with advantages and disadvantages. This perspective stands in opposition to viewing happiness as ultimate dependent variable and opens new perspectives for the future study of the related phenomena.

Opportunity Costs of Happiness Maximization

Happiness maximization may encompass opportunity costs (Arce, 2016; Ferraro & Taylor, 2005; Parkin, 2016; Potter & Sanders, 2012), meaning that pursuing happiness may lead to missing out on the positive aspects of alternative forms of subjective wellbeing. In fact, Oishi and Diener (2014) find that members of the happiest societies report a lower meaning in life than do members of moderately happy societies ($r=-.33$). To our best knowledge, the Oishi and Diener study (2014) employing Gallup data is the only study comparing people's declarations about meaning in their life across a large number of countries. As of 2022, happiness was studied in several large cross-cultural research projects (e.g., WVS [Haerpfer et al., 2020], Gallup [2022], 2022, Diener's data [2000], World Happiness Report [Helliwell et al. 2022], Happiness Meanders study [Krys et al., 2021; 2022;

2023], International Situations Project [Gardiner et al. 2020]), while meaning in life was studied in one large cross-cultural scheme (Gallup). Large cross-cultural studies on alternative forms of subjective wellbeing are also scant. These evidence so far illustrate the imbalance in attention directed at happiness and at other types of subjective wellbeing despite their geographical and cultural variation.

In the current section, we illustrate the potential side-effects of happiness maximization by considering its arguably undesirable society-level correlates. We do so to offer some balance to the otherwise predominant focus on positives associated with happiness (e.g., Inglehart et al., 2008), thus illustrating that happiness maximization may not be uniformly desirable.

Discussion

It is generally good to be happy. To what extent people idealize happiness, however, is an unobvious but empirically tractable question that remains largely understudied. On the basis of recent work in cross-cultural psychology, we propose that the traditionally central and dominant position that happiness has occupied in models of subjective wellbeing needs to be re-assessed. The conceptualization of subjective wellbeing and happiness and the beliefs surrounding them differ substantially across societies, with some societies celebrating the pursuit of high levels of happiness, while others do not. Data on values and happiness confirm these suggestions: happiness is not considered a top-ranked value in many societies, nor do people universally wish to maximize it. Rather, it seems that the central positioning of happiness in models of subjective wellbeing may represent a priority of WEIRD societies in particular, and not for other societies across the globe. Given that these cross-cultural differences are systematic and testable, we propose that more differentiated models of subjective wellbeing should be extended into cross-cultural consideration, and in the current work we presented such model (see Figure 1).

It is important to underscore the substantial magnitude of the cross-cultural differences in ideal levels of happiness that we have established in our datasets. In our study, the difference between North-Western Europe and the rest of the World reached Cohen's $d = 1.93$ ($M_{\text{North-Western Europe}} = 7.45$, $SD = .30$; $M_{\text{other countries}} = 6.51$, $SD = .67$; $t[47] = 4.29$; $p < .001$). To put this difference in more concretely, the Krys et al. dataset⁴ showed that Germany and in Iceland 86% and 84% of participants respectively indicated that ideal happiness is “very happy” at least; in Bhutan, Ghana, Nigeria, Japan, and Pakistan, 70% or more participants indicated that ideal happiness is below “very happy” (with Bhutan reaching 81.5%). These are substantial differences, having potentially major consequences for people's mindsets and their way of being-in-life (see Figure 5 for illustration of ideal levels of happiness across all cultures studied by Krys et al., 2021; 2022; 2023).

>>> Please kindly insert Figure 5 about here <<<

Using a more articulated theoretical rationale and the data from 19,986 participants from 66 countries, the current paper aims to show that the idealization of high levels of happiness is shaped, among other factors, by cultural context, and that the ideal of “happiness maximization” emerged particularly in North-Western European cultures. We further propose that the idealization of high levels of happiness may have evolved in cultures that emerged in the most benign eco-environmental habitats, i.e., those that have faced the smallest existential pressures. North-Western Europe has the most benign eco-environmental conditions of all large macro-geographical regions of our planet, and, drawing from geographical science, we indicate the probable role of Gulfstream in creating them.

⁴ We do not have access to individual level data from the Diener et al. dataset to enable a similar illustration.

Implications for Psychological Science

Our findings are in line with the premise of mutual constitution between culture and psychology, according to which psychological phenomena evolve in interdependence with the social and physical environment in which they appear and, as a result, vary cross-culturally (Markus & Hamedani, 2007). Furthermore, they add to the large body of research on evolutionary psychology which shows that several theoretical assumptions based on WEIRD samples are often too narrow to accommodate subsequent evidence (Arnett, 2008; Henrich et al., 2010; Krys, Vignoles, de Almeida, & Uchida, 2022; Thalmayer et al., 2021). As a way forward in transcending WEIRDness, Barrett (2020) suggests a phenomical approach to psychology. Borrowed from recent evidence in biology, this approach involves mapping several variations of a psychological phenomenon of interest and showing how each variation evolves in relation to the environment. Our findings align with this perspective in conceptualizing happiness as one of many components of subjective wellbeing, shaped by evolutionary and cultural factors. This idea enlarges our understanding of subjective wellbeing and bears a series of implications for psychological science and practice.

Towards Cultural Objectivity in Subjective Wellbeing Studies. Placing happiness within a broader conception of subjective wellbeing is not only an analytical issue. It also touches on issues of ethics and power, as adopting a WEIRD-based conceptualization of happiness may presume a stance of dominance towards other forms of subjective wellbeing. All cultures deserve to be accommodated in developing and testing theories of subjective wellbeing. Applying WEIRD theorizing on subjective wellbeing to other parts of the world bears the risk of imposing WEIRD standards in order to “educate” or “help develop” others, often people in former colonized regions. Psychological science has become more and more aware of the neo-colonial nature of such presumption (Bulhan, 2015; McNamara & Naepi, 2018; Okazaki et al., 2008; San Juan, 2006). Recognizing that happiness is not

tantamount to subjective wellbeing and that subjective wellbeing is a much more complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon is a step towards decolonizing psychology. From a cultural perspective, it is hard to imagine a universal recipe for a good life. It is possible and necessary, however, to study the cultural variety in recipes for living a good life.

The Need to Elaborate a Pattern of Subjective Wellbeing Types. If happiness is not the ultimate dependent variable, then the question of developing a taxonomy for types of subjective wellbeing appears. For example, keeping the Maslow hierarchy (Maslow, 1943) in mind, can we develop a schema of subjective wellbeing where happiness is a “lower level” component of subjective wellbeing, and meaning in life a “higher level” component of subjective wellbeing? That is, do people satiate their happiness first and next their meaning and other components of subjective wellbeing (Gorski, 2022)? Adopting a more nuanced understanding of subjective wellbeing poses further questions about possible relationships between subjective wellbeing components, their cultural congruence, and the degree to which each of them is pursued across societies varying in ecocultural characteristics (Sng et al., 2017).

Towards Conceptual Pluralism in Subjective Wellbeing Studies. Our study concerns the relationship of happiness to other subjective wellbeing components within psychology (see Figure 1). The question here is how to achieve a conceptual pluralism and develop concrete measures which would emanate from the integration of broadened views on subjective wellbeing. We call for comprehensive reviews of components of subjective wellbeing and employ the cultural perspective to mention a few candidates: *sense of meaning* might be recognized and accepted at least equally with happiness across many cultural and sub-cultural groups; a key aspect of good life in Confucian Asia is *sense of harmony* (e.g.,; Kjell et al., 2015; Lun, 2022); it seems difficult to discuss good life in Africa, Middle East or

Latin America, without studying the role of *spirituality/religiosity* (Saroglou, 2003; Shiah et al., 2016; Vellem, 2014).

Towards Optimal Levels of Various Facets of Subjective Wellbeing.

Psychological science needs to pay more attention to the study of optimal levels not only of happiness but also of other components of subjective wellbeing (see also Oishi, Diener, & Lucas, 2007). Our study has documented that people across cultures idealize quite different levels of happiness. It seems plausible that across cultures other components of subjective wellbeing are idealized to various degrees. Data from WVS document that religiosity is attributed low importance in secularized WEIRD cultures, but top importance in Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, with ICC reaching .50 (50% of variance in attributing importance to religion can be explained by the culture-level of analysis).

Towards Uncovering the Consequences of Individual-Culture (In)Congruence in Ideals of Subjective Wellbeing. The person-environment fit hypothesis states that individuals are better adjusted when their individual attributes are congruent with their proximal and more distal environments (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Studies are needed to test a person-culture match in ideal and actual types of various types of subjective wellbeing. Being moderately happy in a culture governed by the happiness maximization principle may be a more challenging task than in cultures creating smaller pressure for happiness. Endorsing a spiritual life may carry different consequences in cultures with relatively low recognition of spirituality as compared to cultures illuminating spirituality (e.g., being atheist in secularized Europe is different from being atheist in countries referring to one or more Gods in their Constitution). The same is true for being non-religious in a religious society, and vice versa.

Targeting Moderate Levels of Happiness. Taking into consideration that providing high levels of happiness to over 7 billion people seems impossible without exceeding critical environmental boundaries (O'Neill, Fanning, Lamb, & Steinberger, 2018), psychological

science may need to study how to encourage—mainly WEIRD—people to be more content with moderate levels of happiness. Buddhist thought, for instance, illuminates this reorientation by considering all sources of desire including happiness as sources of suffering. Equally, concepts of harmony could provide insights for enhancing balanced self and activity ideals by focusing on maintaining a harmonious life. This consideration can encourage a reflexive stance toward happiness in order to depart from a pursuit of “happiness maximization” at any cost and consider instead “a good enough level of happiness”. The second wave of positive psychology (Armstrong, Desson, St. John, & Watt, 2019; Cohen & Bai, 2019; Ivtzan, Lomas, Hefferon, & Worth, 2016; Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016; Wang, Wong, & Yeh, 2016) represents an example of a research program which seeks to supersede WEIRD constraints by including influences from Eastern traditions (dialectical relationship of positive and negative experiences; transcendence of the ego; wisdom; meaning), as heralded by the multi-cultural study of Chinese values (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987).

Implications for Policy Making

Our work bears implications for the policy level as well. A nuanced concept of subjective wellbeing may inform the development of more diverse measures for assessing good life at the country-level (Fabian & Pykett, 2022).

Cross-Country Comparisons of Happiness Need to Acknowledge Ideal Levels of Happiness. International governing bodies seem to formulate policies with the assumption that people in all nations wish to increase their happiness to the same highest levels. For example, OECD recently adopted personal life satisfaction as the “ultimate” dependent variable in its cross-national educational comparisons. Because Japanese students reported lower life satisfaction than students in other countries, OECD instructed Japanese government “to do something with this issue” (Rappleye, Komatsu, Uchida, Krys, & Markus, 2019). Japanese students reported above mid-point happiness, and OECD experts did not

consider that happiness may be idealized in Japan less than in other countries. If international governing bodies (like OECD) want to inform policies in a culturally sensitive way (Krys, Capaldi, Lun, et al., 2020), they may need to learn more about ideal levels of happiness, and their interaction with actual levels of happiness, both for cultures and for their individual members. Without such due diligence, policy recommendations may be biased towards specific cultural values—values of WEIRD societies.

Culturally Sensitive National-Accounts of Wellbeing (NAWB). According to OECD, as of 2018, among thirteen (mostly WEIRD) countries calculating NAWB (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2015), twelve rely on happiness as a measure of subjective wellbeing (Durand, 2018). It seems reasonable to expect that NAWB should guide not only “happiness maximization” policies but also “improvement of meaningful life” policies. As noted, Oishi and Diener (2014) documented that levels of meaning in life at the society aggregate are negatively associated with average happiness of societies. Operating with additional components and measures of subjective wellbeing would contribute to more culturally sensitive (Krys, Capaldi, Lun, et al. 2020), less ethnocentric psychologizing (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008), and hopefully more effective policies (Fabian & Pykett, 2022).

The idea of NAWB (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2015) is a milestone on the pathway beyond narrow economic understanding of national subjective wellbeing. With the current paper, we fully support this direction but signal that personal life satisfaction and happiness-related measures of subjective wellbeing may be WEIRD-themed. As such, instead of escaping from overall economization of social reality, they may reinforce it under the guise of endorsing happiness, since happiness of societies is positively and strongly related to their economic standing, which is not the case for these societies’ sense of meaning (Oishi & Diener, 2014). To become truly *national* accounts of subjective wellbeing, researchers may need to understand the cultural diversity of how people conceptualize subjective wellbeing,

and policy makers need to elaborate indicators that will encompass the cultural diversity of subjective wellbeing concepts. As there is probably no single “one-size-fits-all” type of subjective wellbeing, future NAWB will probably have to be made *more culturally sensitive* NAWB (Krys, Capaldi, Lun et al., 2020). This is, NAWB may need to be adjusted to the ideals regarding subjective wellbeing prevalent in a given culture, and, as a result, the unit of analysis shall be the level of progress on indigenously calibrated types of subjective wellbeing.

Future Directions: Open Questions about Happiness Maximization

The fact that our findings provide a large picture of subjective wellbeing does not diminish the importance and implications of happiness and the tendency to maximize it. They should rather be taken as an opportunity to take stock of its nature and examine it in greater depth.

Why Maximization of Happiness and Not Other Instances of Subjective Wellbeing? In light of the Oishi and Diener (2014) findings that societal happiness is negatively correlated with a country-level sense of meaning, it seems plausible that WEIRD societies tend to maximize happiness, but not equally so other components of subjective wellbeing (at least not a sense of meaning). Future research may need to answer why cultures that emerged in the most human-friendly habitats maximize a specific type of subjective wellbeing—happiness—and not other good ways to live (see Morris, 1956). It is also worth exploring further whether the findings presented here for the most popular facet of happiness (life satisfaction) are valid also for facets of happiness typical for non-WEIRD cultures (e.g., interdependent happiness; Hitokoto & Uchida, 2015). Given the predominance of life satisfaction as the operationalization of happiness, this question ultimately requires more empirical study.

Ideal Self Versus Ought Self. The empirical data we employed to verify our reasoning was based on the instruction originally proposed by Diener and collaborators (2000). In that study, participants were asked to respond to life satisfaction questions by providing ideal answers. It remains unclear, however, whether these instructions activated the *ideal self* or the *ought self* (Higgins 1997). The *ideal self* covers attributes people ideally would like (hope, aspire, and wish) to possess, whereas the *ought self* relates to attributes people believe they should possess (deriving from their sense of duty, obligation, and responsibility). Future studies may need to test if the analyses presented here cover both types of self, and if not, further studies on the differences are needed.

Better Understanding of the Costs of Happiness Maximization. A better understating of maximization should include the comprehensive study of its costs. Does living in a society valuing ceiling levels of happiness indeed create pressure on being more than very happy? If yes, then how? May it indeed lead to increased levels of mania or consumption of psychoactive substances? Our study was correlational only—causality and mechanisms remain to be tested. Our findings show that the associations for substance use fade away when the cultural syndrome of WEIRDness is controlled for. Thus, it is possible that, for some costs, WEIRDness is the actual cause (and happiness maximization is the covariate), while for others happiness maximization has direct causal effects. Furthermore, if members of happy societies are reporting a relatively lower sense of meaning (Oishi & Diener, 2015), then how is happiness related to people’s sense of harmony, or of security, or of predictability? Are societies of happy individuals also societies of happy families and societies of happy local communities?

Discussion on Side-Effects of All Instances of Subjective Wellbeing. A further issue regarding maximization would be to understand whether societies where other subjective wellbeing components prevail also have side effects, if one strives to maximize

their levels. For example, it is not known if the striving to maximize meaning in life or harmony might also have societal disadvantages; it is also imaginable that maximizing spiritual/religious experience may carry societal disadvantages.

Beyond Eco-Environmental Sources of Happiness Maximization. Our work highlights the relationship between “happiness maximization” in a culture, and the eco-environmental conditions in which a culture emerged. However, natural factors represent only part of culture’s story. Future research should, therefore, examine the role that social, political, and perhaps especially, religious factors play in pursuing happiness or alternative concepts of subjective wellbeing. Different types of religion (esp. monotheistic vs polytheistic vs non-theistic religious traditions) can also be associated with the idealized levels of happiness or other components of subjective wellbeing in different ways (Saroglou, 2019). It is also plausible that the degree to which cultures endorse happiness maximization may vary as a function of optimism, perceived control over outcomes, beliefs about prosperity and hardship, and other cultural syndromes that we did not control for (e.g., flexibility-monumentalism [Minkov & Kaasa, 2022])—future studies may need to test such alternative explanations.

Emotions and Subjective Wellbeing. Culture shapes people’s emotional experiences and beliefs about affect (Tsai et al., 2006; 2007). People in WEIRD cultures tend to ‘savor’ positive emotions and ‘avoid’ negative emotions (Miyamoto & Ma, 2011). For Confucians, emotional ideals are a bit more complex. As compared to WEIRD cultures, Confucians report fewer and desire less high arousal emotions (e.g., excitement); the reverse is true for low-arousal emotions (e.g., contentment). Confucians value a sense of appropriate balance and moderation between pleasures and pains, rather than valuing or expecting a life of maximum pleasure or happiness (Tsai & Park, 2014). Such contrasting emotional “lifestyles” are likely to influence the ideals of subjective wellbeing.

Conceptual Clarifications and Discussion Points

Is Happiness the Ultimate Subjective Wellbeing Outcome? We propose that the position that phenomena such as harmony, spirituality, and meaning—components of subjective wellbeing in the broad model—do not ‘merely’ serve the final experience of happiness, or at least not universally. Instead, we propose that treating happiness as ultimate outcome may be more true in WEIRD cultures than elsewhere, and in other cultures other components of SWB may serve as “final” (or at least that happiness occupies less prominent position in SWB than in WEIRD cultures). Had mainstream psychology emerged from and predominantly characterized by Buddhist or Confucian ideals (instead of WEIRD), we might imagine “pure harmony” as final experience. Thus, while we do not deny that happiness is for many, maybe even most, people the ultimate goal they strive for, we propose that it is not for all, and that such exceptions are not flukes but rather deserving of careful consideration in theories of subjective wellbeing.

Does Life Satisfaction Capture Other Forms of Subjective Wellbeing Sufficiently Already? One might argue that measuring life satisfaction may already capture the degree to which people have obtained contributors to subjective wellbeing, such as spirituality, harmony, and meaning. However, to the best of our knowledge, there is no strong empirical evidence lending support to the reasoning that individuals base their life satisfaction evaluations on such other wellbeing concepts. Instead, some evidence casts doubts on the reasoning that life satisfaction covers all forms of subjective wellbeing. First, research commonly equates life satisfaction with happiness but not with other subjective wellbeing components (e.g., Diener, Oishi, & Tay, 2018; Schimmack, 2006). Second, country-level analyses (Oishi & Diener, 2014) based on 132 nation aggregates show that average life satisfaction in countries is negatively associated with the average sense of meaning in

countries, which might question the theoretical assumption that life satisfaction can work as a good proxy for other components of subjective wellbeing.

Differentiating Wellbeing Antecedents from Components. A challenging task in subjective wellbeing research, and plausibly psychology in general, is to determine where one phenomenon ends, and where another begins. In case of subjective wellbeing, for example, should positive affect be considered a trigger of it, or is positive affect part of subjective wellbeing? Likewise, are phenomena such as meaning, harmony, and family happiness components of subjective wellbeing or potential causes? If subjective wellbeing is considered to fluctuate over long rather than short periods of time, then its experiential aspects should probably match that, which is likely the case for meaning, spirituality, harmony, and life satisfaction, but possibly less so for positive and negative affect.

Are People Willing to Sacrifice Happiness for Other Pursuits? Both the narrow and broad models of subjective wellbeing discussed in the current paper propose that sacrifices (e.g., forgoing a positive experience) should ultimately promote their subjective wellbeing. The broad model implies that this sacrifice may even happen, at least theoretically, in terms of happiness; after all, happiness is but one of several components of subjective wellbeing. For example, the broad model accounts for situations in which people forgo individual happiness in the pursuit of family harmony, provided that family harmony is more relevant to their subjective wellbeing than their individual happiness. Indeed, research (Uchida & Kitayama, 2009; Lu, 2008; Lu et al., 2006; Marcus & Kitayama, 1991) shows that wellbeing ideals can be pursued regardless of whether they contribute to a ‘feel good’ destination. In addition, Joshanloo and Weijers, (2014) found that for many people across the world, pursuing and expressing happiness is associated with negative properties such as shallowness, selfishness, reduced empathy, and lack of morality.

Don't People Want to Be Happy? They do. Our data show that 97% of people idealize being happy over being unhappy. Note that we do not claim that people do not want to be happier than they are—in our data, over 70% of participants indicate ideal level of happiness as higher than their actual level of happiness. However, people across cultures idealize different levels of happiness, and the highest levels of happiness tend to be idealized in WEIRD cultures. Rather than denying that people wish to be happy, we propose, on the basis of this cultural and society diversity, that it is important to further investigate factors other than happiness that may, for some, weight strongly towards their subjective wellbeing. By bringing the notion of fundamental cultural differences in subjective wellbeing to the fore, we hope to spark much needed open debate and empirical work.

Why the Term Subjective Wellbeing and Not Another Term (Such as "Mental Wellbeing" or "Mental Health")? A perhaps tempting option is to reserve the term 'subjective wellbeing' for the narrow model, and instead use another term for the broad model—such as mental wellbeing or mental health. While we appreciate the benefits that this can have for theory distinction, we propose that it is overall preferable to stick to the term subjective wellbeing for also the broad model, as all components in our proposed broad model are indeed subjective. Furthermore, our paper is targeted to give an impulse to broaden studies on subjective wellbeing from happiness-related model to a model that assumes flexible, interdependent construction of subjective wellbeing. Using a different term than subjective wellbeing would cause the field to continue focus on subjective wellbeing in the three-component model, possibly overlooking the arguments presented in our manuscript as might then appear relevant to different type of wellbeing only.

Reminder About Avoiding the Risk of Ecological Fallacy. It is important to reiterate that majority of the evidence discussed in the current paper—such as the links between country happiness with depression, substance use etc.—rest on data that represents

aggregates. Specifically, rather than each individual being represented by a single data point, individuals are grouped together into country-wide averages. Such aggregate data can obscure, misrepresent, or even contradict relations that would be found among the individuals that comprise them. We report them because they provide rarely discussed insights into our topic of inquiry, and because we find them worth of further exploration. However, to avoid falling prey to the ecological fallacy, we express caution in interpreting group-level associations as representing the relations between these variables at the level of individuals.

Concluding Remarks

Cultural factors play a significant role in shaping what people recognize as the good life. Around the world, people are living their lives in a variety of ways regarded as good from their cultural perspective. Ideals of the good life across cultures reflect this diversity. For some time, psychology has acknowledged that ideals vary across people and societies. We propose and demonstrate that ideal levels of happiness also vary across people and societies, and we hope to reinvigorate the discussion on the variety of types of subjective wellbeing across cultures.

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