

Ed Diener  
*Editor*

SOCIAL INDICATORS RESEARCH SERIES

38

# Culture and Well-Being

*The Collected Works  
of Ed Diener*



Springer

# Culture and Well-Being

# Social Indicators Research Series

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## Volume 38

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Ed Diener  
Editor

# Culture and Well-Being

The Collected Works of Ed Diener



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## Endorsements

Over the past several decades Professor Diener has contributed more than any other psychologist to the rigorous research of subjective well-being. The collection of this work in this series is going to be of invaluable help to anyone interested in the study of happiness, life-satisfaction, and the emerging discipline of positive psychology.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Professor of Psychology and Management, Claremont Graduate University

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Ed Diener, the Jedi Master of the world's happiness researchers, has inspired and informed all of us who have studied and written about happiness. His life's work epitomizes a humanly significant psychological science. How wonderful to have his pioneering writings collected and preserved for future students of human well-being, and for practitioners and social policy makers who are working to promote human flourishing.

David G. Myers, Hope College, and author, *The Pursuit of Happiness*

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Ed Diener's work on life satisfaction – theory and research – has been groundbreaking. Having his collected works available will be a great boon to psychologists and policy-makers alike.

Christopher Peterson, Professor of Psychology, University of Michigan

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By looking at happiness and well-being in many different cultures and societies, from East to West, from New York City to Calcutta slums, and beyond, Ed Diener has forever transformed the field of culture in psychology. Filled with bold theoretical insights and rigorous and, yet, imaginative empirical studies, this volume

will be absolutely indispensable for all social and behavioral scientists interested in transformative power of culture on human psychology.

Shinobu Kitayama, Professor and Director of the Culture and Cognition Program,  
University of Michigan

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Ed Diener is one of the most productive psychologists in the world working in the field of perceived quality of life or, as he prefers, subjective wellbeing. He has served the profession as a researcher, writer, teacher, officer in professional organizations, editor of leading journals, a member of the editorial board of still more journals as well as a member of the board of the Social Indicators Research Book Series. As an admirer of his work and a good friend, I have learned a lot from him, from his students, his relatives and collaborators. The idea of producing a collection of his works came to me as a result of spending a great deal of time trying to keep up with his work. What a wonderful public and professional service it would be, I thought, as well as a time-saver for me, if we could get a substantial number of his works assembled in one collection. In these three volumes we have not only a fine selection of past works but a good number of new ones as well. So, it is with considerable delight that I write these lines to thank Ed and to lend my support to this important publication.

Alex C. Michalos, Ph.D., F.R.S.C., Chancellor, Director, Institute for Social Research and Evaluation; Professor Emeritus, Political Science, University of Northern British Columbia

# Introduction – Culture and Well-Being Works by Ed Diener

Ed Diener

## Cultural Differences

A central issue in the study of well-being is cultural differences. Do cultures have an effect on well-being? Do people in different cultures have different conceptions of well-being that, in turn, influence the feelings they deem most desirable? Are the causes of well-being similar or distinct in different cultures? These questions speak to the fundamental nature of subjective well-being; and, therefore, understanding in this field cannot proceed without first acknowledging the influence of culture.

One would think that the well-being of people around the world would have been assessed by anthropologists, given that they have studied various cultural groups in such depth. However, anthropologists studied values, practices, and beliefs, but rarely intensively studied emotions, and even more rarely mentioned well-being. For one thing, cultural anthropologists might have considered the discussion of the well-being of other groups to be inappropriate because that could mean judging these groups using western values rather than the values unique to each culture. In addition, anthropologists usually believed that it would be impossible to compare groups' well-being because the concept of quality of life would be idiosyncratic to each culture. It was considered taboo to evaluate societies (Shweder, 2000). Robert Edgerton (1992) broke with this tradition when he wrote of assessing the quality of life of cultures by comparing them as to whether they provided good health and met human needs. However, the direct study of well-being among anthropologists has been rare.

Large scale studies of subjective well-being by survey researchers, both psychologists and sociologists, moved into the cross-cultural tradition when they began to collect data across a number of nations. For example, George Gallup (1976) and Hadley Cantril (1965) both collected well-being data from a number of nations and world regions. Easterlin (1974), working from the early world surveys, concluded

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that well-being was not substantially related to the income of nations. The surveys examined the well-being of nations primarily with regard to the impact of factors such as income.

In 1993, Ruut Veenhoven published his comprehensive analysis of the well-being of nations: *Happiness in nations: Subjective appreciation of life in 56 nations 1946–1992*. This work was a major advance for the field in that a larger number of nations were analyzed, and many predictor variables were considered. Veenhoven discussed his results within the framework of “livability,” conditions of quality of life in societies that meet human needs, and, therefore, cause those within these societies to experience higher subjective well-being. The livability concept suggests that there are certain universal human conditions that will lead to well-being and that cultural variability will be a relatively minor factor, except insofar as it relates to creating objectively better living conditions.

In 1995, Diener, Diener, and Diener compared a relatively large number of nations on well-being and used the cultural variable of individualism as one of its predictors. We found that individualism was highly predictive of the mean levels of subjective well-being in nations, although individualism was very highly correlated with national income, and, therefore, the results might have been due to economic development rather than to other aspects of culture. This study was a first attempt at examining culture vis-à-vis well-being beyond the effects of objective characteristics such as national income. In that same year, Diener and Diener asked whether the predictors of well-being within cultures might differ. In this study of 31 nations, we found that the correlates of well-being, not just mean levels, varied across societies. Both of these papers, reprinted in this volume, represent the approach of studying cultural effects by examining many nations and aligning well-being with cultural dimensions. These studies went beyond the examination of the impact of income and other objective conditions to consider whether traditional cultural dimensions might relate to the levels and causes of well-being. Thus, by the mid-1990s, a beginning had been made in better analyzing the well-being of societies and cultures, and this volume represents our advances from 1995 to the present.

When considering well-being across cultures, there are many important questions: (1) Are there mean level differences between different types of well-being across cultures, and, if so, what are the predictors of these differences? (2) Do cultures differ in well-being primarily because of objective conditions such as income, or do they differ because of cultural factors such as norms, values, and the form of social relationships? (3) Are there differences in the structure and composition of well-being across cultures—for example, in which emotions are considered pleasant and desirable? (4) Is subjective well-being valued differently in different cultures? (5) Do different measurement methods provide converging answers about which cultures have high compared with low well-being? (6) Do the correlates and causes of well-being differ within cultures? (7) Do certain personality characteristics correlate with well-being consistently across cultures, and are cultural differences in personality related to mean differences in well-being? (8) Do the outcomes or behaviors following from high well-being differ across cultures? (9) To what extent do

material boundaries capture cultural effects? The articles contained in this volume offer initial answers to most of these questions.

The culture and well-being questions are of fundamental importance to understanding in the entire field and to scientific knowledge in the behavioral sciences as a whole. Unless we understand what is universal and what is specific, we cannot hope to understand the processes governing well-being. Unfortunately, our scientific knowledge in most behavioral science fields, including the study of well-being, has been built on a narrow database drawn from westernized, industrialized nations. This means that we have only a little knowledge of whether our findings are generalizable to all peoples of the globe and to universal human psychological processes. Fortunately, during the last decade my students and I, as well as others working in this area, have rapidly expanded our knowledge of well-being vis-à-vis culture. The first attempt to summarize the findings in this area came in 1999 with *Culture and Subjective Well-Being*, a book edited by Eunkook Suh and Diener. The current volume represents a renewed effort to give a broad overview of major findings in this area and to point to the important directions for future research.

## Composition of This Volume

I am very pleased with the articles presented in this volume because I believe that they represent true advances in our fundamental understanding of subjective well-being. I am very grateful to my respective co-authors because without their efforts and creativity none of these articles would exist. I believe the articles here are important because they begin to show what is universal as opposed to culture-specific about well-being, and, in so doing, they give important clues to the processes that create subjective well-being.

The first chapter reprinted here is a 2007 review paper by myself and William Tov, which reviews many of the important advances in our knowledge of culture vis-à-vis well-being. This paper documents several of the major themes of this volume. Although there are universal causes of well-being across cultures and nations, there are also unique influences as well. Similarly, the experience of well-being has certain pancultural aspects, and yet, there are also specific ways that well-being is experienced in various cultures as well.

The next two papers in the volume, authored together with my wife Carol and daughter Marissa in 1995, included several new findings. The Diener, Diener, and Diener (1995) article focused on predictors of mean levels of well-being across 55 nations. At the time this was considered to be a very large number of nations, and the article reviewed a more diverse set of cultures than had been examined in previous studies. We found that rich, individualistic nations tended to have higher subjective well-being, but also that factors such as human rights were related to the average well-being experienced in nations. However, even with the larger number of countries, it was difficult to separate the effects of the predictors because they were so highly correlated with one another. This article showed clearly that,

contrary to Easterlin's (1974) conjecture, the wealth of nations was associated with the well-being experienced in them, and strongly so.

The Ed Diener and Marissa Diener article represents the initial demonstration that the correlates of subjective well-being (SWB) vary across cultures. Indeed, the degree to which self-esteem was correlated with life satisfaction varied dramatically across cultures and showed a much stronger association in individualistic societies. This finding gave support to two important conclusions. First, it confirmed that the predictors of SWB vary substantially across cultures; and second, it revealed that feeling good about oneself carries more weight in individualistic nations. In this paper, we also found that financial satisfaction showed a stronger association with life satisfaction in poorer nations than in richer nations. Therefore, the findings clearly indicated that cultures vary in terms of what is most relevant to life satisfaction. Moreover, the study was an advance in that it had a larger number of societies, 31, than most previous cross-cultural studies, and a more diverse set of nations. Many of the previous cross-cultural studies of well-being had relied on comparisons between only two nations, or had analyzed several nations that were very similar to one another.

In the article that I authored with Shigehiro Oishi in 2001, we discovered that achieving goals can vary in relation to well-being across cultures depending on the degree to which the goals are valued in the cultures. We found that the attainment of certain goals is more related to well-being in collectivist cultures, and that the attainment of other types of goals is more relevant to well-being in individualistic cultures. When participants pursued goals for fun and enjoyment, this increased satisfaction more among individualists than among collectivists, whereas pursuing goals to please others increased SWB more among collectivists.

The Oishi, Diener, Lucas, and Suh (1999) article drives home the point that there are different predictors of well-being in different cultures and situations, and it replicated several of the findings of Diener and Diener (1995). For example, financial satisfaction was a better predictor of life satisfaction among the poor, whereas, among the wealthy, home life was a better predictor of life satisfaction. In the second study, we found, also supporting the conclusions of Diener and Diener, that self-esteem and freedom were better predictors of life satisfaction in individualistic nations than in collectivist ones.

Eunkook Suh, Diener, and John Updegraff (2008) go even farther in suggesting that the correlates of well-being differ across cultures, showing in both correlational and experimental studies that collectivists use their emotions less as information that is relevant in reporting their life satisfaction. In other words, not only do the predictors of well-being vary across cultures, but the associations among various forms of subjective well-being also vary. In this paper, we were able to establish causal direction because we used an experimental priming methodology in addition to simple correlations. We found that collectivists relied more on social appraisals of their lives in computing life satisfaction than do individualists. Thus, some factors that might be considered as universals in causing well-being—the appraisal of others and our own emotional feelings—vary in their strength of association with life satisfaction across cultures.

The next paper, with Shigehiro Oishi as lead author (2007), furthered our understanding of cultural differences in the causes of well-being to an even greater degree. In this paper, Oishi, myself, and our colleagues found that the degree to which positive events stimulated positive feelings varied across cultures. Paradoxically, positive events stimulate less within-person change among persons and in cultures characterized by high life satisfaction. It appeared that people low in satisfaction experienced fewer good events, and consequentially, these events had more impact when they did occur. Although European-Americans had more good events and higher life satisfaction, over time they reacted less strongly to each good event. This finding suggests that a series of good events would raise one's long-term moods so that simple good events produce less change.

Taken together, our studies demonstrate that the causes of well-being differ in predictable ways across cultures. The values of people in a particular culture, as well as the nature of their everyday experience, influence the factors that most strongly affect their well-being. This does not mean, of course, that there are no universals, but it certainly places boundaries on the idea that the causes of well-being are completely pancultural.

The article by Michael Eid and Diener (2001) revealed that whether various emotions are seen as desirable varies to some degree across cultures. There are universals in that some emotions are generally seen as desirable and others as undesirable. But certain self-conscious emotions such as guilt and pride vary in how they are valued and how much they are experienced. Norms for positive emotions such as pride and contentment were more associated with reports of experiencing them than were the norms for negative emotions. This suggests that emotion norms do not merely reflect the types of affect experienced in a culture because the relation is asymmetrical for positive and negative emotions. Instead, it may be that situational and personality factors more strongly influence the experience of negative emotions, whereas positive emotions are more under people's control and are more highly subject to the effects of socialization. An unexpected finding from the Eid and Diener study is that there is more variability within collectivist nations than individualistic societies in terms of the norms governing emotions.

The next two papers in the volume concern conceptual issues related to the assessment of emotions. We were concerned with the issue of the psychological processes influencing various types of measures of well-being. In the Scollon, Diener, Oishi, and Biswas-Diener (2004) paper, we examined several different types of measures, assessing a variety of emotions across five cultural groups. Indigenous emotions that were particular to specific cultures clustered with other similar positive or negative emotions rather than being in a space by themselves, suggesting that they might differ from other emotions but are not so different that they fall outside the common space of emotions across cultures.

The relative position of cultural groups was consistent across the various types of measures of well-being, with Hispanics always ranking at the top. However, cultures differed most on certain emotions such as pride. Furthermore, cultures varied substantially with regard to the positioning of some emotions; pride clustered more closely with the positive emotions in some cultures and with the negative emotions



in other cultures, for example. Love was closer or farther from sadness depending on the culture. Thus, although there is a core of pleasant versus unpleasant feelings across cultures, the way certain emotions are experienced can differ.

An interesting finding in the Scollon et al. study was that the memory for one's emotions was biased by one's global self-perceptions differentially across cultures. In some cultures, a person's general emotional self-perception colored the memory they had of the week's emotions and added substantially to the memory prediction from actual on-line emotion reports, whereas in other cultures, the memories were more accurate.

In the article I published in 2000 with Scollon, Oishi, Dzokoto, and Suh, we studied the propensity toward positivity in responding in 41 societies. We proposed that people might across cultures differ in their propensity to be generally positive about the world. Naturally, people in all cultures would be unlikely to be positive about something that is clearly negative, such as pain. However, when conditions are ambiguous, or so complex that they defy ready categorization, people might differ in their judgments of positivity simply because the judgment is less about the world and more about their own personality, feelings, and cultural attitudes toward the world.

We assessed positivity by comparing people's ratings of global topics, such as education, with more concrete and specific topics, such as professors or textbooks, the idea being that people would be grounded in the concrete judgments but could express their predispositions more readily when broad categories were judged. We found that our measure of positivity, the difference in people's ratings of broad areas of their lives versus the specific components of those areas, predicted life satisfaction and was related to norms for positive emotions. Although preliminary, these findings suggest that while some part of life satisfaction depends on circumstances, part also depends on people's propensities to judge things in a positive light if they have some freedom to do so. The findings also suggest that the magnitude of cultural differences in well-being will to some extent depend on the concreteness and specificity of the measure.

These studies have implications both for the theoretical understanding of emotional well-being across cultures and for the cross-cultural measurement of well-being. We now know, for instance, that cultural groups might differ more on memories of emotions than they do on actual emotional experience, and we know that people's positive predispositions can color reports of well-being even beyond influencing how they react to the concrete elements of their circumstances. Although these differences across cultures might be labeled as "biases," they are also substantive in that they reflect people's actual reactions and might influence future behavior. Obviously much more work in this area is needed, and I will describe some essential future directions in the concluding chapter of this volume.

Importantly, not all emotions that are considered positive in western cultures are necessarily evaluated or experienced as positive in all cultures—pride, for instance. Thus, we must be careful in assessing people's emotional well-being across cultures to make sure that we are aggregating emotions that are actually of the same valence.

The final two articles reprinted in this volume describe the well-being of “exotic,” or smaller groups, rather than large societies. My son, Robert Biswas-Diener, published with Joar Vittersø and Diener (2005) an article that describes self-reports of well-being among three groups: the Amish in the USA, the Inughuit (and Inuit people in Northern Greenland), and the Maasai (a herding people living in the Serengeti of Africa). Although all three groups were “happy” in that they were generally above neutral, the Maasai showed the highest life satisfaction of the three groups. Their scores suggest that material luxuries are not necessary for high well-being in all cultures because the Maasai lead a very simple life that in western cultures would be considered to be desperately impoverished.

There were also differences in the specific patterns of well-being, for example with the Maasai reporting very high levels of pride, the Amish being unsatisfied with self-related domains, and both the Amish and Inughuit being relatively dissatisfied with the material domains of their lives. Thus, cultures do not simply differ in a general way on “happiness”; asking which cultures are happiest is bound to oversimplify matters to some extent. Cultures will differ in some forms of well-being and not in others; it is important, therefore, to assess a variety of types of SWB to fully capture the well-being of a society.

Robert Biswas-Diener and Diener (2001) examined another “exotic” group in our study in the slums of Calcutta. We studied those living in a shanty-town, pavement dwellers (homeless), and sex workers. The life satisfaction scores were slightly below neutral in the groups we studied, but not as low as one might expect given the difficult conditions. Surprisingly, people were positive about many domains of their lives, including the social domain. An interesting feature of this study is that we used an unusual measure of SWB beyond the typical self-report scales, and that was to ask people to list positive and negative events from their lives during the past day and past year. We used the difference in number of good versus bad events recalled as an assessment of well-being. In this case, the slum dwellers were able to list slightly more positive than negative events, supporting the conclusion that they find rewards in life despite their dire circumstances.

The papers collected in this volume do not represent the entirety of my works in the area of culture and well-being. For example, in 2000 Eunkook Suh and Diener edited a book entitled *Culture and Subjective Well-Being*, and we have published many more articles in this area, as have others. Hopefully the articles reprinted in this book, however, will give readers a good overview of the questions being asked and some of the answers that have been found.

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# Culture and Subjective Well-Being

William Tov and Ed Diener

**Abstract** Subjective well-being (SWB) is composed of people's evaluations of their lives, including pleasant affect, infrequent unpleasant affect, life satisfaction (LS). We review the research literature concerning the influence of culture on SWB. We argue that some types of well-being, as well as their causes, are consistent across cultures, whereas there are also unique patterns of well-being in societies that are not comparable across cultures. Thus, well-being can be understood to some degree in universal terms, but must also be understood within the framework of each culture. We review the methodological challenges to assessing SWB in different cultures. One important question for future research is the degree to which feelings of well-being lead to the same outcomes in different cultures. The overarching theme of the paper is that there are pancultural experiences of SWB that can be compared across cultures, but that there are also culture-specific patterns that make cultures unique in their experience of well-being.

## Introduction

With great perseverance  
He meditates, seeking  
Freedom and happiness.  
—from THE BUDDHA, Chapter 2, *The Dhammapada*

Over two thousand years ago, the Buddha perceived suffering to be the nature of existence. But for him, the attainment of nirvana was not simply a break from this cycle of suffering, it was also a return to true bliss. Although it was not the direct purpose of meditation, happiness was certainly an important consequence, and a critical topic in Buddhist philosophy (Gaskins, 1999). Across time and cultures, generations of people have in their own way reflected upon the question of happiness. As long as it has been pondered, it may come as a surprise that the scientific

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