Aversion to Happiness Across Cultures: A Review of Where and Why People are Averse to Happiness

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Abstract A common view in contemporary Western culture is that personal happiness is one of the most important values in life. For example, in American culture it is believed that failing to appear happy is cause for concern. These cultural notions are also echoed in contemporary Western psychology (including positive psychology and much of the research on subjective well-being). However, some important (often culturally-based) facts about happiness have tended to be overlooked in the psychological research on the topic. One of these cultural phenomena is that, for some individuals, happiness is not a supreme value. In fact, some individuals across cultures are averse to various kinds of happiness for several different reasons. This article presents the first review of the concept of aversion to happiness. Implications of the outcomes are discussed, as are directions for further research.

Keywords Aversion to happiness · Culture · Subjective well-being · Happiness · Western psychology · Positive psychology · Fear of happiness

1 Introduction

In contemporary psychological literature, scientific analysis of individuals' well-being is focussed on subjective well-being, and is mainly undertaken in the well-established field of happiness studies. Subjective well-being is believed to consist of life satisfaction, the presence of positive affect, and the absence of negative affect (Diener et al. 1999). Ever since the Enlightenment, Westerners have responded to the ideas of liberal modernity,

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hedonism, and romantic individualism (Christopher and Hickinbottom 2008) by believing in the sovereignty of individuals over their personal happiness (Haybron 2008), and the importance of positive mood and affect balance as ingredients of a good life (Christopher 1999; Tatarkiewicz 1976). Indeed, Western culture and psychology seem to take for granted that happiness is one of the most important values guiding individuals' lives, if not *the* most important. Western culture and psychology also seem to take for granted that happiness is best understood as a personal concept, such that an individual's happiness is not directly constituted (but may be affected) by the success, health, or psychological well-being of others. In this paper, any unqualified use of the term 'happiness' refers to the Western concept of personal happiness that is characterised by satisfaction with life and a preponderance of positive over negative emotions.

Contrary to this Western view, our survey of some less-studied aspects of various cultures reveals that many individuals possess negative views about happiness, and are sometimes averse to it. In this paper the aversion to happiness, and particularly different reasons why different cultures are averse to happiness, are analysed through a brief review of relevant theoretical and empirical literature on happiness from a variety of cultures and academic disciplines. We find that there are many claimed justifications for being averse to happiness, and that at least some people from all cultures are likely to be averse to some kind of happiness for these reasons. We conclude that this important aspect of human culture should be given consideration in future studies on happiness, and that such consideration is likely to produce more informed results, especially in cross-cultural studies.

We begin with a brief analysis of the sometimes-hidden assumption in Western culture, and the majority of Western research on subjective well-being, that all kinds of happiness are always worthy of active pursuit (Sect. 2). Then we provide a philosophical analysis of the concept 'aversion to happiness' (Sect. 3). Following this we report on a range of theoretical and empirical research from several cultures to provide evidence that many individuals and cultures tend to not value certain kinds of happiness highly, and may even be averse to happiness for a variety of different reasons (Sect. 4). We then report on a wider range of research (from psychology, philosophy, cultural studies, and religious studies) to provide evidence for a range of different reasons why people claim to be averse to happiness, including that: being happy causes bad things to happen to you, being happy makes you a worse person, expressing happiness is bad for you and others, and pursuing happiness is bad for you and others (Sect. 5). Finally, we summarise our findings and discuss the implications, especially for interpreting cross-cultural differences in levels of subjective well-being and designing future studies of subjective well-being across cultures (Sect. 6).

2 The Hegemony of the Quest for Personal Happiness in Western Culture

Much of the Western research on happiness shares the assumptions that happiness is something that we should want for ourselves and something that we are at least partially responsible for attaining for ourselves (Joshanloo 2013a). In the United States, for example, it is commonly assumed that failing to appear happy is cause for concern (Eid and Diener 2001; Held 2002; Lyubomirsky 2000; Menon 2012). Indeed, "failure to achieve happiness … can be seen as one of the greatest failures a person can experience" (Morris 2012, p. 436), and one that he only has himself to blame for (Bruckner 2012, p. 61). Western psychologists (and some economists) often write as though happiness is universally considered to be one of the highest human goods, if not *the* highest. For

example, Braun (2000) writes "every human being, no matter what culture, age, educational attainment, or degree of physical and mental development, wants to be happy. It is the common end to which all humans strive…" (p. x, see also, e.g., Frey 2002, p. vii; Myers 1993; Seligman 1998). Indeed, it is not uncommon to read that, in this era of subjective well-being worship, people should strive for happiness in any way possible (Gruber et al. 2011), that psychologists should provide "scientific" short-cuts for them, and that policymakers should tailor policies with an eye to maximising happiness (Zevnik 2010). Empirical data from research on Western cultures support these notions. For example, North Americans report valuing happiness highly (Triandis et al. 1990) and thinking about it at least once a day (Freedman 1978). With respect to the burning desire for personal happiness in Western culture and psychology, Richardson (2012, p. 26) comments that, for Western psychologists, ideals like happiness and well-being function like "god terms" that seem to be beyond doubt or question.

Given such a state of affairs, it is not surprising that there has been a large upsurge in psychological research on subjective well-being over the last three decades. Interest in the study of subjective well-being has leaked into other branches of social science as well. Indeed, De Vos (2012) argues that happiness has turned into the hottest topic of contemporary social science. And, while it still doesn't attract as much scholarly attention as some more established areas of social science, social scientific research on happiness is certainly more likely to be picked up by mainstream media than social scientific research on most other topics. Especially since the rise of the "economics of happiness" (Frey 2008), psychologists and economists have increasingly called for more attention to subjective well-being as an important basis for guiding policy-making (Diener et al. 2009; Lucas and Diener 2008). And policymakers have listened to these calls, as shown by the recent release of the United Nations-backed World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al. 2012).

How about other cultures? Does happiness work as the supreme value or, at least, a key pillar of a good life across all cultures? Acknowledging that there are cultural differences in this regard, Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) maintain that for North Americans the high value of happiness and the importance of its pursuit are intrinsically salient, while for other parts of the world, it is not as important. However, Lyubomirsky and colleagues also claim that the value of happiness and the importance of its pursuit are becoming increasingly salient around the world. That is, with globalization and democratization, people around the world are becoming increasingly obsessed with their personal happiness—their subjective well-being. While there seems to be an element of truth in this claim, other values are still more salient than this kind of happiness for many non-Western cultures. Many researchers argue that personal happiness is more strongly emphasized in individualistic cultures than in collectivistic cultures, and that the idea of 'happiness as one of the highest goals, if not *the* highest' is far from universal (e.g., Ahuvia 2001; D'Andrade 1984; Lutz 1987; Mesquita and Albert 2007; Snyder and Lopez 2007; Wierzbicka 1994). For example, Suh (2000) argues that while Westerners feel a strong pressure to be happy (i.e., to attain and express personal happiness), East Asians tend to feel a certain pressure to belong (i.e., to bring about and experience social harmony), and thus their life is more firmly guided by the need to have good interpersonal relationships, than to be happy. When the supreme goal of a culture is social harmony, personal happiness can even be perceived as detrimental to social relationships (Uchida et al. 2004). However, as we argue below, the value of social harmony is not the only reason people in non-Western cultures are wary of the Western tendency to focus on personal happiness.

3 Aversion to Happiness: The Concept

The concept 'aversion to happiness' discussed in this paper constitutes a heterogeneous set of con-attitudes about different types of happiness that are based on a diverse group of relatively stable beliefs that certain personal relations with different types of happiness should be avoided for one or more reasons. Divisions within the set of beliefs underpinning aversion to happiness include: the different reasons for believing that people should be averse to happiness, the different extents to which people should be averse to happiness (e.g., happiness is something to be slightly cautious of, to be very cautious of, or to be extremely worried about), the different degrees of happiness that people should be averse to (e.g., some people are only cautious of extreme happiness), the different kinds of happiness that people are averse to (e.g., happiness as pleasure and not pain, happiness as satisfaction with life, happiness as worldly success, or all kinds of personal happiness), and the different relations that an individual can have to happiness (e.g., being happy, expressing happiness, or actively pursuing happiness). So, the concept of aversion to happiness captures both aversion to multiple different but related targets and different reasons for being averse to those targets.

People from different cultures tend to have different reasons for believing that different relations to different degrees and kinds of happiness should be disliked or avoided to different extents. However, some reasons for believing that certain relations to happiness should be disliked or avoided appear to be more universal, affecting most cultures to some degree. For example, non-negligible proportions of people from all cultures might believe that the pursuit of extreme happiness is something to be avoided because it is likely to lead to unhappiness, whereas only a minority of people in a few cultures might think that being happy causes someone to be a bad person. Certainly the concept 'aversion to happiness', as discussed here, is a broad one, but the discussion below is intended to shed light on the different aspects of aversion to happiness with the aim of encouraging further study on both the concept as a whole and its major subdomains. Furthermore, despite these many divisions within the concept, aversion to happiness might also be useful to consider as a general attitude underpinned by an overarching belief about the extent to which it is rational to pursue or avoid happiness for oneself or ones' society, with different reasons to avoid different personal relations to happiness cumulatively contributing to the strength of this belief. Whether aversion to happiness as a general concept is useful in this way will depend on whether the people who are averse to happiness for one reason are also likely to be averse to it for other reasons. This is an open empirical question, but the concentration of anecdotal and empirical evidence from certain cultures discussed in the next two sections indicates that the different reasons to be averse to happiness are likely to cluster together in some cultures.

Given space constraints, this paper focuses on providing cultural and empirical evidence for beliefs that various reasons justify aversion to the kind of happiness that dominates Western culture and Western happiness studies, a personal happiness characterised by satisfaction with life and a preponderance of positive over negative emotions. It is to this task that we now turn.

4 Evidence for Aversion to Happiness Across Cultures

In this section we provide evidence that: happiness is not valued by some people and some cultures as much as others, happiness is avoided and diminished by some people and some cultures, and that people are averse to certain kinds of happiness in some cultures.

4.1 Evidence that Happiness is not Always Valued Highly

Much existing evidence suggests that happiness is less valued in Eastern cultures than Western ones, a difference that is often explained with reference to opposing cultural views about the value of certain emotions, including happiness (Eid and Diener 2001; Kitayama et al. 1997; Kitayama et al. 2006; Mesquita and Albert 2007). For example, previous research on display rules—the sociocultural rules governing which emotions are appropriate to display in public—has shown that East Asians are more inclined than Westerners to think that it is not appropriate to express happiness in many social situations (e.g., Safdar et al. 2009). Furthermore, in a study of Taiwanese and American students' opinions about what happiness is, many of the American participants considered happiness to be the highest value and the supreme goal in their lives, while the Taiwanese participants made no such statements (Lu 2001; Lu and Gilmour 2004). In a different empirical study, Lu and Gilmour (2006) also found that personal accountability—a belief that happiness is everybody's natural and inalienable right and each person is responsible for their own happiness—and explicit pursuit—a belief that, prudentially speaking, one should explicitly and actively pursue their own happiness—were more strongly endorsed by American than Chinese participants, while dialectical balance between happiness and unhappiness was more strongly endorsed by the Chinese participants.

Although these findings do not directly support an aversion to happiness, they do imply the existence of less positive views on happiness in non-Western cultures. It can be suggested that because values extolled in non-Western cultures (e.g., harmony and conformity) may be often times at odds with the pursuit of personal happiness, the endorsement of such individualistic values in non-Western cultures may be associated with negative consequences for an individual. Extensive evidence from various lines of research indicates that incongruence between a person's values and those emphasized within their environment is detrimental to that person's well-being (e.g., Joshanloo and Ghaedi 2009; Lu 2006; Sagiv et al. 2004; Triandis 2000). It is possible, therefore, that being raised in a culture that does not value happiness could encourage the development of negative attitudes towards happiness.

4.2 Evidence of Aversion to Happiness

Culture influences individuals' attitudes towards positive experiences, including whether they seek to avoid or diminish them (Bryant and Veroff 2007). Miyamoto and Ma (2011) showed that cultural scripts play an active role in shaping emotion regulation and emotional experiences. Their experiments with East Asians and Americans revealed that Americans were more inclined than Japanese to savour positive emotions. Lindberg (2004; as cited in Bryant and Veroff 2007) found that East Asians reported a lower capacity to take pleasure in positive experiences and amplify their joy; indeed, they were more inclined to dampen or curtail enjoyment than Americans. Other studies have shown that individuals from many cultures, including Western ones, are inclined to dampen their positive moods and affects, such as by focussing on negative elements of otherwise positive situations (e.g., Bryant and Veroff 2007; Quoidbach et al. 2010; Wood et al. 2003). That some individuals and cultures tend to avoid and diminish happiness is consistent with having an aversion to happiness, since people who are averse to happiness would likely avoid circumstances that tend to elicit happiness and try to suppress any happiness that happened to well up within them.

Direct evidence for aversion to happiness in non-Western societies can be found in studies on a psychological construct, 'fear of happiness' (Joshanloo et al. 2013; Joshanloo 2013b). The construct is measured by a scale comprised of five items that assess agreement with statements about whether happiness and extreme happiness lead to negative consequences (e.g., "I prefer not to be too joyful, because usually joy is followed by sadness"). In these studies, Joshanloo and colleagues found that the fear of happiness scale has good statistical properties at both individual and cultural levels in 13 mainly non-Western nations from various world regions, and that these beliefs exist to varying levels in all of the nations studied (Joshanloo et al. 2013).

Although we expect aversion to happiness to be much more prevalent in non-Western cultures, direct evidence for aversion to, and even fear of, happiness in Western societies can also be found in discussions of how to treat the fear of happiness in both personal (Ben-Shahar 2002) and clinical settings (Berg et al. 1998; Edmonds 1946; Melka et al. 2011). Indeed, aversion to, or the fear of, happiness is apparently well known in clinical settings; for example, Holden (2009) claims that: "Everyone I have ever worked with… knows something about the fear of happiness" and "absolutely everyone experience[s] a fear of happiness" (p. 106).

Aversion to happiness has also been quantified in a Western culture. Gilbert et al. (2012) created a 9-item fear of happiness scale based on comments made to Gilbert during therapy sessions, and tested it in 185 University of Derby students. The scale intended to "explore people's perceptions and anxieties around feeling happy", and included items expressly designed to capture feelings of aversion to, and fear of, happiness, such as "I am frightened to let myself become too happy" (Gilbert et al. 2012, pp. 381–382). Even in their thoroughly Western sample, Gilbert et al. (2012) found a mean of 11.63 on a scale of 0–36 ($SD = 8.31$) for their fear of happiness scale. Furthermore, Gilbert and colleagues also found that fear of happiness correlated significantly with many variables of interest to clinical psychologists, including: depression ($r = .7$), hatred of self ($r = .62$), and feelings of safety ($r = -.46$). Therefore, clinical psychology has provided empirical evidence for the existence of aversion to happiness and shown its potential relevance to clinical practice. Gilbert et al. (2012) conclude that further investigation into different reasons for why people are averse to happiness is likely to have important implications for clinical psychology. Joshanloo and colleagues (2013) also found evidence for fear of happiness in a sample from New Zealand, which has been shown to be similar to most other Western nations in terms of its scores on socioeconomic indicators and cultural beliefs (e.g., Bond et al. 2004; Inglehart and Baker 2000).

So, aversion to happiness is empirically tractable and exists in both Western and non-Western cultures. But why are people averse to happiness?

5 Reasons for Aversion to Happiness Across Cultures

In this section we provide cultural and empirical evidence of people being averse to happiness, or believing that people should be averse to happiness, for the following reasons: being happy makes it more likely that bad things will happen to you, being happy makes you a worse person, expressing happiness is bad for you and others, and pursuing happiness is bad for you and others.

5.1 Being Happy Makes it More Likely that Bad Things Will Happen to You

Our research has shown us that many people are averse to happiness because bad things, such as unhappiness, suffering, and death, tend to happen to happy people. Since these negative conditions are often seen as being more negative than being happy is positive (Baumeister et al. 2001), belief that happiness causes, or tends to be followed by, these negative conditions is enough to make people averse to happiness (preferring a roughly neutral state). Furthermore, since different emotional states, such as happiness and unhappiness are valued differently by different cultures (e.g., Diener et al. 2003, p. 412), we should expect to find cultural differences in the extent to which people are averse to happiness because of the negative conditions it can cause.

East Asian cultures are somewhat under the influence of Taoism (Ho 1995). In Taoism, it is posited that things tend to revert to their opposite (Chen 2006; Peng et al. 2006). Happiness (best understood in this context as success or experiencing fortune and pleasantness) tends to be accompanied by and then outweighed by unhappiness and vice versa. For example, in the Tao-Te-Ching we read: "Misery!—happiness is to be found by its side! Happiness!—misery lurks beneath it! Who knows what either will come to in the end?" (Lao Tse 2008, p. 106). Furthermore, Ji et al. (2001) showed that Chinese were more likely than Americans to predict a reversal in their happiness status when shown graphs showing various trends over the life course, with the Chinese participants much more likely to choose graphs in which the happiness trend reverted or oscillated.

One half of this dialectical view of happiness—that happiness tends to cause, or be followed by, sadness—seems to be a very widespread belief. For example, in Korea, there is a lay cultural belief that if an individual is happy now, he or she is likely to be less happy in the future (Koo and Suh 2007). Furthermore, in a qualitative study, Uchida and Kitayama (2009) found that Japanese participants believed that happiness could lead to negative consequences because happiness made them inattentive to their surroundings. Sayings expressing the same sentiment (e.g., "crying will come after laughing", "we laughed a lot, then we will come to its harms", and "laughing loudly wakes up sadness") are also often heard in Iran.

The belief that happiness causes, or is likely to be followed by, unhappiness is also present, albeit to a lesser degree, in Western cultures (Ho 2000). Noting Western adages and proverbs, such as the following ones: "happiness and a glass vessel are most easily shattered", "after joy, sorrow", "sorrow never comes too late and happiness too swiftly flies" (Tatarkiewicz 1976, p. 249), Tatarkiewicz concludes that some people naturally expect happiness to be followed by unhappiness. Taking this idea further, Holden (2009) claims that fearing happiness because it is likely to lead to unhappiness is also the meaning behind the popular Western sayings: "after happiness, there comes a fall" and "what goes up must come down" (p. 111). Furthermore, Gilbert et al. (2012) argue that happiness can be "frightening" if you believe that "when I feel happy I am always waiting for something bad to happen" (p. 375). Ben-Shahar (2002, p. 79) and Holden (2009) agree, arguing that people might be averse to happiness because they fear the devastating loss of newly-attained happiness more than they value the actual attainment of it. Indeed, Epicurus (c. 341–271 B.C.E) warned that intense pleasures, which many Westerners now associate with happiness, are to be avoided because they are likely to result in painful unsatisfiable desires for more and better of the same (Weijers 2011).

While some might be averse to all degrees of happiness, others are only averse to extreme happiness. Extreme or intense happiness has most or all of the consequences that lower intensities of happiness have and some that they do not. Similarly to above, in

Japanese culture, extreme happiness (or good fortune) is thought to lead to suffering (Minami 1971), echoed by the Chinese proverb: "extreme happiness begets tragedy" (Bryant and Veroff 2007, p. 39). Pflug's (2009) qualitative study revealed the same idea in a Western culture, finding that some German students mentioned that intense happiness leads to unhappiness in their responses to open-ended questions about happiness. Western philosopher, Joel Kupperman (2006), argues that extreme happiness might lead to negative consequences because it causes carelessness, which can result in catastrophic misfortune, including death.

A separate empirical line of research on the concept 'fear of emotion' has reached a similar conclusion; some individuals are afraid of certain affects, including positive affects, particularly when they are strong. Such individuals fear strong affective states because they are concerned that they will lose control over their emotions or their behavioural reactions to emotions (e.g., Berg et al. 1998; Melka et al. 2011). Along similar lines, Holden (2009) has argued that people fear achieving extremely high levels of happiness because they worry that they will lose control of their lives in a narrative sense; that is, they will lose sense of who they are, and consequently feel alien in their own minds.

But happiness having negative consequences *in life* is not the only reason to be averse to it. In traditional Christianity, if happiness (perhaps best understood as a combination of worldly success, a positive state of mind, and occasional merriment in this context) is not accompanied by salvation and grace, it might draw a true Christian away from God, something which could be greatly feared. Indeed, the danger of happiness, for medieval Christians, lurked more in the possibility that it would lead to eternal damnation than in any suffering it might lead to in life (Tatarkiewicz 1976). This perceived danger of happiness resulted in cultural forces that created an aversion to happiness by inculcating most Western children with the idea "that to be happy is to be doing wrong" up till the second half of the nineteenth century (George M. Beard; c.f. Sicherman 1976, p. 904). More recently, Arieti and Bemporad (1980, c.f. Gilbert et al. 2012, p. 377) noted that some depressed patients are "fearful of feeling happy" because they have a "taboo on pleasure", probably because of an upbringing in a hard line puritanical Christian family. Although these ideas no longer seem to be widespread in the contemporary era, it is not unreasonable to assume that they linger among some Christians to some extent (possibly in modified forms).

In sum, there is evidence from a variety of cultures that people are averse to happiness because they believe that happiness and especially extreme happiness lead to unhappiness and other negative consequences that outweigh the benefits of being happy.

5.2 Being Happy Makes You a Worse Person

People aren't just averse to happiness because it might lead to something bad, however; some individuals and some cultures tend to believe that happiness is worthy of aversion because being happy can make someone a worse person (both morally and otherwise). Again, we found evidence for this belief in both non-Western and Western cultures. First we discuss beliefs that happiness is worthy of aversion because it can make someone a morally worse person, and then we discuss beliefs that happiness is worthy of aversion because it can make someone less creative.

Generally speaking, Islam is critical of people that are perceived to be very happy (best understood as experiencing regular and intense positive emotions and few, if any, negative emotions in this context). Prophet Muhammad is cited as saying that "were you to know what I know, you would laugh little and weep much" and "avoid much laughter, for much

laughter deadens the heart" (Chittick 2005, p. 133, see also Quran, 5:87). Good and Good (1988) note that ever since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, under the influence of the Shiite ideology, happiness has been associated with shallowness, foolishness, and vulgarity. Happy people are also seen as being distracted from God, making them morally and spiritually deficient (in Islamic cultures, true happiness is considered to be an inner peace derived from devotion to God; Joshanloo 2013c). In contrast, sad people are often defined as serious and deep. Since Islam is relatively widespread, aversion to happiness for the reason that it can make you a bad person is likely to be equivalently widespread. Similarly, but on a smaller scale, Holden (2009, p. 110) observes that some Westerners are averse to happiness because they consider happy people to be superficial "intellectual lightweights" as opposed to "serious-minded" people who "lament the hopeless suffering of the world". Naturally, happiness doesn't necessarily cause ignorance about the hopeless suffering of the world (it is more likely the other way around), but some people nevertheless worry that happiness might preoccupy their minds, leaving them little time for deep reflection on important (e.g., political or religious) issues.

Ahmed (2007, p. 135) has pointed out that, at different times in the West, members of marginalised groups (e.g., women, immigrants, and homosexuals) have had an important reason to kill joy, avoid happiness, and cling to unhappiness: because to be happy in proximity to the injustice they suffer could make them weak in the face of oppression. So, perhaps even in the West, certain members of cultural subgroups have been averse to happiness because being happy might make them less motivated to fight for justice, thereby making them morally worse people. Furthermore, Ben-Shahar (2002, p. 79) and others (e.g., Holden 2009, p. 107) argue that people might fear happiness because they would feel unworthy and guilty if they were to attain it; they would feel like bad people for being happy when they know that more deserving people are suffering.

Similarly, there exists a cultural myth that portrays unhappy people as more creative than sad people (Fredrickson et al. 2000), leading some aspiring artists to fear happiness as they would fear writers block. For example, when Edvard Munch, the depressive author of the famous painting *The Scream*, was asked why he did not do something about his emotional ailments, he retorted: "They are part of me and my art. They are indistinguishable from me, and it would destroy my art. I want to keep those sufferings." (c.f. Layard 2005, p. 220). Holden (2009, p. 110) reports that this fear—the worry that being happy will lead to a loss of creative and artistic faculty—is widespread among actors and artists. Indeed, Glück (1996, pp. 579–580), herself an artist, has reported that the thought of being happy was terrifying to her because it represented itself as a "vision of desolate normalcy" and threatened to eradicate her desire and capacity to produce good art. Perhaps the fears of these artistic types can be explained by the idea that being happy is bad for you because being happy is boring and being boring is the characteristic most reviled by artists. In this vein, Wilson (2008, p. 7) argues that happiness makes people bland because interesting lives include agony and dejection, not just a preponderance of positive emotions.

In sum, some people and some cultures tend to be averse to happiness not just for what it leads to, but also for what it means about the person who is happy. In both Western and non-Western cultures, evidence points an aversion to happiness based on the belief that being happy makes you a worse person (morally or otherwise).

5.3 Expressing Happiness is Bad for You and Others

In addition to being averse to *being* happy, individuals in many cultures have issued warnings about *expressing* happiness (often understood as success in the following

examples) because of the negative consequences for the expresser and those around her. Expressing happiness usually comes in the form of explicit verbal statements, such as "I am so happy today!", excited and extroverted behaviour, and copious smiling and laughing. Happiness, understood as satisfaction, can also be expressed, albeit it in less physically obvious ways, such as demonstrating unflappable smugness when questioned about one's life. Even though not expressing happiness is sometimes seen as a reason for concern in Western cultures, we found evidence for the belief that expressing happiness should be avoided in many non-Western and Western cultures.

According to Uchida and Kitayama (2009), in Eastern cultures, expressing happiness or outwardly displaying success can arouse envy, such that the positive feelings associated with happiness might be offset by the negative feelings of guilt and disharmony. Indeed, Miyamoto et al. (2010) experimental study revealed that East Asians' concern about the interpersonal consequences of their actions, such as causing unhappiness in others by expressing happiness, makes what would probably be positive experiences for Westerners become bittersweet. Furthermore, in another study in which researchers asked participants to report different aspects, features, or effects of happiness, the Japanese participants frequently mentioned negative social consequences of expressing happiness, such as arousing other's envy, while American participants did so rarely (Uchida and Kitayama 2009). These findings help to explain why the simultaneous experience of negative and positive emotions in pleasant settings is more prevalent in East Asian cultures than Western cultures (e.g., Goetz et al. 2008; Leu et al. 2010; Miyamoto et al. 2010).

Similarly, Lyubomirsky (2000) observes that the expressions of happiness or success in Russia are often perceived as inviting envy, resentment, and suspicion, at least partly because there is a cultural belief in Russia that anyone who is happy or successful might have used immoral means for achieving these states. A similar perspective is taken in some other cultures. In Micronesia, Lutz (1987) demonstrated that in Ifaluk culture happiness is discouraged as too individualistic for the communal good of the tribe because for the Ifaluk, happiness is associated with showing off, overexcitement, and failure at doing one's duties. Since the envy and resentment of your neighbours can have severely negative consequences for you, it makes sense to be averse to anything that might cause neighbourly envy and resentment, such as overt displays of happiness or success. Even in the West, as Holden (2009, pp. 109–110) observes, it is common to try to avoid expressing happiness, and especially extreme happiness, in many situations because it annoys, and attracts the envy of, others and even invites possible attack from them.

In many cultures, even people with the power to resist attacks from their mortal peers apparently have reason to avoid expressing happiness. Lyubomirsky (2000) mentions that, in Russia, the expression of happiness or success is often perceived as inviting the ire of the devil. And, in the United States, Holden (2009) observes that some people fear extreme happiness because "you fear that God is going to single you out and make you die because things are going too well" (p. 112). Perhaps for such people the attainment of extreme happiness seems so unnatural to them, that they believe the force in control of nature would have no choice but to correct the anomaly if they ever attained extreme happiness. There is also belief in the 'evil eye', prevalent in Iran and neighbouring countries, which is believed to damage people who fail to hide their happiness and achievements (Moshiri Tafreshi 2009). Perhaps in an attempt to avoid the gaze of the evil eye, when Iranians talk about something good that has happened or is going to happen to them, they may also invoke this ritual saying: "may the devil's ear be deaf" (which is similar to the English proverb "do not tempt fate"). It is perhaps no coincidence that many of these lay beliefs apply to

outward signs of both happiness and success, since these beliefs are likely to have evolved in a time when happiness was synonymous with success.

In sum, there are individuals and cultures that tend to be averse to expressing happiness because they worry that their peers, or a supernatural deity, might resent them for it, resulting in any number of severe consequences.

5.4 Pursuing Happiness is Bad for You and Others

Individuals in many cultures have also issued warnings about actively pursuing happiness (particularly of the individualistic and immediate pleasure-based kind) because of the negative consequences for the pursuer and those around him. These warnings could plausibly result in individuals and cultures tending to be averse to the pursuit of personal happiness (as opposed to pursuing the happiness of others); something we found considerable evidence for in both non-Western and Western cultures.

Many East Asian cultures are influenced by Buddhism. In a Buddhist context pursuing personal happiness is seen as misguided: "And with the very desire for happiness, out of delusion they destroy their own well-being as if it were their enemy" (Shantideva 1997, p. 21, as cited in Wallace and Shapiro 2006). Furthermore, Ricard (2011) argues that the desire for pleasure-based happiness is nearly always centred on the self, which can make a person more selfish and thereby have negative effects on the well-being of others. Indeed, Buddhists tend to argue that the narrow pursuit of happiness can lead to such mental states as cruelty, violence, pride, and greed, and hence have negative consequences for the pursuer of personal happiness and those around him (Ricard 2011). In addition to actively causing harm to others, Buddhists also tend to view the pursuit of happiness in a negative light because it may lead to the passive harm of others through neglect. Similarly, striving for personal pleasure-based happiness was seen as misguided and shameful in traditional Chinese culture because contributing to society was considered as better for oneself and everyone else (Lu 2001).

Many Western writers have also found reasons to despise the pursuit of happiness in its individualistic sense because of its negative effects on both the individuals pursuing happiness and on those around them (e.g., Bruckner 2012; Hochschild 1996). Indeed, that the pursuit of happiness (at least in its dogged, unreflective, or extreme forms) is worrying precisely because it often results in a lose–lose situation, with the pursuers ending up dissatisfied and burnt-out while those around them get disaffected and just generally burnt.

Regarding the negative effects of the direct pursuit of personal happiness on the pursuer, Bruckner (2012) has argued that the industry of happiness, and the notion that health is required for happiness, has led to such an abundance of devices and strategies for monitoring and improving happiness that the active pursuit of happiness requires constant effort in such a way that no pursuer of happiness has the time or carefree attitude required to appreciate happiness. Bruckner's argument is a version of the paradox of happiness—that the direct pursuit of happiness is likely to lead to unhappiness (see, e.g., Martin 2008)—an idea with a lengthy history in Western thought that goes back at least as far as Epicurus (discussed above). The usual advice offered by authors in this Western tradition is to directly pursue activities, such as acting morally, that tend to bring about happiness as a by-product (e.g., Locke 1991).

For fear of the resulting negative effects, Westerners have also brought many warnings against the increasing self-inflation and radical individualism in contemporary Western cultures that have resulted from the widespread pursuit of the American dream. Envisaging the American dream as the achievement of happiness through (particularly material)

success Hochschild (1996), points out that the American dream is based on radical individualism, the importance of personal achievement, and indifference to society as a whole. Hochschild believes that this highly materialistically oriented and self-centred ideology is flawed because it leaves little room for other personal values or the value of other people. Indeed, Hochschild concurs with Thomas Hooker (1586–1647, a prominent puritan colonial leader) who said: "For if each man may do what is good in his owne eyes, proceed according to his own pleasure, so that none may crosse him or controll him by any power; there must of necessity follow the distraction and desolation of the whole…" (c.f. Clinton 1952, p. 481). Indeed, Binkley (2011, p. 384) agrees that the pursuit of personal happiness leads to actions that are self-interested and "not in service to any vision of the social good". Along similar lines, Rehberg (2000) investigated the fear of, and scepticism towards, happiness in the works of prominent European philosophers expressing similar concerns (e.g., Max Scheler, Helmut Plessner, Arnold Ghlen, and Friedrich Nietzsche). Likewise, Holden (2009, p. 109) has observed that some people fear happiness because they think it will make them selfish and insensitive to the needs of others in a way that will offend or otherwise harm them.

Writers in critical psychology and cultural studies warn us that "the direct pursuit of security and happiness seems progressively to erode our capacity for devotion even to the best modern ideals of justice and the freedom of all" (Richardson and Guignon 2008, p. 618); a phenomenon that might be explained by the idea that pursuing happiness is bad for us because it weakens our critical capacities in a way that makes us less free to make our own value judgements (Ewen 1976; Binkley 2011, p. 385). Schumaker (2006, p. 9) concurs, arguing that the pursuit of happiness embodied in the American Dream is a "wild goose chase" that is bad for us because it diverts us from the path to authentic happiness— a happiness that arises from loving relationships and other meaningful pursuits.

In sum, considerable evidence exists (in both Western and non-Western cultures) for individual voices and cultural norms that warn against the perils of pursuing happiness because of the damage it can cause to the pursuer and those around her. These warnings are most prominent against the direct pursuit of individualistic, immediate, hedonistic, and material concepts of happiness. Given these voices and norms it is not surprising that some people are averse to pursuing happiness because of the likely negative effects on themselves and those around them.

5.5 Summary

Throughout history, it is perhaps impossible to find a culture wherein an aversion to the direct pursuit, or attainment, of some kind of happiness is entirely absent. Indeed, our review revealed that aversion to happiness has assumed many forms and has been based on many different premises. The core themes of these beliefs are that happiness, particularly its extreme forms, causes bad things to happen, including: making you unhappy, making you selfish, careless, shallow, complacent, and boring, and making others unhappy by gaining at their expense, ignoring their plights, disrupting social harmony, and making them envious. It appears that these beliefs are more strongly endorsed in non-Western cultures, while Western culture is more strongly animated by an urge to maximize happiness and minimize sadness (e.g., Christopher and Smith 2006; Eid and Diener 2001; Lyubomirsky 2000). We wrap up this section by making the important observation that, considering the inevitable individual differences in regards to even dominant cultural trends (Markus and Hamedani 2007), we expect no culture to unanimously hold any of these beliefs.

It should be noted that the culmination of this evidence does little to cast doubt on the intrinsic value of most kinds of happiness. Indeed, while happiness and the pursuit of certain kinds of happiness are widely believed to have negative effects for some people in some cases, happiness is, in and of itself, still a positive experience for most people and according to most of the common conceptions of happiness. Furthermore, some of the beliefs about the negative consequences of happiness seem to be exaggerations, often spurred by superstition, of timeless advice on how to enjoy a pleasant or prosperous life. Nevertheless, it should not be in doubt that many individuals and cultures do tend to be averse to some forms of happiness, especially when taken to the extreme, for many different reasons.

6 Conclusion and Implications

It seems that, in Western contexts, personal happiness (best understood as being satisfied with life and experiencing a preponderance of positive over negative emotions) is often emphasized, and failing to be happy is viewed negatively. Western (in particular Anglo-American) psychology and social sciences are influenced by the ethos of contemporary Western culture. Happiness is regarded by some Western scholars "as a basic building block, a value in terms of which other values are justified" (Braithwaite and Law 1985, p. 261). The zeitgeist of happiness is reflected by research on positive psychology and subjective well-being, which dominate contemporary research on happiness. However, our survey across time and cultures indicates that many of the ways in which people are averse to different kinds of happiness, and their reasons for these aversions, have gone relatively unnoticed in the contemporary happiness literature.

Our review of contemporary and historical psychological, philosophical, cultural, and religious research revealed that: aversion to some form of happiness or other is probably widespread (albeit with varying degrees of influence in different cultures), and there are several different beliefs that underpin people's aversion to happiness. The main cultural differences might be fruitfully explained by referring to both the extent to which happiness is valued in different cultures and the extent to which personal happiness is valued compared to collective values.

Perhaps the most important implication of aversion to happiness (and the beliefs that underpin that attitude) is the doubt it casts on claims that all forms of happiness are universally beneficial or worthy of direct pursuit. Some beliefs underpinning people's aversions to happiness do not contradict the idea that happiness is the greatest good, such as the belief that extreme happiness should be avoided because it will lead to extreme unhappiness, but others do cast some doubt on that idea. Indeed, some beliefs about why we should be averse to happiness are motivated by different individual and cultural views about what the best life for an individual consists in, including views where happiness is considered bad for the individual (e.g., some traditional versions of Christianity) and even something that makes a person bad (e.g., Iranian conceptions of happy people as superficial, foolish, and vulgar). These considerations show that equating happiness with *the* supreme universal good is dangerous unless each culture (or individual!) were to create and be assessed by its own definition of happiness. What remains unclear is whether there exists a definition of happiness that would universally be considered intrinsically good for the one experiencing it. Happiness defined as satisfaction with life and a preponderance of positive over negative emotions might be able to play this role conceptually, but once it is operationalized into a multi-item survey the assumptions made (e.g., about which emotions

are positive) are likely to make the definition inappropriate for some individuals and cultures. Therefore, cross-cultural research on happiness should not assume that national subjective well-being scores are reporting on something that everyone values highly, and certainly not equally.

The existence of cultural differences in the extent of aversion to happiness also has important implications for the debate about whether international differences in levels of reported subjective well-being are mainly due to cultural reporting biases or actual differences in functioning in different cultures. That is, it stands to reason that a person with an aversion to expressing happiness (understood as subjective well-being) may report lower subjective well-being than they would otherwise. This would result in a response bias with the consequence that cross-cultural reports of subjective well-being would be less useful unless the bias could be corrected for. However, it is also likely that an aversion to happiness would lead an individual to engage in different behaviours and activities (e.g., supressing positive feelings and avoiding joyous activities) with the result that they experience less positive emotion in their lives. Therefore, aversion to being happy might make individuals less happy, providing reason to think that the differences in levels of reported subjective well-being across cultures might reflect actual differences instead of cultural response biases. This is a potential avenue for further research. Most important in this line of research would be experimental studies designed to examine how much of the variance in subjective well-being scores is real and how much can be regarded as reporting bias. That part of the variance in reported subjective well-being is contributed by such cultural attitudes as aversion to happiness should not be ignored in future well-being studies, particularly when the subjective well-being scores are used to evaluate the functioning of nations.

Besides its exploratory role in understanding cultural and individual differences in reported subjective well-being, the aversion to happiness construct may help us better understand cultural and individual differences in other important psychological variables, such as ideal affect. In addition to differences in actual emotional experiences (Matsumoto 2001), cultures and individuals vary in their affective ideals. Ideal affect refers to positive affective states that an individual or a culture would ideally like to experience (Tsai et al. 2006; Tsai 2007). Previous research shows that Western cultures generally favour high-arousal positive emotions (e.g., excitement and euphoria) whereas East Asians emphasize low-arousal positive states, such as relaxation and peacefulness (Tsai 2007; Tsai et al. 2007). It might be argued that aversion to happiness is one of the factors setting the stage for a preference for low-arousal, rather than high-arousal, emotions. In other words, one of the reasons for preferring emotional moderation may be that the person is averse to extreme happiness because they believe it to be hazardous.

Future research should also investigate whether different reasons for aversion to happiness tend to go together and how individual components of, and the cumulative attitude of, aversion to happiness is translated into actual behaviour in different life domains. For example, are individuals with high levels of aversion to extreme happiness less willing to attend parties and other social events at which people try to attain and express extreme happiness? Considering that various sorts of music may invoke various states of mind, what sorts of music do individuals with a high levels of aversion to happiness like to listen to or avoid? Given that drinking alcohol may lead to excessive merriness, what are the drinking habits of these individuals?

It would also be interesting to theoretically, and then perhaps empirically or experimentally, investigate the extent to which aversion to certain kinds of happiness is rational. As mentioned, several of the beliefs underpinning cultural aversions to happiness appear to

be based on superstition, making them seem likely candidates for irrationality. On the other hand, there may turn out to be some wisdom or utility in those beliefs that have enabled them to perpetuate.

In sum, much research is required to systematically study aversion to happiness and its consequences for individuals and societies. Indeed, there are risks for happiness studies in exporting Western psychology to non-Western cultures without undertaking indigenous analyses, including making invalid cross-cultural comparisons and imposing Western cultural assumptions on other cultures (Thin 2012). The excitement about the "explosion" of positive psychology should be accompanied with due attention to the cultural issues involved and neglected facets of the variables under study. Cross-cultural and cultural psychologists can contribute greatly to balancing this excitement with cultural investigations and, ultimately, more precision. One of the main goals of cross-cultural psychology is to explore other cultures in order to discover novel cultural and psychological phenomena and to adjust psychology's overarching theories accordingly. This work is intended to result in "…a more nearly universal psychology that will be valid for a broader range of cultures" (Berry et al. 1992, p. 5). Therefore, by paying due attention to understudied concepts, such as aversion to happiness, cross-cultural psychologists can contribute to the healthy growth of happiness studies. The present study was a modest attempt towards this goal. We hope that the present review will spur further research, and inform more culturally sensitive hypotheses in the field of happiness studies.

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