

The Subjective Well-Being of Small Societies

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Abstract:

So-called “small societies” such as Amish communities and traditional tribal groups offer a unique opportunity to chart the conceptual territory of subjective well-being (SWB). First, these groups offer an alternative to standard cross-national comparisons that are so common in happiness research. Because of their smaller size and relative isolation, each small society represents a relatively homogenous experience of happiness that can shed light on the ways that social ties, community norms and practices might influence SWB. This chapter explores both culture and methods as they relate to SWB. Three diverse “case studies” are discussed including the Amish, Tonga Islanders, and the Maasai. Finally, recommendations are given for improving SWB research.

Keywords: subjective well-being, happiness, small societies, traditional cultures, culture, Amish, Tonga, Maasai, Research Methods

In recent years the study of subjective well-being has grown exponentially. Academic articles and chapters on the topic have increased dramatically over the last two decades. This academic interest in happiness has coincided, to some degree, with the advent of the modern positive psychology movement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Subjective well-being has also experienced an uptick in academic attention as it is increasingly legitimized as a field of study in a broad range of disciplines including law (Posner & Sunstein, 2010), economics (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2008), philosophy (Haybron, 2008) and anthropology (Thin, 2009). These trends are reflected in an increasing number of academic journals devoted to well-being related topics including *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *International Journal of Wellbeing*, *Journal of Positive Psychology*, and *Psychology of Well-being*.

One interesting subset of studies in this area has focused on the ways that cultural factors influence subjective well-being. Frequently, national identity is used as a proxy for culture (e.g. Diener, Diener & Diener, 1995). The emphasis in these types of studies is almost exclusively cross-cultural (examining cultural similarities and differences) as opposed to cultural (seeking to understand concepts as they exist within one culture; Jahoda & Krewer, 1997). Cross-cultural research has the advantage of allowing comparisons between diverse groups. This has been helpful in business-related research (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005) as well as in understanding societal differences in social, material and environmental well-being (Biswas-Diener, Diener, & Lyubchik, 2015). Unfortunately, an emphasis on contrasting cultures necessitates the use of standard measurement, which usually translates to quantitative methods and the use of surveys created in, by and for members of industrialized societies. Similarly, an emphasis on contrasting also encourages the use of convenience sampling; especially through employing college student samples.

There has been a conspicuous absence of research attention to small societies and traditional cultures. Traditional culture is a term used to describe the beliefs, norms, roles, and practices of people whose traditions are anchored in a shared cultural heritage (Biswas-Diener & Thin, 2017). Specifically, traditional culture is associated with historical practices that exist in the larger modern context. This concept is often understood to be culture that is pre-industrial and pre-colonial. The cultures of indigenous people in nations such as Canada and Australia are examples of traditional culture even though many of these people have assimilated with more mainstream society or use modern technologies. Members of some small societies, such as Amish farmers or hunter-gatherers, are especially likely to retain their traditional culture because of their limited contact with mainstream or colonial cultures.

Conducting research with small societies with traditional cultures is difficult. Often, members of these groups have experienced prejudice and discrimination and can be distrustful of researcher motives. In addition, there are methodological complications including translation difficulties and the obstacles presented by remote geographical locations in which these societies are located. Despite these hardships, I argue that it is both wise and important to include traditional cultures in the larger research program of subjective well-being research. Research with small or traditional societies adds a layer of specificity to a topic—culture—that is plagued by fuzzy boundaries. In many cross-cultural studies in psychology, for example, nationality is treated as being synonymous with culture (e.g. Suh, Diener, Oishi & Triandis, 1998). However, nations such as China, for example, are too diverse to realistically have some monolithic, unifying culture. Demarcating cultural boundaries by collecting data from smaller and more traditional groups can help us understand cultural factors that are broad and regional versus those that are unique and local.

In addition, the bulk of the research attention to culture in psychology has focused on broad cultural concepts such as individualism and collectivism (Triandis, 1995). Individualistic cultures are those in which the primary unit of measurement is the individual. These cultures emphasize uniqueness and generally have greater social and geographic mobility. By contrast, collectivist societies are those in which the unit of measurement is the family. These cultures tend to emphasize social harmony and social obligation. Although individualism and collectivism are, arguably, the most researched dimensions of culture in psychology, other conceptualizations of culture have also been studied. These include cultures of honor (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996), indexical versus referential cultural (Landrine, 1992), cultures with positivity biases (Diener et al, 2000), and independent versus interdependent self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

The Measurement of Well-Being in Cultural and Cross-Cultural Research

In this chapter, I generally use terms such as well-being, happiness, and subjective well-being interchangeably. I do so out of linguistic convention and to promote a better experience for the reader. That said, I also acknowledge that each of these concepts is distinct, and that—for research purposes—each can be operationalized in unique ways (Diener, 1984). For a thorough discussion of definitions related to happiness please see Haybron (2007) and Diener and Biswas-Diener (2008). Similarly, I treat the terms small society as if it is synonymous with traditional culture. There are also instances in which these concepts overlap with “non-western culture” and “non-mainstream culture.” While arguments can be made for the distinctiveness of these concepts a careful parsing of these terms is beyond the scope of this chapter. For a fuller discussion of this issues please see Mathews and Izquierdo (2009).

It is impossible to disentangle the findings of studies on the SWB of small societies from the very methods used to conduct those societies. That is, small societies present unique opportunities to focus on methodological difficulties even as they offer interesting possibilities for gaining new insights into happiness. To explore this issue in detail I will discuss some of the common research practices in the cross-cultural study of SWB as well as outline their limits. Thereafter, I will argue for the importance of enhancing current research practices with more attention to culturally sensitive data collection procedures including interviewing and qualitative analyses.

Methods Common to Cross-Cultural Studies in SWB

Researchers have long been interested in the role that cultural factors such as norms and values play in SWB. Studies have usually been structured around samples: their demographic categories and size. Some studies have employed large international samples from many nations (egs. Diener & Diener, 1995; Veenhoven, 2012). Other studies have targeted comparisons of samples from only a handful of nations (e.g., Biswas-Diener, Vittersø & Diener, 2005; Wirtz & Napa-Scollon, 2012). A third class of SWB studies uses analyses of data from only a single nation but using standard metrics that allow for comparison (e.g. Biswas-Diener, Tay & Diener, 2012). Consumers of this research can be reassured by the fact that many of these studies use longitudinal sampling or large samples of adults. Other studies have employed student samples. Interestingly, this is an instance in which student sampling is defensible because it allows for more direct cross-cultural comparison. Students samples, of course, limit the ability to generalize results to there is an inherent trade-off in the costs and benefits of this method of sampling.

In cross-cultural research on SWB a standard—typically quantitative—measure is used. Perhaps the most common of these is the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985); a five-item questionnaire using a 1-7 Likert scale that directs respondents to indicate their agreement with

each item. Although such methods offer the benefit of a standard medium of comparison these methods have been criticized as insensitive to cultural norms and contexts, and therefore difficult to interpret accurately (Thin, 2009). More recently, large samples such as the Gallup World Poll have attempted to address this shortcoming by employing the Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale (Cantril, 1965). This so-called “Cantril Ladder” offers greater cultural sensitivity by anchoring life appraisals in the respondent’s own experience, even those these are not made explicit. The ladders instructs, “The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you while the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you.” This allows for differences in context: a rating of 6 offered by two separate respondents is assumed to be comparable even though the best possible life might include menial employment for one and living in a mansion for the other.

There are those, myself included, who also argue for a greater use qualitative measures in cross-cultural research. Qualitative measures allow for greater contextualization of data (Colby, 2009). This is especially important when studying a highly subjective phenomenon like happiness. Qualitative methods, such as structured interviews and ethnographic analyses, are generally more sensitive than are quantitative measures to cultural differences in happiness. This is not to suggest, however, that such methods are inherently superior. They are time consuming, can limit generalizability, and may be vulnerable to researcher bias during analysis and interpretation. Even so, a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures could be advantageous in this research. An example of this can be seen in a hypothetical study in which the Cantril Ladder was used in conjunction with interview questions that probed respondents’ specific representation of the best and worst possible life. The subsequent interview information would provide the basis for better understanding the numeric ratings. They might also help future researchers understand just how comparable Cantril Ladder ratings truly are.

Case Studies

The bulk of this chapter will consist of case studies in research on the SWB of small societies. There are, of course, too many such societies to allow comprehensive coverage in of the research in this chapter. Instead, I have elected to focus on three small scale societies. I have chosen these specific three examples because they meet the following criteria:

- a. Existing high-quality research on SWB. Many small-scale societies have been the subject of scientific scrutiny but this research attention has not focused explicitly on SWB or has been methodologically limited by small sample sizes or similar problems.
- b. Diversity. I have chosen these examples because they represent two distinct types of diversity. First, they are societies with geographical diversity, located in the American Midwest, the South Pacific, and East Africa. This is important because small scale societies give us the opportunity to examine the ways that the natural environment influences daily psychological experiences. Second, these examples represent diversity in “types” of culture. Each society is unique in its means of food production, economy, language group, and spiritual beliefs.
- c. Methodological lessons. Each of the example societies offers insights into the benefits and limitations of existing research practices. The research I will report has been carried out using both spanning qualitative and quantitative methods. I will argue that both types are necessary to ensure the quality of SWB research.

Intentional Culture: The Amish

The Amish of North America are famous for their intentional rejection of modern technologies such as electric light and motor vehicles. Because they live in close proximity to people who live an industrialized lifestyle, they have become a source of media fascination. They are depicted, alternately, with romanticism or vilification in movies and television shows. The Amish are a religious order and are part of the Anabaptist tradition that grew out of the Protestant Reformation (Hostetler, 1993). Anabaptists broke from the Catholic Church on the issue of baptism: the former group preferred baptism to occur in adulthood when people are, presumably, able to make a more informed choice regarding the acceptance of God. The Amish were persecuted in Europe and the earliest Amish immigrants to North America arrived from Switzerland. Their descendants speak “Pennsylvania Dutch” (a bastardization of the word “Deutsch”) which is a dialect of German. Their largest population is concentrated in Pennsylvania and Ohio (USA), with smaller communities in Indiana, Illinois and other states. There are also communities living in Mexico, Belize and Canada.

Amish culture is centered on the Christian religion. They believe in the concept of “*gelassenheit*.” Although in modern German *gelassenheit* means “carefree” it has a different meaning among the Amish. It indicates the unburdening that comes with submission to God (Kraybill, 1989). The Amish adopt a fairly literal interpretation of Christian scripture, pray daily, and engage in community worship. They emphasize

community-based generosity and gratitude for their food, home, health and other material provisions (which they see as blessings from God). The Amish aspire to be intentional in their behaviors. For example, during the Vietnam War, a time when young males in the United States were drafted for military service, military-aged Amish males chose to be “contentious objector.” As with many small societies, there is a relative lack of privacy in Amish communities and individual behavior is monitored by the group. In the most extreme cases, shunning (called “*meidung*” by the Amish) occurs as a social correction for wrong action. One Amish man describes it this way: “Shunning works a little bit like an electric fence around a pasture with a pretty good fence charger on it” (Kraybill, 1989, p.117).

Perhaps the most conspicuous aspect of their intentional approach to living is their rejection of modern technologies. The Amish avoid the “perils of worldliness” assumed to be in automobiles, tractors, electricity, the Internet and other technologies and conveniences. This separation from the world is based in scriptural passages that admonish non-conformity to the world and to avoid being yoked to non-believers (Hostetler, 1993). As such, the Amish have gravitated toward a rural, agricultural lifestyle that allows for the greatest degree of self-sufficiency. Within Amish culture are there further sub-divisions, such as the distinction between Old Order and New Order Amish. The New Order Amish split from the Old Order in the 1960s. The New Order generally are more permissive toward technology (e.g., commercial airline travel, some electricity in the home) but share many conservative religious values with their Old Order spiritual counterparts.

The very intentionality of their lifestyle is suggestive of the prospect that Amish people might enjoy high levels of happiness. In past studies, researchers have found that people who engage in a voluntarily simple lifestyle enjoy high levels of subjective well-being (Brown & Kasser, 2005). Further, the researchers found that life satisfaction and affect balance were correlated with both the mindfulness and the intrinsic values that underscore an intentional lifestyle.

The majority of research conducted with the Amish has been either anthropological or medical in nature. The norm for inter-marriage among the Amish means that they have a relatively small gene pool compared with “the English” (as they refer to all mainstream Americans). The small gene pool makes them a useful group for the study of the genetic aspects of health and illness. One example of this type of research that is directly relevant to happiness is a study of Bipolar Disorder among the Amish (Egeland, 1988). In the early 2000s, my colleagues and I also collected data on subjective well-being from 52 Amish people (Old and New Order) living in 2 communities in Illinois (Biswas-Diener, Vittersø, & Diener, 2005).

The process of recruiting and sampling our Amish participants offers an important methodological lesson for the study of subjective well-being outside of college student samples. Because of their desire to separate from industrialized society the Amish must be approached with sensitivity and patience. I originally contacted the Amish through a small, local museum of Amish culture. It was both coincidental, and helpful, that my surname—Diener—is also a relatively common Amish surname. This curious point of contact allowed me to introduce myself and my project. I spent 3 months visiting Amish households before conducting my research. These social calls were often spent in silence or discussing genealogy, in order to gain the trust of community members. During this time I had the opportunity to spend the night in Amish homes, attend communal meals and festivities, and give public addresses in Amish primary schools. It turns out that these public talks were the “tipping point” in my recruitment of participants. Because the Amish have so little news of the non-Amish world they are curious about other cultures. My weekly talks on tribal society in East Africa grew in attendance and led to a number of introductions to people who eventually agreed to participate in our research.

We were able to recruit 52 Amish participants for our study of which 56 % were male and for which the average age was 44. Interestingly, the average levels of life satisfaction as measured by the SWLS (Diener et al., 1985) was 4.4; just above the neutral point. Above neutral scores are consistent with the idea that “most people are mildly happy” (Diener & Diener, 1996), and that mild happiness is evolutionarily advantageous (Fredrickson, 2001). Comparatively, the Amish satisfaction in our study can be interpreted as meaning that the Amish fall lower than members of many other groups. In a study of more than 13 thousand college students from 31 nations, for example, only students from Kenya (whose average life satisfaction was 4.0) scored lower than the Amish (Diener & Diener, 1995).

Anecdotally, the Amish society in which we conducted our study was fraught with contrasts. On the one hand, the Amish had a pronounced pro-social attitude. One man I interviewed, for example, had donated tens of thousands of US Dollars toward the medical treatment of his neighbor’s son, with no thought of repayment. Similarly, the Amish often helped one another in quilting, construction, and food preparation. On the other hand, these neighborly behaviors were confined to in-group members. There was a conspicuous degree of prejudice toward out-group members, especially ethnic or religious minorities. One bishop, for example, asked me whether I thought the space shuttle Challenger exploded because there

was a Jewish person (Judith Resnick) aboard.

Another set of contrasts could be found in the relationship between the Amish and the larger “English” society in which they live. While on the one hand there is a strong cultural push to remain separate from industrialized society. The Amish I spoke with were highly invested in publicly conforming to group norms related to abstaining from the use of industrial technologies and from remaining aloof from broader society. Privately, however, the Amish revealed themselves to be as curious and as human as people from any other society. One participant, for example, admitted that he used his workplace telephone—an allowable technology—to phone a newspaper number that hosts recordings of the world’s news. Another informant revealed that she had secretly flown on an airplane. These examples reflect the on-going tension of a society that must—individually and collectively—continually re-negotiate its relation to the larger society in which it exists. Where subjective well-being is concerned, the tension between retaining traditions and adapting to new circumstances is an interesting issue for research. Too often, we treat culture as if it is a static phenomenon. The acknowledgment that culture is a dynamic system is, itself, a call for more longitudinal data collection among small societies despite the hardship this may entail.

A closer examination of Amish satisfaction reveals some interesting cultural insights. In our study, we measure global life domains (e.g., “self” and “social life”) as well as specific domains (e.g., “intelligence” and “family”). These satisfaction scores are shown in Table 1. Past research has revealed that discrepancies between global and specific domains reflect the role cultural norms play in the construction of satisfaction judgments (Diener, Napa-Scollon, Oishi, Dzokoto, & Suh, 2000; Oishi & Diener, 2001). Specifically, global and specific domain satisfaction should, theoretically, be in agreement. For example, if a person is satisfied with her romantic life, her friendships, and her family relationships—all specific domains—she should, logically, report about the same amount of satisfaction with her overall social life (the global domain). Diener and colleagues found that this correspondence occurred in some cultures, such as Japan. In other cultures, however, they discovered an inflationary effect. People in Colombia and the United States, for instance, are likely to inflate their global reports of satisfaction over that reported for specific satisfaction. Diener and his colleagues explained that the tendency toward or away from inflation is suggestive that—in the absence of clearly defined criteria for making a judgment—people default to a cultural norm for positivity.

Table 1. Amish Satisfaction

Amish Satisfaction			
<i>Self-Satisfaction</i>		<i>Social Satisfaction</i>	
Self	4.2	Social Life	5.7
Intelligence	4.7	Friends	6.1
Morality	5.3	Family	5.9
Physical Appearance	5.1	Romance	6.1

In the case of the Amish in our study, you can see that no such inflationary effect occurs. In fact, it appears, at least in this instance, which the Amish tend toward a deflationary effect. It does not make logical sense that Amish participants would report relatively high satisfaction with various aspects of the self, but report significantly lower satisfaction with the self globally. In this case, the whole is less than the sum of the parts. Although we cannot be certain, one possible explanation for this trend is to be found in cultural norms for self-abnegation. It may be, for the Amish that experiencing “too much satisfaction” with the self is akin to the perceived sin of pridefulness and too far from the virtue of humility.

In this respect, the Amish provide an interesting case study of small society happiness. They appear, upon a close examination of their life satisfaction, to evaluate their lives positively. They seem appreciative of their material circumstances and enjoy the benefits of living a values-congruent lifestyle. On the other hand, their unique religious views give rise to cultural norms that, perhaps, dampen some of this psychological positivity. It is here that the usefulness of more qualitative and ethnographic measures can be easily seen. Rather than assuming an operational definition of happiness it makes sense to ask “what is happiness for the Amish?” To some degree, it is not the upbeat emotional experience sought by many mainstream Americans. Instead, it is a state of being “blessed by God” as the result of right thought and behavior.

Social Roles in Small Society: Tonga Islanders

The South Pacific region and its Polynesian cultures are, perhaps, the least researched on the planet.

Their geographic isolation adds financial and time costs to any study of well-being among these widespread island nations. One interesting exception to this is a study of the well-being of Tonga Islanders (Moore & Younge-Leslie, 2005). Like many of its neighbors, Tonga is an archipelago of more than 100 islands although it has a population of only about 100 thousand people. Of these, about 70% live in the “main island” of Tongatapu. Tongan society is a constitutional monarchy that has traditionally resisted colonial incursions in the region. Approximately 70% of Tongans living in remote areas rely on subsistence production, an activity that is largely governed by cultural prescriptions for male and female roles (food production for men and text-tile production for women). In more populous areas approximately 37% of people have full-time employment and are involved with fishing, agriculture, and tourist industries (Younge-Leslie & Moore, 2012).

Moore and Younge-Leslie (2005) were interested in understanding aspects of Tongan happiness, called *fiafia*, that were universal (similar to patterns found elsewhere) as well as those that were locally unique. They recruited 227 respondents who completed written surveys on a wide range of constructs related to well-being. They discovered trends that link their Tongan sample with the results of wider research. For example, they found that the Tongans in their study were generally happy, a conclusion reached by other researchers (eg. Diener & Diener, 1996; Biswas-Diener, Vittersø, & Diener, 2005). In fact, the average satisfaction reported was comparable to that of people studied in the Dominican Republic and Brazil. Specially, she found the average levels of general life satisfaction were 2.36 out of 5, indicating reports just above the neutral point. This might reflect the generally adaptable quality of mild happiness (Diener, Kanazawa, Suh & Oishi, 2014; Fredrickson, 2001). Moore and Younge-Leslie also discovered strong collectivistic leanings in their sample. Using statistical regression, they found that social concerns such as kinship duties were significant predictors of happiness while individualistic concerns were not.

As is the case in many small societies, Tongan culture places a heavy emphasis on social cohesion (Younge-Leslie & Moore, 2012). This includes fulfilling social roles, social and kinship duties. Tongan culture includes institutional practices to reinforce this point. The community gathers together in *fono* meetings, during which matters of community concern are discussed. Similarly, Tongan society is hierarchically organized and elders enjoy higher status than do younger people. Members of society are assumed to fulfill specific roles including those that are status based, such as offering deference and respect to elders, as well as material gifts. This can be seen reflected in the fact that elders, in general, reported higher life satisfaction than did younger people in the study. Younge-Leslie and Moore offer a preliminary psychological explanation for the higher well-being of older participants: their status affords them greater autonomy to make personal decisions. This line of reasoning is supported by research from self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Tongan society offers a case study of the ways that social structure, and the cultural norms surrounding it, can affect well-being. The formal social bonds and relatively fixed structure of society can be seen reflected in many other studies of small societies. For example, Adelson (2009) reports that the well-being of members of Cree society of Eastern Canada is similarly related to kinship ties and obligations. Their concept of *miyupimaatisiun* translates to “being alive well” and includes a heavy emphasis on responsibility to kin, fulfilling prescribed social roles, and the maintenance of social networks. These same emphases have been found by other researchers investigating the well-being of other cultures. Kral and Idlout (2012), for example, found the theme of family was the single most important to the happiness of more than 100 Inuit participating in their study. Although it is true that social relationships are generally highly correlated with happiness (Tay & Diener, 2011) the Inuit in this study placed a special emphasis on visiting with family—especially elders—and fulfilling prescribed social roles such as parenting. Similarly, Galinha and colleagues (2013) found that subjective well-being is better predicted by relationship satisfaction in a large sample of Mazambicans (relative to Americans). The emphasis on high quality social bonds is a call for more sophisticated research on culture and subjective well-being. Future researchers can parse the concept of relationships into constituent categories (e.g. fulfilling obligations, number of friends, social status, size of family, etc.) to better understand which types of relationships impact well-being.

Cultural understanding of Positivity and Negativity: The Maasai

The Maasai are an indigenous group living in East Africa. They are semi-nomadic pastoralists (herders) and their language (Maa) is Bantu. Historically, the Maasai have resisted English and German colonial rule in the region and have retained many of their traditional practices such as medicine men (*laibon*), the ritual circumcisions of adolescent males and females, polygamy, and a period of warrior hood for young males (*morani*). The Maasai are largely pre-literate and live in houses made of stick frames supporting dried mud and cow dung for the walls and roof. The traditional Maasai diet consisted of cow milk mixed with cow blood but in recent times they have supplemented this with *ugali* (corn meal), tea, and chicken eggs. Roles such as gathering firewood and herding cattle are culturally prescribed by sex.

Social status is important to the Maasai. Traditionally, men enjoy the highest status. Among men, status is conferred by wealth (having many cattle, wives, and/or a large family), leadership (being recognized as wise and honest among one's age peers; the Maasai have clear generational age groups), and bravery. Women have lower status and children have no status.

Biswas-Diener, Vittersø, and Diener (2005) interviewed 127 Maasai living largely outside of the tourist industry and world economy. Fifty-two per cent of our sample was female and the average age of our sample was 32. The respondents were from 10 villages in the Megwerra (also, Megwara) region of Kenya. Although the respondents in this study had no formal education they live near the border of the Maasai Mara National Park. Tourists can be seen traveling to and from the park and approximately 20% of the park fees are paid back to the Maasai to fund medical clinics and similar extra-cultural services. Increasingly, Maasai children attend Christian missionary schools and some Maasai are beginning to live in homes with tin roofs.

Our study began with translating and back translating our measures into Maa using separate native translators. During this process, we also conducted preliminary interviews aimed at better understanding the local conceptualization of happiness. We were informed, in art, by earlier research suggesting that cultural concepts are bound to specific language (Wierzbicka, 2004). For example, we identified a number of distinct linguistic concepts related to happiness such as: 1) *enchipai* (general happiness; the state of being in a joyful mood), 2) *ashipai* (literally to have a “bright heart,” this concept is deep contentedness), and 3) *ebiotishu* (the state of being healthy and fit). Understanding local concepts of happiness is more than simply a translation issue; it also an opportunity to place these happiness-related concepts in the context in which they occur: event antecedents, cultural norms and values, individual appraisals and behavior (Mesquita, 2001). Simply put, one limitation of current cross-cultural research on subjective well-being is that reported mean levels of affect do not provide needed information about how these emotions are interpreted, tolerated, or used.

The Maasai also enjoy a cultural pride that is common in many tribal societies. For example, they believe that *Ngai* (God) endowed the Maasai with dominion over all the cattle on Earth. As pastoralists the Maasai do not engage in hunting and generally harbor prejudices toward members of nearby tribal groups who do. The Maasai collectively refer to these groups as *Dorobo*, which is a derogatory term. One Maasai informant in our study said, “During Creation the Maasai were given all the cows. The Dorobo were given other animals because there were no cows left. They [the Dorobo] are looked down on and are poor. Sometimes we beat them up.”

The Maasai in our sample reported relatively high levels of happiness. For example, they reported an average score of 5.4 out of 7 (where 4 is the neutral point) on life satisfaction (Biswas-Diener, Vittersø, & Diener, 2005). Similarly, they reported frequent experiences of positive emotion including joy and pride. They did report moderate amounts of worry and anger. Further, we were able to obtain two informant reports of emotion for each of our respondents. There was a high degree of agreement across our peer raters and all of the peer reports of affect balance (positive emotion divided by negative emotion) were significantly greater than zero.

A better understanding of how the Maasai understand emotion can be found in our previously unpublished qualitative data. We asked each of our respondents to list positive and negative memories from the previous day (with the order of these two tasks counter-balanced across participants) and to repeat this task for positive and negative memories for the prior year. We were able to collect this data from 111 individuals. In Table 2, we display the total number of events listed for each time period and for both positive and negative valences. All but one of our respondents could list one or more positive events from the previous day. This single exception—a 24-year-old woman—had had six goats killed by hyenas the previous evening. Of our 111 respondents, 59 of them could not list a single negative memory from the previous day. Of the remainder who did report a negative memory these included mentions of severely sick or hungry children (N = 4), goats being killed by leopards and hyenas (N = 3), and sick or dying livestock (N = 7). Interestingly, the health concerns of friends (e.g., miscarriage, illness) were mentioned with the same frequency as personal health concerns.

Table 2. Maasai Memory Reports

	Maasai Memory Reports (N = 111)	
	<i>Yesterday</i>	<i>Last Year</i>
<i>Positive Events Reported</i>	211	206

<i>Negative Events Reported</i>	59	162
<i>Memory Balance Score</i>	3.58	1.27

What could account for the highly positive memories of the Maasai in our study? It is interesting to consider a number of culturally relevant factors. Culture could impact the way that the Maasai cognitively process and use the information necessary for making life evaluations. Past research has shown that culture can affect the ways that visual information is processed and retrieved (Nisbett, 2003) and the way that norms are integrated into satisfaction judgments (Suh, 2000). Although it is speculative, these data are suggestive of a number of interesting possibilities. First, the Maasai may have a culturally unique appraisal system for negative events wherein only events meeting some critical threshold are encoded as negative. For example, a minor illness may not be viewed as “complaint worthy” whereas losing livestock to a predator is. In addition, the Maasai seem to have a relatively high threshold for what constitutes a negative event. There were no events that were comparable to common daily complaints in industrialized society (e.g., “I was stuck in a traffic jam,” “I was late for a meeting,” “I had a frustrating interaction with customer service”). Instead, the Maasai complaints were more comparable to our more serious complaints such as car accidents or major financial setbacks.

Both of these trends can be seen in the memory reports for negative events occurring during the prior year. All but a small handful of respondents with whom we collected memory reports reported negative events for the previous year. Of these, the overwhelming majority were specifically about the drought that had plagued the region. Most of these reports mentioned livestock dying and many mentioned outbreaks of illness. Only a handful of participants specifically mentioned a personal hardship such as falling ill themselves. Of these personal hardships, four were complaints about money (all four were tangentially involved with either tourism or the selling of cornmeal.

As with the memory reports for recent events the yearly memory reports offer an intriguing look into Maasai psychology. First, it is noteworthy that so many of them reported the same negative event (the drought). That is, the drought—for the Maasai—was on the scale that the 2006 Indian Ocean Tsunami or Hurricane Katrina were for the regions those disasters impacted. It should be noted that there have been 12 such droughts since 1975, making them a far more frequent occurrence than their counterpart natural disasters in other parts of the world. The wide agreement about the negative impact of the drought is evidence that the Maasai experience their lives as linked to the natural environment and linked to one another. This can especially be seen in the fact that very few mentioned a personal hardship (“I had to walk 15 kilometers to fetch water”) whereas many mentioned illness in other people or the death of livestock.

The way the Maasai conduct mental appraisals of past events is not well understood and is in need of further study. These preliminary findings point, however, to new research questions. For instance, researchers have found that memory of events is related to but not identical to the actual experience of events (e.g., Wirtz, Kruger, Scollon & Diener, 2003). Further, research reveals that more global judgments, such as yearly as opposed to daily judgments, are more likely to draw upon cultural norms (Diener et al, 2000; Suh, Diener, Oishi & Triandis, 1998). The Maasai offer a unique opportunity to test cultural differences in appraisal thresholds for both types and frequency of events as well as into the shared nature of appraisal.

Conclusion

Small societies offer well-being researchers a unique laboratory in which to improve our methodology and gain new empirical insights. Regarding the first point, the lion’s share of international study in the field of well-being is ensconced in cross-cultural approaches. While this approach offers a standard by which to compare individuals and groups it is also limiting. Well-being researchers are advised to expand their methodological approaches by increasing their focus on cultural, rather than cross-cultural, understanding of key concepts. This typically means the collection and analysis of more qualitative data. This is especially important in establishing a sensitive and comprehensive understanding of local definitions of well-being (see Sell & Nagpul, 1992). This is a difficult challenge because, from a practical standpoint, it means increased time in the field, longer duration of study, fewer participants, higher expenses, more travel, and more complexities regarding linguistic translation. Despite these challenges it is a worthwhile undertaking. In part, because small societies are, by their very definition, small and isolated. This means that it is easier to get representative samples of the population and that the society itself can act as a laboratory in which certain conditions are naturalistically controlled.

The methodological complexities of investigating the well-being of small societies also raises the prospect of increased Interdisciplinary collaboration. Well-being researchers, and especially psychologists and economists who gravitate toward cross-cultural approaches, might benefit from the expertise of those

who are oriented toward cultural approaches. Historically, disciplinary approaches to definition and measurement have served as an obstacle to effective cross-disciplinary research. Even so, there are examples in the well-being literature of interdisciplinary theory (Ahuvia et al, 2015) as well as empirical study (Inglehart, Foa, Peterson & Welzel, 2008). Greater dialogue between academics could help researchers improve methods, enrich their understanding, and bridge levels of analyses.

Small societies also offer unique opportunities to better understand well-being. It may be that, historically, small societies have been treated as nothing more than curious case studies that are so small and so culturally relativistic that results from their study are not generalizable. To the extent that this claim is true it is likely more so in psychology than in anthropology. Rather than thinking of small societies as interesting oddities, well-being researchers would do well to consider them as unique laboratories. In many cases, the geographical isolation, possible in-group biases, and small populations mirror—to some extent—the controlled conditions of the research laboratory. The linguistic and cultural challenges they present also encourage researchers to reflect on their methodological assumptions and continue to innovate data collection and analysis.

All cultures change, including those of small societies. In fact, as technology increases globalization, it is small societies that face the most dramatic impacts and the most rapid potential change. As some traditional practices and languages face extinction, research offers us an opportunity to investigate how pace of change and type of change affect well-being. Embedded within our interviews, surveys, and other small society data are invaluable insights into kinship, vulnerability, resilience, and the pursuit of happiness.

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