

THE OUTLOOK ON HAPPINESS AND SELF-CONTROL ACROSS CULTURES: THE
POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-CONTROL AND HAPPINESS

By

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Abstract

This literature review examined the research question of whether or not self-control had a positive correlation with happiness. The goal of this paper was to analyze self-control and happiness across the globe and to use supporting previous research to find if there was a positive correlation between the two. Previous research supported the idea that different perspectives of self-control can affect a person's ability to be content in life (Wei et al., 2013) and in addition, varying outlooks on happiness can also affect how a person views their well-being (Pflug, 2009). The concept of how self-control and happiness vary across cultures and that there are similarities between self-control and happiness was validated through supportive research. A positive relationship between self-control and happiness may be plausible because of the positive aspects that come with having good self-control (Cheung et al., 2014).

The Outlook on Happiness and Self-Control Across Cultures: The Positive Relationship
Between Self-Control and Happiness

Self-control can affect many aspects of life such as relationships, health, wealth, academic success, and so much more. Self-control entails the ability to control one's emotions, desires, and behaviors (Wei et al., 2013). Self-control is similar to a muscle in the sense that it can be strengthened and trained over time but can also be overexerted (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). The overexertion of self-control can be revealed through a lack of stamina or motivation to follow through with a goal (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Individuals may wonder why excelling in certain areas of their life are more difficult than others. They may have wished to improve areas such as procrastination or having stronger friendships. These personal endeavors that people struggle with could be related to varying levels of self-control.

Different perspectives and definitions for what self-control and happiness mean to an individual can affect a person's ability to be overall happy in their life (Wei et al., 2013). Factors that may affect a person's self-control and therefore their happiness include their cultures values, family life, and upbringing. In particular, places and people may vary if they practice individualist or collectivist ideas and customs. Differing beliefs and values from numerous perspectives can help shape an overall theory depicting how some people's self-control and happiness can be traced through their cultures. People are commonly happier when they have better self-control since it may lead them to positive aspects that self-control entails (Cheung et al., 2014). Individuals can have different outlooks on self-control and happiness, but it is found that there is a consistent relationship between self-control and happiness (Wei et al., 2013). Despite the fact that individual people can have different ideas and examples for how self-control and happiness are defined, there is frequently a correlation between self-control and happiness.

The current investigation focuses on the positive relationship between self-control and happiness across cultures. A positive correlation is predicted due to the numerous positive benefits that come from having good self-control such as health, wealth, and positive relationships (Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2007). Self-control varies across countries, cultures, and individuals (Wei et al., 2013). Happiness also varies across countries, cultures, and individuals (Cheung et al., 2014). Happiness, in regards toward areas of a person's life, refers to satisfaction and subjective well-being (Veenhoven, 2012). Research has found links between self-control and happiness and that these two topics coincide with one another (Cheung et al., 2014).

Throughout this paper previous research similar to the current theory, a positive correlation between self-control and happiness, was analyzed and found supportive. Self-control, happiness, and individualism versus collectivism are discussed and analyzed throughout the paper. Pieces of these topics are further detailed such as how happiness relates to self-control, the subjective nature of happiness and self-control, and how self-control and happiness vary across countries.

There are two predictions for this thesis; the main one being that self-control positively correlates to happiness and the second less prominent hypothesis is that the varying outlooks of self-control and happiness across countries will determine how happy a person is. The second prediction is based upon how people have different ideas about happiness and how an individual's mental depiction of what that means to them can affect their ability to achieve happiness. This project will take a theoretical approach by examining and synthesizing the literature in this area.

Individualism vs. collectivism relating to self-control

There are various aspects of self-control that differ across countries and cultures. Examples of this include the varying ideas of what is considered more important as a society which could be based around work, school, family, etc. Research from Meifen Wei et al. (2013) demonstrated how these different aspects play a role in suppression and harmony. Self-control consists of regulating one's emotions, desires, thoughts, and behaviors in different aspects of life. An example of self-control is choosing to eat an apple instead of a candy bar as a snack when aiming to eat healthier. Another example of self-control is following the speed limit when you would rather speed to get home faster. A person's idea of self-control can vary based on the prevailing values, morals, and beliefs of their cultural origin. Self-control can be dependent on a person's culture and what their culture values and promotes, whether that be through traditions, principles, laws, ideas, etc. (Pflug, 2009). A person's upbringing can be heavily impacted by the beliefs and values of their environment and therefore what may be exhibited through their self-control (Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2007).

An individual's self-control will commonly have effects on their relationships, academics, work, etc. whether they are part of an individualist or collectivist country (Suh & Oishi, 2002). Individualist ideas focus on independent thoughts and how a person will be affected alone, whereas collectivism is based around prioritizing a group of people over oneself (Wei et al., 2013). Wei and colleagues (2013) hypothesized that culture would moderate the association between emotion suppression and interpersonal harmony. The participants consisted of Chinese citizens and European Americans who completed surveys on different areas of self-control. Areas of self-control that were measured were social harmony and interpersonal harmony. Social harmony pertains to having feelings of respect and harmony towards other people in a society whereas interpersonal harmony refers to keeping peace between two or more parties. They found

that Chinese participants valued suppression, or repressing emotions, in exchange for social harmony, which was also linked to self-control. Wei et al. (2013) also found that the European Americans valued interpersonal harmony more than the Chinese participants. Chinese participants reported more restraint and patience than European Americans, and European Americans showed a higher tendency to self-enhance their self-assessment data. This meant that the European American participants answered dishonestly in order to improve their results.

The self-assessment results from the Wei et al. study (2013) imply that places with collectivist ideas, such as China, yield better social harmony than somewhere similar to America that demonstrates individualistic ideas. The findings from the data (Wei et al., 2013) show that variables, such as valuing freedom, among European Americans resulted in less self-control but better interpersonal harmony than the Chinese participants. Since self-control can affect obtaining certain achievements, Wei and colleagues (2013) predicted that higher self-control would yield more happiness. As shown in the results from Wei et al. (2013), aspects of self-control in Chinese participants, such as suppression, were higher than the European Americans. Feeling the need to suppress oneself, and other variables, can portray that these societies of collectivism may have better self-control, but they may not be happier than individualist societies (Butler et al., 2007). Although it is difficult to define one's happiness and self-control, simply through different cultural perspectives, since everyone's own idea of what self-control means is based around personal preferences and desires.

Subjectivity of happiness

As mentioned previously, happiness is a subjective emotion and the meaning or reasoning behind happiness can vary across the world. For instance, a study took students from South Africa and Germany to compare their individual experiences and values concerning

happiness, and to uncover lay beliefs about the nature of happiness in these locations (Pflug, 2009). In Pflug's study (2009) there were 57 Germans and 44 Black South Africans who completed a prompted essay. Researchers explained to the participants that they were to write a free format essay responding to the open-ended question of "what is happiness to you?". Considering that these participants came from different settings, one would assume that they would have experienced different life events, situations, environments, and ways of living (Suh & Oishi, 2002). Researchers were looking for the conceptions of happiness in both of these populations.

After analyzing the participants' essays, Pflug found various underlying themes from both locations regarding happiness. Pflug found that the German students' ideas of happiness entailed aspects of freedom, autonomy, and hedonic pleasure. The South African students described happiness through contentment, social harmony, and close family relationships. These different ideas of happiness ultimately affect how the individuals vary in self-control as well.

Derived from the data, we find that the meaning of happiness varies around the globe from culture to culture and from person to person. Through this finding, it can be implied that since self-control also varies depending on perspective, that happiness would vary with it and that these two concepts would be connected. Although this theory is speculated, the associations between self-control and happiness may be coincidental and not definitively causal. Results found that happiness for the German students consisted of ideas related to self-control over themselves such as being autonomous or independent. On the other hand, the South African students expressed notions of happiness, and therefore self-control through these obligations, through aspects of social harmony and familial ties. These ideas can be related to the previously mentioned work of Wei et al. (2013) and how individualist and collectivist countries differ in

self-control and happiness. As was portrayed in Pflug's study (2009), the individualist (German) students included more self-attaining terms of happiness through individual points of self-control. In contrast, the collectivist (South African) students portrayed happiness through more group-oriented terms of self-control.

The study pertaining to different perspectives of happiness reiterates the idea that with self-control comes a positive association with happiness (Pflug, 2009). The participants had different perspectives but the people who had a fair sense of what happiness meant to them were ultimately more content (Pflug, 2009). Both groups of participants had their own views on what happiness was, but as they described their ideas of happiness, they have also described features of self-control that are tied into their happiness. Despite sharing different beliefs that applied to happiness, the German and South African students also confirmed through their essays that some parts of self-control were positively correlated to happiness (Pflug, 2009). Although the perspectives on happiness and self-control were different, the relationship between self-control and happiness was consistent.

Self-control and happiness

Happiness is an emotion that can be correlated to self-control and has been explored among various cultures, countries, and continents. Self-control and happiness are related in a myriad of ways which can be supported using information from Wei et al. (2013) and Cheung et al. (2014) studies. Cheung et al.'s study (2014) used 546 German participants to further examine their research question. Cheung et al. (2014) hypothesized that trait self-control positively relates to happiness that is mediated by regulatory focus. Trait self-control was measured using a shortened version of the Self-Control Scale where participants answered using a 5-point Likert scale. Regulatory focus was measured using the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire which

measured promotion and prevention focus on a 9-point Likert scale. Promotion focus consists of growth, advancement, and accomplishment and focuses on an approach goal pursuit that labels goals to be “gains” and “non-gains” (Cheung et al., 2014). On the other hand, prevention focus highlights vigilance, responsibilities, and rigidity and for goals to be considered as “losses” and “non-losses” (Cheung et al., 2014). Happiness was also measured by using the Subjective Happiness scale with a 5-point Likert scale, answering questions in regard to how the participants related to them personally. The study found that trait self-control was positively associated with promotion focus and negatively associated with prevention focus. There was a significant effect of trait self-control having a positive correlation to happiness (Cheung et al., 2014).

Being able to focus on goals and avoid obstacles such as procrastinating has been correlated to more happiness (Cheung et al., 2014). People may occasionally have negative cycles of self-control and behavior, but people can also have positive cycles of self-control which can lead to positive behaviors and being generally happier (Hofmann et al., 2013). Self-control is like a muscle, meaning that the more a person practices and trains self-control, the better they can become at utilizing self-control. With this idea in mind, we can understand how happiness plays a role in self-control. If a person is engaging in healthy habits such as eating well, exercising, and meeting deadlines, it is more likely that they will continue these positive patterns and therefore increase their happiness (Hofmann et al., 2013). If someone is incorporating self-control into their everyday life, that will most likely lead to more happiness (Wei et al., 2013).

Cheung and colleagues focused on the correlation between self-control and happiness and found a positive effect of trait self-control on happiness (Cheung et al., 2014). Happiness and

self-control can both be subjective ideas depending on what cultures and values an individual has or is part of. Finding a positive correlation between self-control and happiness in Cheung et al.'s study could have other variables tied to the results that were not further examined. The participants being from Germany could have also had an effect on their self-control and happiness. This research implies that other countries with similar values and ideas could also have a positive relationship between self-control and happiness.

Family processes: predicting self-control and deviant behavior

In addition to self-control being an attribute that can be strengthened or weakened, self-control can also be predicted through a person's family processes (Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2007). This meaning that an individual's level, or amount, of self-control that they have can be calculated by the implementation of family processes, such as closeness and support (Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2007). For example, if a family implements beneficial family processes it can be presumed that their child will develop good self-control (Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2007). According to the article written by Vazsonyi and Belliston (2007), family processes were measured using subscales. These subscales equated to family closeness (relationship levels in the family), emotional/mental support (being present in order to support a family member both emotionally and mentally) and moderate monitoring (a fair amount of involvement in the family members life). In this study, the experimenters evaluated whether family processes were able to predict low self-control and how low self-control was associated with deviant behavior. The effects of self-control on deviant behavior yield strong correlations to crime and similar deviance (Pratt & Cullen, 2000). Deviant behavior can include criminal activities, drug and/or alcohol use, school misconduct, and similar negligent actions (Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2007).

In this study, measures of family processes, self-control, and deviant behaviors were acquired from the participants through the use of questionnaires with various point scales. Participants consisted of individuals from middle to late adolescents located in Hungary, Japan, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the U.S. In using people from these various locations around the world, the experimenters were able to obtain people with different cultures and therefore differing beliefs and ideas towards self-control (Vazsonyi et al., 2001). The results from this study displayed that adolescents that did not have close family relationships, were not emotionally or mentally supported, and that did not have a fair amount of supervision from the family were associated with low self-control and deviant behaviors (Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2007).

Through this study we can see how low self-control was predicted through familial relationships and was also related to deviant measures. Due to previous research, it can also be concluded that the adolescents who participated in this study, that had more deviant behaviors and low values of the family processes measurements, were not doing well in certain areas such as academically and in their family relations (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Most people who partake in drug and alcohol use and suffer academically are lacking self-control and therefore also lack in motivation (Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2007). Vazsonyi and Belliston's findings suggest that family processes play an important role in developing self-control and that families who are present and included in their children's life will be better off emotionally and mentally. Higher levels of family closeness and emotional support were associated with better self-control, and this enhanced self-control resulted in better grades, socialization, and motivation (Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2007). These positive achievements and components of an individual can usually be

associated with a person who is doing well in their overall life and has good self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 2001).

Implications

As stated throughout this paper, the core of self-control, such as its foundation of controlling desires and emotions, stays consistent around the globe but there are countless ways that individuals perceive self-control. The mindset surrounding what self-control entails can be depicted through countless perspectives, but they are all based on each individual person's emotions and desires. A part of self-control that can change from culture to culture pertains to what stems from an individual's emotions, desires, and what makes them happy. These perceptions can vary in cultures and individuals depending on their core beliefs and whether they share ideas of individualism or collectivism (Wei et al., 2013). Differing ideas of what constitutes self-control may lead to differing beliefs about what constitutes happiness (Pflug, 2009). Through research focusing on self-control and happiness and how they are connected (Cheung et al., 2014), we can see how self-control leads to positive behavior. Therefore, through these positive behaviors, there is more satisfaction in life and happiness (Hofmann et al., 2013). Despite dissimilar beliefs of what happiness means among cultures, communities, and countries, everyone can hopefully say that they have experienced what happiness feels like. One person might describe happiness as being close to their family, whereas a different person may express happiness through freedom from their family. This can be analyzed through a lens of contrasting ideas of self-control among people and how they describe happiness (Pflug, 2009). The foundations of self-control and happiness may differ among individuals but the ideology of self-control's positive association with happiness still holds true (Suh & Oishi, 2002).

Discussion

Limitations

Although there were careful examinations of previous findings, the participant datasets that were examined covers only a small portion of the worldwide data that is still out there. Despite the numerous studies about varying perspectives on self-control and happiness across cultures, it was a challenge to find previous research that accurately supported the idea of how self-control and happiness are positively correlated.

Conclusions

Previous research consistently supported the theory that self-control can be positively related to happiness. This examination of the outlook on happiness among different countries and cultures revealed that there can be positive correlations between self-control and happiness. Although there is a positive correlation between self-control and happiness, people can have different perspectives on what self-control and happiness mean to them individually.

Self-control has various effects on an individual, and these effects especially pertain to different countries and cultures. Features such as emotional suppression, social harmony, and interpersonal harmony are examples of what can be affected by differing ideas of self-control (Wei et al., 2013). Another important factor to take into consideration is whether one is part of an individualist or collectivist society. Being part of an individualist or collectivist culture can play a role in affecting an individual's self-control (Suh & Oishi, 2002). Collectivist societies such as China, value emotional suppression in exchange for social harmony (Wei et al., 2013). Having better emotional suppression means that these individuals are able to control their emotions better, which correlates to how having good self-control requires being able to control your emotions and desires. Collectivism therefore yields individuals with better self-control than those in individualistic societies and therefore these people have better social harmony (Wei et al.,

2013). As found in Wei et al.'s 2013 study we can presume that since people in collectivist cultures report more social harmony and emotional suppression, that they have good self-control which yields more complacent individuals.

As stated previously, happiness involves having satisfaction towards life and a subjective well-being (Veenhoven, 2012) and parts of self-control include staying goal focused and motivated (Cheung et al., 2014). Self-control can lead to happiness due to the positive aspects that come with having good self-control (Cheung et al., 2014). This is shown through the example on emotional suppression leading to social harmony and therefore happiness (Wei et al., 2013).

These forms of what happiness entails relies heavily on an individual's culture because different cultures have differing ideas of what happiness entails. Happiness is subjective, and for some people happiness can mean spending time with one's family, but on the other hand happiness for others can mean spending time away from one's family and having independence (Pflug, 2009). Low self-control can lead to deviant behaviors such as being involved with drugs or doing poorly academically. The associations between these concepts might be particularly challenging for individuals living in cultures that value family relationships and closeness. If someone in that situation did not have the best relationship with their families, then that lack of closeness can predict deviant behavior and lack of self-control (Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2007). Happiness and self-control rely greatly on individuals' perceptions of their own happiness (Cheung et al., 2014) and what that means to them. Despite differences in certain values that pertain to self-control, the core focus of having self-control can be the ultimate gateway to happiness.

Further Research

It is important for future researchers to compare self-control and happiness among cultures and examine how self-control and happiness positively correlate, because it is currently a very gray area, and more data could be very beneficial. Additional research on this subject can help on individual and collectivist levels such as with mental health issues and struggles within families. Examples of family struggles can include lack of communication, poor academics, and low family support (Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2007). The widespread knowledge that self-control may have a correlation with happiness can lead to people utilizing this information to positively impact their families (Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2007). Continuing research on the positive correlation between self-control and happiness can provide insight into certain aspects of mental health that have an emphasis on self-control such as OCD. Continuing research can also help identify self-control issues such as someone who may have too much or too little self-control in their life. More public information on the positive correlation between self-control and happiness across cultures can help families work together to prevent deviant behavior and promote better self-control. In highlighting the undertones of self-control, it could also help diagnose mental health issues that focus on self-control such as eating disorders, OCD, ADHD, etc. Some people may often not realize that they have mental illnesses and may assume that they are simply a more neurotic person or have a Type A personality, or on the opposite spectrum may believe that they are simply a lost cause. In emphasizing the importance of learning more about self-control and the varying levels of self-control, it can become more common knowledge as to what a moderate amount of self-control is and how it can positively affect areas of a person's life. This knowledge can positively impact academics and family relationships and can also shed light on how too much self-control can have negative outcomes associated with mental struggles such as OCD and ADHD.

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