

ROBERT BISWAS-DIENER, JOAR VITTERSØ and ED DIENER

MOST PEOPLE ARE PRETTY HAPPY, BUT THERE IS CULTURAL VARIATION: THE INUGHUIT, THE AMISH, AND THE MAASAI

ABSTRACT. Diener and Diener (1996; *Psychological Science* 7: 181–185) suggested that most people are happy, and offered support for this claim from surveys in industrialized societies. We extend their findings to include people who lead materially simple lives and live in cultures far removed from those of typical survey respondents. We found that the Kenyan Maasai, the United States Amish, and the Greenlandic Inughuit, all reported positive levels of life satisfaction, domain satisfaction, and affect balance (more frequent positive emotions than negative ones). Across satisfaction and affect measures, including methods in addition to global self-reports, our 358 respondents from these cultures were one average, positive on all 54 scales, and significantly above neutral on 53 of them. Across all measures and samples 84% of participants scored above neutral. However, nobody was perfectly happy and satisfied, and the groups reported unique configurations of satisfaction and affect. Although all three groups were high in satisfaction with social domains, the Amish reported lower satisfaction with self-related domains, and the Maasai and Inughuit were relatively lower in satisfaction with material domains. All three groups reported frequent positive emotions, but only the Maasai reported frequent feelings of pride. Thus, the fact that most people tend to be moderately happy does not mean that they are ecstatic, or that there is no variation across cultures in happiness.

In 1996 Diener and Diener claimed that most people are happy, and implied that this is a natural state gifted to us by evolution. They reviewed evidence showing that a wide range of people, on average, report positive (above neutral) levels of well-being. From an evolutionary perspective these results make sense: the predominance of pleasant emotions would facilitate approach behaviors, because these emotions lead to the broadening and building of resources (Fredrickson, 2001), and high activation pleasant emotions include facets such as activity and energy that are almost synonymous with approach behavior. The

importance of these approach-oriented behaviors might be particularly beneficial for an intelligent species that can move between new and different environments. This is congruent with Ito et al. (1998) positivity-offset theory, the idea that people have a slightly positive hedonic tone that stimulates approach behaviors when no hedonic stimuli are active.

But, because the data reviewed by Diener and Diener came almost entirely from people in industrialized societies, another explanation is possible: that some factor related to life in industrialized culture contributed to the reports of positive well-being. For example, there could be emotion norms for positivity common to industrial cultures, which tend toward individualistic definitions of self (Triandis, 1995). Another possibility is that people reported happiness because industrial society largely meets human needs. Industrialized countries tend, for example, to have better infrastructure, better health care systems, better human rights records, more formalized social welfare programs, lower unemployment, and higher rates of education for both sexes than their "third world" counterparts. These advantages could lead to an increase in subjective well-being (SWB). In the present article, we extend the analysis of Diener and Diener to cultures that are substantially different from industrialized culture, including collectivist culture and materially simple culture. We examine the Maasai of Kenya, traditional pastoralists who have few modern amenities and little exposure to western media, the Amish, who consciously reject modern values and technologies, and the Inughuit of Greenland, who live in a harsh environment and retain many elements of a hunting lifestyle.

In addition to sampling culturally distinct groups, we have included several types of measures in our studies to more strongly test the generality of Diener and Diener's conclusions. In terms of content, we examined both cognitive and affective components of SWB including life satisfaction, reports of satisfaction with specific domains (e.g., food, friendships, and physical appearance), and affect balance (positive minus negative emotions). We also employed several different methodologies to assess SWB. In addition to the global self-reports scales that are frequently used in this field, we also measured happiness by the reports of friends and family members of the respondents.