Fear of happiness across cultures:
A review of where and why are people afraid of happiness

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Abstract
One of the basic postulations of contemporary Western culture is that pursuing personal happiness is among the highest values guiding individuals’ lives. 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 the field of subjective well-being). However, some important facets of the experience of happiness have been overlooked so far 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 afraid of happiness for several different reasons. This article presents the first review of the concept of the fear of happiness. Implications of the outcomes are discussed, as are directions for further research.

Key words: Fear of happiness; values, subjective well-being; happiness; Western psychology; positive psychology

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1. Introduction

In contemporary psychological literature, scientific analysis of individuals’ well-being is mainly undertaken in the well-established field of happiness studies, and involves research on subjective well-being. 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, hedonism, and romantic individualism (Christopher & 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 the highest value guiding individuals’ lives and best understood as a personal concept (that has come to be captured by subjective well-being). In this paper, any unqualified use of the term ‘happiness’ refers to the Western concept of personal happiness that is characterised by individualism and a focus on pleasure and other positive emotions (Joshanloo, 2013a).

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 afraid of it. In this paper the fear of happiness, and particularly different reasons why different cultures fear 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 reasons to fear happiness and that at least some people from all cultures are likely to fear happiness for one or more of them. 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 happiness should be actively pursued (Section 2). Then we provide a philosophical analysis of the concept ‘fear of happiness’ (Section 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 happiness highly, and may even fear happiness for a variety of different reasons (Section 4). We then report on an even wider range of research (from psychology, philosophy, cultural studies, and religious studies) to provide evidence for a range of different reasons why people believe that happiness should be avoided and feared, 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 (Section 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 (Section 6).

2. The hegemony of the quest for personal happiness in Western culture

Most of the Western research on happiness shares the assumption that happiness should be actively pursued. Indeed, it is an American cultural assumption that failing to appear happy is cause for concern (Eid & Diener, 2001; Held, 2002; Lyubomirsky, 2000; Menon, 2012). In the USA, “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 economists nearly always presuppose that happiness is universally the highest human good (e.g., Myers, 1993). 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 Frey & Stutzer, 2002, p. vii; Seligman, 1998). It is thought that, in this era when subjective well-being is so highly valued, people should strive for happiness in any way possible (Gruber, Mauss, & Tamir, 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 coming from 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.

With 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. 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 & Diener, 2008). And policymakers have listened to these
calls, as shown by the recent release of the United Nations-backed World Happiness Report (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs 2012) and the OECD Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-being (OECD 2013).

How about other cultures? Does happiness work as the supreme value and key pillar of a good life across all cultures? Acknowledging that there are cultural differences in this regard, Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) maintain that for North Americans the pursuit of happiness is intrinsically salient, while for other parts of the world, it is not as important. However, Lyubomirsky and colleagues also claim that the pursuit of happiness is becoming increasingly salient around the world. That is, with globalization and democratization, people around the world are becoming increasingly obsessed with their personal happiness. While there seems to be an element of truth in this claim, other values are still more salient 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 norm of ‘happiness as the highest goal’ is far from universal (e.g., Ahuvia, 2001; D’Andrade, 1984; Lutz, 1987; Mesquita & Albert, 2007; Snyder & Lopez, 2007; Wierzbicka, 1994). For example, Suh (2000) argues that while Westerners feel a strong pressure to be happy (i.e., to gain 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. When the supreme goal of a culture is social harmony, personal happiness can even be perceived as detrimental to social relationships (Uchida, Norasakkunkit, & Kitayama, 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 individualistic happiness.
3. Fear of happiness: The concept

The concept ‘fear of happiness’ discussed in this paper constitutes a relatively stable normative belief domain constituted by the notion that certain personal relations with happiness should be avoided for one or more reasons. Divisions within the domain of fear of happiness beliefs include: the different reasons for believing that happiness should be feared, the different extents to which happiness should be feared (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 should be feared (e.g., some people only fear extreme happiness), the different kinds of happiness that are feared (e.g., pleasure and not pain, satisfaction with life, or all personal happiness), and the different relations that an individual can have to happiness (e.g., being happy, expressing happiness, or actively pursuing happiness).

As will be discussed, people from different cultures tend to have different reasons for believing that different relations to different degrees and kinds of happiness should be feared to different extents. However, some reasons for believing that certain relations to happiness should be feared 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 actually makes someone a bad person. Certainly the concept ‘fear of happiness’, as discussed here, is a broad one, but the discussion below is intended to shed light on the different aspects of fear of happiness with the aim of encouraging further study on the concept as a whole and its major subdomains.
Furthermore, despite these many divisions within the fear of happiness, it might also be useful to consider fear of happiness as an overarching normative belief about the extent to which happiness should be pursued or avoided, with different reasons to fear happiness cumulatively contributing to the strength of this belief.

Given space constraints, this paper focuses on providing cultural and empirical evidence for beliefs that various reasons justify a fear of the kind of happiness that dominates Western culture and Western happiness studies, a personal happiness characterised by individualism and a focus on pleasure and other positive emotions (Joshanloo, 2013a). It is to this task that we now turn.

4. Evidence for fear of 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 happiness is literally feared by some people and 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 and is often explained with reference to opposing cultural views about the value of certain emotions, including happiness (Eid & Diener, 2001; Kitayama et al., 1997; Kitayama, Mesquita, & Karasawa, 2006; Mesquita & 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 & 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 should be responsible for their own happiness—and explicit pursuit—a belief that 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 speak directly to the fear of happiness concept, 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 (harmony, conformity) may be often times at odds with an individualistic and hedonistic pursuit of 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 & Ghaedi, 2009; Lu, 2006; Sagiv, Roccas, & Hazan, 2004; Triandis, 2000). It is possible, therefore, that being raised in a culture that does not value happiness could encourage the development of negative views about happiness, including aversion and possibly fear.
4.2 Evidence that happiness is avoided or diminished

Culture influences individuals’ attitudes towards positive experiences, including whether they seek to avoid or diminish them (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). Miyamoto and Ma (2011) showed that cultural scripts played 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; c.f. Bryant & 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 & Veroff, 2007; Quoidbach et al., 2010; Wood, Heimpel, & Michela, 2003).

That some individuals and cultures tend to avoid and diminish happiness does not necessitate that these people fear happiness, but these behaviours are consistent with fearing happiness. If someone fears happiness, they would likely avoid circumstances that tend to elicit happiness and try to suppress any happiness that happened to well up within them. Still, much more evidence is needed to establish that some individuals and cultures tend to fear happiness.

4.3 Evidence that happiness is feared

Direct evidence for the fear of happiness in a non-Western society can be found in a study of the relationship between fear of happiness and satisfaction with life for 220 students from the University of Tehran. Joshanloo (2013b) tested the Iranian
students with a 5-item fear of happiness scale, which assesses the belief that happiness, and especially extreme happiness, should be feared and avoided because it leads to negative consequences. For example, one item asks for the extent of agreement with the statement: “I prefer not to be too joyful, because usually joy is followed by sadness” (Joshanloo, 2013b, p. 648). Joshanloo found that his fear of happiness scale was negatively correlated with the items of a life satisfaction scale.

Although we expect fear of happiness to be much more prevalent in non-Western cultures, direct evidence for the 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, the fear of happiness is 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).

The fear of happiness has also been quantified in a Western culture. Gilbert and colleagues (2012) created a 9-item fear of happiness scale based on comments made to Gilbert during therapy sessions, and tested it on 185 University of Derby students. The scale intended to “explore people’s perceptions and anxieties around feeling happy” and mainly included items that capture feelings of fear about 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 and colleagues (2012, p. 383) 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 fear of happiness and shown its potential relevance to clinical practice. Gilbert and colleagues (2012) conclude that further investigation of different reasons for why people fear happiness is likely to have important implications for clinical psychology.

So, the fear of happiness is real and exists in both Western and non-Western cultures. But why do people fear happiness?

5. Reasons for the fear of happiness across cultures

In this section we provide cultural and empirical evidence of happiness being feared, or being worthy of fear or avoidance, for the following reasons: 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.

5.1 Being happy causes bad things to happen to you

Our research has shown us that many people fear happiness because bad things, such as unhappiness, suffering, and death, tend to (or necessarily) 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 these negative conditions is enough to make people fear happiness. Furthermore, since different emotional states, such as happiness and unhappiness are valued differently by different cultures (e.g., Diener, Oishi, & Lucas 2003, p. 412), we should expect to find cultural differences in the extent to which people fear happiness because of the negative conditions it can cause.
In East Asian cultures, which are somewhat under the influence of Taoism, happiness and unhappiness are seen as interdependent and complementary concepts. In Taoism, it is posited that everything eventually reverts to its opposite (Chen, 2006; Peng, Spencer-Rodgers, & Nian, 2006), so happiness will ultimately revert to 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). For example, Ji, Nisbett, and Su (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 leads to 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 & 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. Proverbs 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 leads to unhappiness is also present, albeit to a lesser degree, in Western cultures (Ho, 2000). Several proverbs support this claim. 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 inevitably followed by unhappiness. Similarly, Holden (2009) claims that fearing happiness because it will lead to unhappiness is also the meaning behind the popular Western proverbs: “after happiness, there comes a fall” and “what goes up must come down” (p. 111).

Furthermore, Gilbert and colleagues (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 fear happiness because they fear the devastating loss of happiness more than they value the attainment of it. Indeed, Epicurus (c. 341-271 B.C.E) warned that happiness was to be avoided because it will result in painful unsatisfiable desires for more and better of the same (Weijers 2011).

While some might fear all degrees of happiness, others only fear 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 is thought to lead to suffering (Minami 1971), echoed by the Chinese proverb: “extreme happiness begets tragedy” (Bryant & 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. Philosopher Joel Kupperman (2006) provides the following possible explanation for the negative consequences of extreme happiness: extreme happiness is bad 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 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 fear happiness. In traditional Christianity, if happiness 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 a fear of happiness because they pushed the idea “that to be happy is to be doing wrong” onto nearly all Western children up till the second half of the 19th 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 the 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 happiness is feared because people believe that happiness, and especially extreme happiness, leads to
unhappiness and other negative consequences that outweigh the benefits of being happy.

5.2 Being happy makes you a worse person

People don’t just fear happiness because it might lead to something bad, however; some individuals and some cultures tend to believe that being happy is something to be feared and avoided because being happy makes you a worse person. Again, we found evidence for this belief in both non-Western and Western cultures.

Generally speaking, Islam is critical of laughing (which is a sign of happiness) and fond of weeping (Joshanloo, 2013b). 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 of mourning, happiness has been associated with shallowness, foolishness, and vulgarity. To make matters worse, happy people are also seen as being distracted from God, making them morally and spiritually deficient. In contrast, sad people are often defined as serious and deep. Since Islam is relatively widespread, the fear of happiness because it makes you a bad person is likely to be equivalently widespread. Similarly, but on a smaller scale, Holden (2009, p. 110) observes that some Westerners fear 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”.

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 feared happiness because being happy might make them less motivated to fight for justice, and thereby, 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, happiness is sometimes feared not for what it leads to, but for what it is and what it means about the person who is happy. In both Western and non-Western cultures, evidence points to the fear of being happy because being happy makes you a worse person.

5.3 Expressing happiness is bad for you and others
In addition to fearing being happy, individuals in many cultures have issued warnings about expressing happiness because of the negative consequences for the expresser and those around her. Indeed, the negative consequences of expressing happiness are often thought to be so strong that it is appropriate to fear happiness. 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 and feared in many non-Western and Western cultures.

According to Uchida and Kitayama (2009), in Eastern cultures, expressing happiness can arouse envy, such that the positive feelings associated with happiness might be offset by the negative feelings of guilt and disharmony. Indeed, Miyamoto, Uchida, and Ellsworth’s (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 not (Uchida & 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, Spencer-Rodgers, & Peng, 2008; Leu et al., 2010; Miyamoto, Uchida, & Ellsworth, 2010).

Similarly, Lyubomirsky (2000) observes that the expression 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 their happiness. 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 fear anything that might cause neighbourly envy and resentment, such as overt displays of happiness. Even in the West, as Holden (2009, pp. 109-110) observes, it is common to fear expressing happiness, and especially extreme happiness, because it annoys, and attracts the envy of, others and even invites possible attack from them.

In many cultures, even those with the power to resist attacks from their mortal peers have reason to fear 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). 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 achievement (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”).

In sum, there are individuals and cultures that tend to fear 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 pursuing happiness because of the negative consequences for the pursuer and those around him. These warnings could plausibly result in individuals and cultures tending to fear the pursuit of happiness; 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 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 & Shapiro, 2006). Furthermore, Ricard (2011) argues that the desire for 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 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 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. Brickner, 2012; Hochschild, 1996). Indeed, that the pursuit of happiness (at least in its dogged, unreflective, or extreme versions) 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 pursuit of 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 (Martin 2008)—an idea with a lengthy history in Western thought that goes back at least as far as Epicurus (discussed above).

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 as a result of the widespread pursuit of the American dream. Hochschild (1996), for instance, points out that the American dream is based on radical
individualism, the importance of personal achievement, and indifference to society as a whole. It is highly materialistically oriented and self-centred, leaving no room for other personal values or the values of others. Hochschild believes that this ideology is flawed, concurring 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 (2001, p. 384) agrees that the pursuit of 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 & 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. Given these voices and norms it is not surprising that some people fear 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 the fear of happiness is entirely absent. The fear of 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 & Smith, 2006; Eid & 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 & Hamedani, 2007), we expect no culture to unanimously hold any of these beliefs.
In brief, the evidence that we have gathered here not only casts doubt on the universality of the high value of happiness, but also indicates that several different beliefs about happiness cause some individuals and groups to tend to fear it.

6. Conclusion and implications

It seems that, in Western contexts, there is a heavy emphasis on happiness, and failing to be happy is viewed negatively. Western (in particular 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 & Law, 1985, p. 261). The zeitgeist of happiness is reflected in the fields of positive psychology and subjective well-being that dominate the contemporary research on happiness. However, our survey across time and cultures indicates that many important aspects of happiness, especially linked to the fear of happiness, have gone relatively unnoticed in the contemporary happiness literature.

Our review of contemporary and historical psychological, philosophical, cultural, and religious research revealed that: the fear of happiness is probably widespread (albeit with varying degrees of influence in different cultures), there are several different beliefs that underpin people’s fear of happiness, and the existence of beliefs about why happiness should be feared seems to have many important implications. The potential scope and depth of these implications demands attention from happiness scholars, and particularly more empirical research on the topic (designed to quantify the extent of different fear of happiness beliefs around the world).
Perhaps the most important implication of the fear of happiness (and related beliefs) is the doubt it casts on claims about the universality of the supreme importance of happiness (characterised by individualism and a focus on pleasure and other positive emotions) in individuals' lives. Some fear of happiness beliefs 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 many do. Indeed, most fear of happiness beliefs tend to be 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, or even a universal good, is untenable unless each culture were to create its own definition of happiness. Most importantly, cross-cultural research on happiness should not assume that national subjective well-being scores are reporting on something that everyone values.

The existence of cultural differences in the extent of fear of happiness beliefs also has very important implications for the debate about whether international differences in levels of subjective well-being are due to cultural reporting biases, actual differences in functioning in different cultures, or both. That is, it stands to reason that a person with a fear of expressing happiness 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 the fear of being happy 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 experienced less positive emotion in their lives. Therefore, fear of being happy might make individuals less happy, providing reason to think that the differences in levels of subjective well-being across cultures might reflect actual differences instead of cultural response biases. Clearly this is a fruitful avenue for further research. Most important 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 subjective well-being is contributed by such cultural beliefs as fear of 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 subjective well-being, the fear of happiness construct may help us 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, Knutson, & Fung, 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, Miao, & Seppala, 2007). It might be argued that the fear of 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 fears extreme happiness because they believe it to be hazardous.
Future research should also investigate how the fear of happiness is translated into actual behaviour in different life domains. For example, are individuals with high fear of 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 fear of happiness like to listen to or avoid? Given that drinking alcohol may lead to excessive merriness, what are the drinking habits of these individuals?

In sum, much research is required to systematically study the fear of happiness and its consequences for individuals and societies. Such studies should be taken seriously and should be accelerated. Indeed, there are risks for happiness studies in exporting Western psychology to non-Western cultures without undertaking indigenous analyses, including 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, resulting 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 the fear of happiness, cross-cultural psychologists can contribute to the healthy growth of this line of research. 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.

References


