

**Religiosity Reduces the Negative Influence of Injustice on Subjective Well-being: A
Study in 121 Nations**

Mohsen Joshanloo

Chungbuk National University

&

Dan Weijers

Sacramento State

Abstract

National injustice has been linked to lower national happiness. We predict that national religiosity will mitigate this negative influence of injustice on happiness. We test this hypothesis analyzing national-level data from 121 nations, using a single-level moderated regression analysis. To capture various aspects of national injustice, we combine four national measures associated with injustice, namely: indexes of group grievances, political terror, rule of law, and corruption perceptions. The results show that national religiosity has a significant moderating effect on the relationship between injustice and happiness, such that higher levels of religiosity mitigate more of the negative effects of injustice on happiness than lower levels do. The results hold when religious affiliation and indexes of economic prosperity, education, and social support are controlled for. These results indicate that people in religious cultures may successfully utilize religious faith to deal with adverse conditions.

Keywords: injustice, religiosity, subjective well-being, happiness, culture

Introduction

The results of national-level studies indicate that several variables that could be understood as measures of national injustice are significantly correlated with measures of national happiness. In a study of 65 nations, Elliot and Hayward (2009) found that national curtailment of civil, religious, and political freedoms was associated with lower satisfaction with life. Other research shows that national corruption (indicating injustice inflicted by the public sector) is negatively correlated with national happiness (Tavits, 2008; Veenhoven, 2004). Inequality of income and other goods, which is seen as a form of injustice by some (Glaeser, Scheinkman, & Shleifer, 2003), has also been argued to be negatively correlated with happiness (Senik, 2009, p. 12; e.g. Pickett & Wilkinson, 2010; Verme 2011). In addition to these mainly national-level results, research at the individual level has also documented a negative relationship between the perception of injustice and personal happiness (e.g. Dalbert, 1998; Johnson, 1990; Maes, Schmitt, Lischetzke, & Schmiedemann, 1998). Taken together, these results indicate that higher levels of national injustice are associated with lower levels of national happiness.

National-level studies also suggest that the negative psychological effects of difficult national circumstances, such as injustice, can be mitigated by national religiosity. In a study of 154 nations, Diener, Tay, and Myers (2011) found that religiosity (measured as the perceived importance of religion) was associated with higher positive affect and lower negative affect, especially when national circumstances were difficult relative to other nations. Religiosity may also buffer the adverse consequences of poverty, as indicated by Gebauer, Nehrlich, Sedikides, and Neberich's (2013) study of 187,957 respondents from 11 nations. Gebauer and colleagues find that religious people in religious cultures reported higher well-being when their income was low compared to when it was high.

Elliot and Hayward (2009) investigated 65 nations and found that in nations in which the government heavily curtails civil, religious, and political freedoms, respondents who self-identified as religious (independently of church attendance) were more likely to be satisfied with their lives. Citing Pargament, Tarakeshwar, Ellison, and Wulff (2001), Elliot and Hayward (2009, p. 305) suggest that, in times of national difficulties, religion might provide people with a “positive means of interpreting the cause and purpose of their painful life experiences”. Diener and colleagues suggest that this effect of religiosity may result from religion providing “supportive and integrative social structures that can... dampen the harmful effects of difficult circumstances” (Diener, Tay, & Myers, 2011, p. 1288). The results of these cross-national studies give reason to believe that nations with higher levels of religiosity might be more protected from the negative psychological effects of national injustice than nations with lower levels. Thus, we predicted that the negative effect of national injustice on national happiness would be reduced in nations with higher levels of religiosity. In other words, we predicted that national religiosity would moderate the relationship between injustice and happiness. We tested this religiosity-as-buffer hypothesis using data from 121 nations.

Control Variables and Analysis

It is possible that several other factors could interfere with the effect of national religiosity on the relationship between national injustice and national happiness, so we controlled for a number of these potentially confounding variables in our analyses. We acknowledge that various religions have various concepts of the divine and different perceptions of hardship and injustice. For example, only Abrahamic religions are monotheistic and have the conception that individuals should have a relationship with God, who is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good, in the way that may make the presence of

real-world injustice seem so troubling. Therefore, we included religious affiliation in our analyses to control for its potential effects.

It can be argued that more religious nations, which happen to be more collectivistic, deal better with injustice and other difficulties not because of their religiosity, but because people in these nations receive better social support from their tight and vast social networks. Social support has been found to correlate with happiness (e.g., Helliwell, Barrington-Leigh, Harris, & Huang, 2010), and to reduce the negative effects of many stressors (Taylor, 2011), so it may also reduce the negative effects of injustice. Therefore, we included social support as a control variable in our analyses to control for its effects.

We also included two other control variables as they are associated with our central variables: economic prosperity and education. The economic prosperity of nations was included as a control variable because the results of other studies suggest that it might independently affect our variables of interest; it correlates with happiness (e.g., Helliwell, 2003), religiosity (e.g., Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2007), and injustice (e.g., Diener & Diener, 1995). Education was included as a control variable for similar reasons; it has been found to correlate negatively with religiosity (e.g., Meisenberg, Rindermann, Patel, & Woodley, 2012) and positively with happiness (e.g., Florida, Mellander, & Rentfrow, 2013; Graham & Felton, 2006; Layard, 2005).

Method

Sample

121 nations were included in this study. These nations were chosen because we had data for all of the variables of this study for them. The list of the nations included in the analyses is presented in Table 1. These nations represent a large portion of the global population.

Measures

Injustice. Because a national injustice index is not available, we calculated a composite index of injustice for this study. Our thorough survey of the existing national indexes indicated that four national indexes can be used to indirectly measure various aspects of injustice:

- (1) An index of group grievances, measuring discrimination as well as ethnic, communal, sectarian and religious violence (Fund for Peace, 2012)
- (2) The political terror index, measuring state-sponsored political violence and repression (Gibney, Cornett, Wood, & Haschke, 2011)
- (3) The rule of law, capturing the extent to which agents have confidence in and abide by the rules of society (Worldwide Governance Indicators Project, 2011)
- (4) The perceived levels of public sector corruption as measured by the corruption perceptions index (Transparency International, 2012).

Group grievances are an important aspect of national-level injustice because justice is supposed to be impartial with respect to morally irrelevant factors such as ethnicity and religious affiliation. The index for state-sponsored political violence and oppression captures the abuse-of-power aspect of injustice. The index for the rule of law was included as it provides information about how just people believe their national laws to be (confidence in the rule of law), and whether they act justly in relation to their national laws (abiding by the rule of law). Finally, the Corruption Perceptions Index captures perceptions of injustice inflicted by the public sector, indicating abuse of public positions, and lower efficacy of the judiciary system in prosecuting corruption and restoring justice.

A principal axis factoring (followed by Promax rotation) on these four variables yielded only one factor with an eigenvalue greater than 1. The scree plot test also indicated a single factor. All four indexes loaded on this factor with factor loadings ranging from .78 to

.94 (eigenvalue = 3.251, variance explained = 81.27%). To give equal presence to the constituting indexes, the individual indexes were first standardized and then summed up to form the injustice index for each nation (the rule of law and corruption perceptions index indexes were reverse-coded). The national injustice index for all the nations are presented in Table 1.

Religiosity. The national religiosity scores provided by Diener and colleagues (2011) were used to assess religiosity. This index captures the average importance of religion in individuals' daily lives for each nation based on the data provided by the Gallup World Poll from 2005 to 2009.

Happiness. The affect balance scores of the nations provided by Diener, Suh, Kim-Prieto, Biswas-Diener, and Tay (2010) were used to measure national happiness, based on the Gallup World Poll data, collected from 2005 to 2006. Affect balance is the difference between positive (e.g., enjoyment) and negative feelings (e.g., sadness).

Economic prosperity. To measure the economic prosperity of the nations in the study, the economy sub-index of the 2012 Legatum Prosperity Index was used. This index measures "nations' performance in four key areas: macroeconomic policies, economic satisfaction and expectations, foundations for growth, and financial sector efficiency" (Legatum Institute, 2012, p. 12).

Education. The education sub-index of the 2012 Legatum Prosperity Index was used to measure the level of education in the nations under study. This index measures "nations' performance in three areas: access to education, quality of education, and human capital" (Legatum Institute, 2012, p. 18).

Social support. To assess the national level of social support, the social support index provided by Diener and colleagues (2010) was used. This index measures national levels of social trust and support based on the Gallup World Poll data, collected from 2005 to 2006.

Results

The intercorrelations among the variables of the study are presented in Table 2. Injustice was negatively correlated with happiness. Figure 1 shows the relationship between injustice and happiness for all the nations. We conducted three separate moderated regression analyses (Aiken & West, 1991) to test the hypotheses of the study. National religiosity was mean-centered in the analyses. The results of the regression analyses are presented in Table 3. We examined tolerances and variance inflation factors (VIFs) in all the three regression analyses. Using the traditional cut-points of tolerance $< .2$ and VIF > 5 , we found that multicollinearity was not an issue in the analyses.

In the first regression, we entered the main effects of religiosity and injustice, as well as their interaction term to predict national happiness. As can be seen in Table 3, we found that the interaction of religiosity with injustice was a significant predictor of happiness. This shows that the relationship between injustice and happiness is moderated by national-level religiosity. The moderating effect of religiosity is shown in Figure 2. The graph (produced by Interaction; Soper, 2013) demonstrates that the negative relationship between injustice and happiness is stronger for less religious nations. The results of a simple slope analysis showed that, whereas for moderately and lowly religious nations the relationship between injustice and happiness was significant (p [two-tailed] $< .001$), the relationship for highly religious nations was not significantly different from 0 (p [two-tailed] = .180).

In a separate analysis, we added major religious affiliations to the model to examine if the results would hold for all major religious affiliations. Based on the statistics provided by the Association of Religion Data Archives (2011)¹, we only included affiliations that were the

¹Although data related to the United States were not available in this source, we included the United States in the analysis as a majority Christian nation.

majority religion in more than five nations. Only Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism met this criterion, and so only these three were included in the analysis as dummy variables. The category against which these variables are assessed includes all other religious affiliations. As can be seen in Table 3, after controlling for religious affiliation, the interaction between injustice and religiosity remained a significant predictor of happiness, and the strength of the prediction was approximately the same as that in the first model. This means that the results hold across nations with various religious affiliations.

Finally, to examine if national levels of economic prosperity, education, and social support would explain the interaction between injustice and religiosity, in a separate analysis, we added these variables to the equation in conjunction with religious affiliation. As can be seen in Table 3, the interaction remained significant when controlling for these variables, indicating that the influence of religiosity as a mediator of the relationship between injustice and happiness cannot be explained by these variables.

Discussion

The correlations among the variables (see Table 2) are generally as expected. In line with previous research, injustice is negatively correlated with happiness (e.g. Elliot & Hayward, 2009; Pickett & Wilkinson, 2010; Verme 2011). The correlation between injustice and religiosity is strong, and probably represents several underlying relationships. It has been shown that people may turn to religion in times of hardship (Diener et al., 2011; Inglehart, 2010), and injustice is a kind of hardship. Moreover, nations with weak economies tend to have higher levels of both injustice (Diener & Diener, 1995) and religiosity (Inglehart, 2010). The small negative and non-significant correlation between religiosity and happiness should not be misinterpreted as evidence that religiosity tends to decrease happiness. This is because this result hides the fact that nations with high levels of religiosity tend to report lower levels

of happiness because, as the other correlations and previous research (e.g., Inglehart, 2010) show, those nations also tend to have worse living conditions, including being poorer, less well-educated, less just, and less socially supportive (all of which are positively correlated with happiness and each other).

Our main purpose was to investigate the moderating role of religiosity on the relationship between injustice and happiness. The religiosity-as-buffer hypothesis predicts that the negative effect of national injustice on national happiness is reduced in nations with higher levels of religiosity. Our findings were consistent with this hypothesis. In general, the negative effect of injustice on subjective well-being was mitigated to a greater extent in nations with higher proportions of the population reporting that religious belief is important to them.

It should be noted that these results offer little information about the exact mechanism by which the religiosity of a nation might reduce the negative psychological effects of national injustice. Roughly following a suggestion of Elliot and Hayward (2009), the buffering effect of national religiosity might be a product of the aggregation of individual-level psychological coping mechanisms that reduce the negative effect of the injustice by instilling a belief that everything happens for a reason. However, this individual-level effect might also interact with a national-level effect; living in a nation steeped in religious belief might make religious explanations for injustice more available and believable, and thereby make such explanations better at mitigating the negative psychological effects of living in an unjust nation.

In view of the diverse conceptualizations of happiness and injustice advocated in various religions, we tested whether our findings held in nations dominated by various religions. We found that the interaction of injustice and religiosity was still a significant predictor of happiness, indicating that the results are generalizable to many nations with

various religions. In this analysis, injustice remained a significant predictor of happiness, indicating that the negative influence of injustice on happiness holds in many religiously diverse populations. Religiosity's buffering effect on the relationship between injustice and happiness also remained significant when we added our control variables (economic prosperity, education, and social support) to the analysis. All of the control variables were significant predictors of happiness, justifying their inclusion. Adding the control variables to the regression weakened the direct predictive power of injustice, leaving it not significant. This change suggests that injustice's direct effect on happiness might be dependent on education, or social and economic factors, as well as religiosity. The buffer effect of religiosity on the relationship between injustice and happiness, however, was largely independent of the control variables.

The final result worthy of further comment is that education is positively correlated with happiness in the correlation analysis, whereas being a significant negative predictor of happiness in the regression analyses. This result is probably best justified by education's positive correlation with happiness being explained through the economic benefits of an educated populace (human capital), since economic prosperity was included as a variable in the regression analyses and probably stripped out the happiness-promoting aspect of education. The remaining aspects of education might then have a negative effect on happiness because an educated populace is very aware of the multitudinous problems facing them and the rest of the world's people, providing them with more somber moments. Moreover, higher education comes with higher expectations and standards of comparison, which may cause more frustration and disappointment in face of hardship (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976; Oishi, 2012).

Our results rule out an alternative prediction about the influence of religiosity on the relationship between injustice and happiness, inspired by previous findings at the individual

level. Drawing on these findings, some may argue that people in nations with high levels of religiosity might experience widespread difficulties in face of national injustice, given that many religions portray absolutely just deities, who reward their followers with beneficial lives. In other words, highly religious nations might be heavily populated with people who strongly believe that injustice should not occur as a result of their devotion to their deities. Therefore, the occurrence of injustice in highly religious nations might cause a national crisis of being angry at God because God should have prevented the injustice (e.g., Exline & Martin 2005; Exline et al., 2011; Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano, 2005). Prior studies at the individual level have shown that when religiosity is joined by high levels of anger at God or questioning of God, it can exacerbate the pernicious effects of some negative life circumstances on subjective well-being (Exline, Park, Smyth, & Carey, 2011; Pargament & Cummings, 2010; Pearce, Singer, & Prigerson, 2006). These studies may suggest that, if national injustice can cause national spiritual crises, then higher levels of national religiosity might exacerbate the negative effects of injustice on people's happiness. However, our findings did not support this prediction, and instead indicated that national religiosity mitigates the negative influence of injustice in religious nations.

Although these findings are promising, the study had limitations. This study only used national-level data, and should be followed up by analysis of multi-level data for a deeper investigation of the effects of religiosity on the relationship between injustice and happiness. For example, it may be the case that the buffering effect of national religiosity will become non-significant when individual-level religiosity is added to the analyses. Moreover, it seems reasonable to predict that only religious people would benefit from the buffering effects of living in a religious nation. These predictions could not be tested in the single-level analyses conducted in the present study, due to the required individual-level data being unavailable.

On the whole, our analyses seem to show that belief in religion helps to deal with the negative emotional impacts of injustice at the national level. A likely reason for this is that more religious believers view at least some injustice as a necessary part of some complicated higher plan for the greater good, rather than as a reason to be angry at, or lose faith in, God. Naturally, this does not entail that people with strong religious beliefs endorse or ignore the injustice around them. As the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1843/1955) argued, that someone believes every detail of the universe is managed by a perfect being does not prevent them from having preferences and taking actions, such as trying to prevent injustice, for these injustice-preventing actions are also part of the perfect beings' plan.

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Table 1
National Injustice Index

Nation	II	Nation	II	Nation	II	Nation	II
Afghanistan	8.04	Ukraine	2.44	Georgia	1.00	Lithuania	-3.22
Pakistan	6.14	Indonesia	2.40	Moldova	.99	Spain	-3.33
Yemen	5.89	Mauritania	2.39	Tanzania	.94	Hungary	-3.37
Nigeria	5.56	Dominican Republic	2.32	Malawi	.93	United Arab Emirates	-3.47
Zimbabwe	5.41	Ecuador	2.28	Senegal	.93	Poland	-3.48
Chad	5.37	Kazakhstan	2.26	Burkina Faso	.84	United States	-3.58
Iran	4.59	Guatemala	2.22	Jamaica	.76	Botswana	-3.75
Nepal	4.45	Belarus	2.06	Macedonia	.70	Estonia	-3.76
Uzbekistan	4.19	Niger	2.00	Jordan	.63	Czech Republic	-3.95
Bangladesh	4.18	Paraguay	2.00	Bosnia and Herzegovina	.55	France	-3.99
Russia	4.11	Saudi Arabia	1.86	Argentina	.42	Portugal	-4.29
Kyrgyzstan	4.06	Laos	1.82	South Africa	.31	Chile	-4.34
Egypt	4.01	Bolivia	1.81	Albania	.16	Korea, South	-4.36
Sri Lanka	3.91	Rwanda	1.70	Ghana	.16	Slovenia	-4.72
Venezuela	3.82	Togo	1.66	Mali	.09	Uruguay	-5.23
Kenya	3.43	Nicaragua	1.64	Trinidad and Tobago	-.29	United Kingdom	-5.26
Ethiopia	3.40	Madagascar	1.60	Romania	-.46	Japan	-5.33
Philippines	3.39	Honduras	1.59	Malaysia	-.50	Belgium	-5.40
Cambodia	3.37	Turkey	1.56	Benin	-.51	Austria	-5.51
Angola	3.16	Israel	1.56	Montenegro	-.54	Germany	-5.61
Uganda	3.09	Zambia	1.54	Greece	-.71	Netherlands	-6.23
India	3.01	Morocco	1.54	Bulgaria	-.74	Singapore	-6.32
Azerbaijan	2.91	Peru	1.54	Panama	-1.11	Australia	-6.34
Tajikistan	2.86	Armenia	1.33	Italy	-1.24	Norway	-6.61
Colombia	2.83	Mozambique	1.22	Kuwait	-1.64	Ireland	-6.69
Cameroon	2.79	Brazil	1.20	Latvia	-1.88	Switzerland	-6.73
Haiti	2.74	Sierra Leone	1.20	Croatia	-1.90	Canada	-6.73
Lebanon	2.69	Vietnam	1.19	Slovakia	-2.02	New Zealand	-6.78
Thailand	2.57	Serbia	1.13	Costa Rica	-2.21	Denmark	-7.20
Mexico	2.44	El Salvador	1.10	Cyprus	-2.42	Finland	-8.06
						Sweden	-8.15

Note. II = Injustice Index. Higher scores indicate higher injustice.

Table 2

Correlation Matrix Across Nations

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Happiness	1					
2. Injustice	-.38**	1				
3. Religiosity	-.13	.68**	1			
4. Economic Prosperity	.52**	-.66**	-.46**	1		
5. Education	.21*	-.67**	-.72**	.64**	1	
6. Social support	.51**	-.52**	-.52**	.59**	.68**	1

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 3
Summary of Moderated Regression Analyses Predicting Happiness

predictors	B	β	t	p	99% CI		N	R ²	F (df)
					L	U			
<i>Without covariates</i>									
Constant	.45	–	32.64	.000	.422	.495	121	.48	11.647 (3,117)**
Injustice	-.01	-.46	-3.97	.000	-.030	-.006			
Religiosity	.16	.28	2.55	.012	-.004	.331			
Injustice × Religiosity	.03	.25	2.73	.007	.002	.074			
<i>With religious affiliations</i>									
Constant	.46	–	9.92	.000	.340	.584	121	.49	6.076 (6,114)**
Injustice	-.01	-.43	-3.54	.001	-.029	-.004			
Religiosity	.17	.30	2.67	.009	.003	.347			
Injustice × Religiosity	.04	.27	2.80	.006	.003	.077			
Christian	.00	.00	.03	.974	-.122	.125			
Muslim	-.03	-.09	-.60	.548	-.166	.104			
Buddhist	.03	.05	.49	.624	-.139	.203			
<i>With all covariates</i>									
Constant	-.13	–	-1.26	.209	-.416	.145	119	.72	13.040 (9,109)**
Injustice	-.00	-.14	-1.21	.228	-.018	.007			
Religiosity	.16	.29	2.52	.013	-.006	.338			
Injustice × Religiosity	.03	.23	2.84	.005	.003	.067			
Christian	-.01	-.04	-.30	.762	-.118	.093			
Muslim	-.04	-.14	-1.11	.266	-.159	.064			
Buddhist	-.01	-.02	-.24	.806	-.154	.128			
Economic prosperity	.03	.37	3.31	.001	.007	.057			
Education	-.02	-.37	-2.91	.004	-.051	-.003			
Social support	.71	.55	5.67	.000	.385	1.046			

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Note. ps are based on two-tailed tests. Injustice and religiosity are centered. The social support score for Morocco, and the education and economy indexes for Madagascar were not available. Thus, these two nations were excluded in the last regression analysis reported in the table.

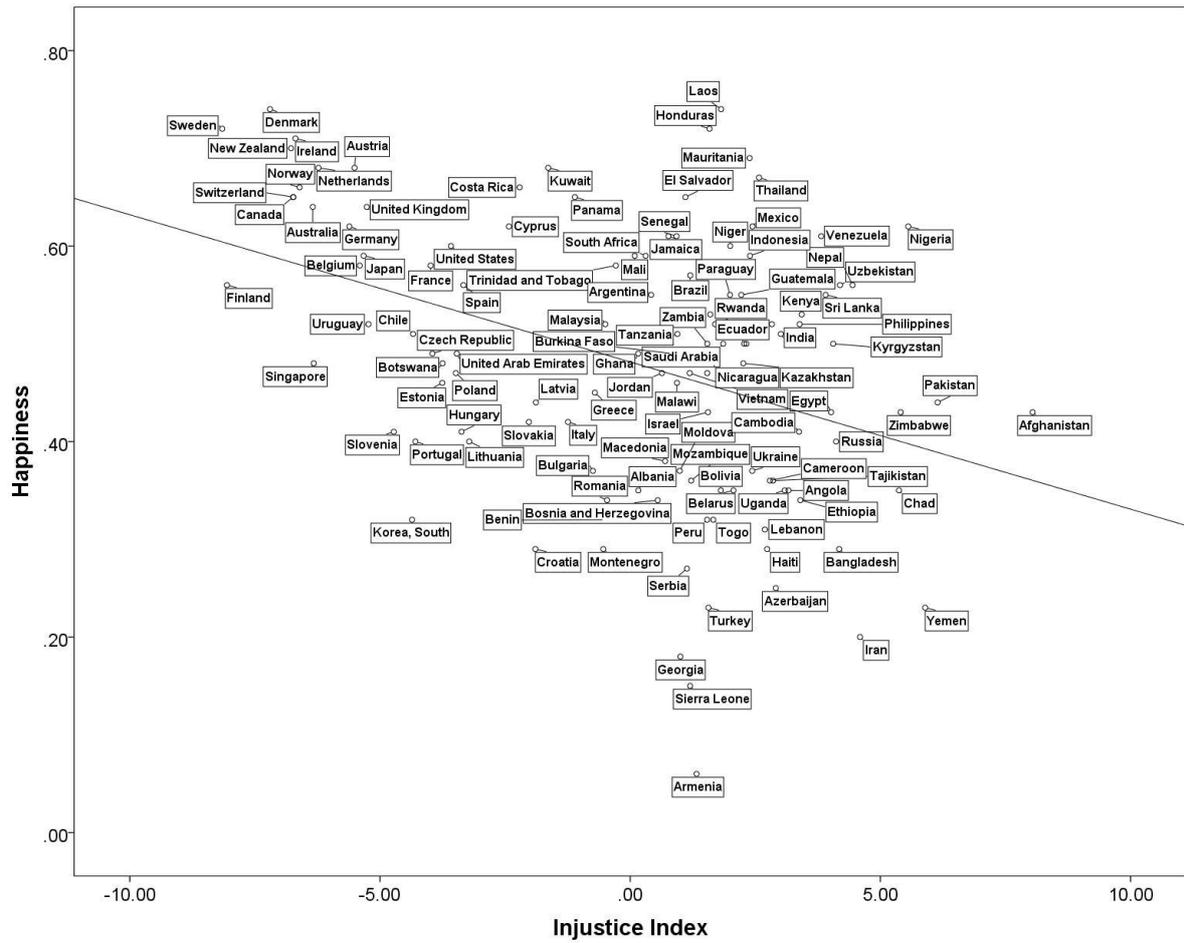


Figure 1

The relationship between the injustice index and national happiness

Note. Happiness is measured by an index of affect balance.

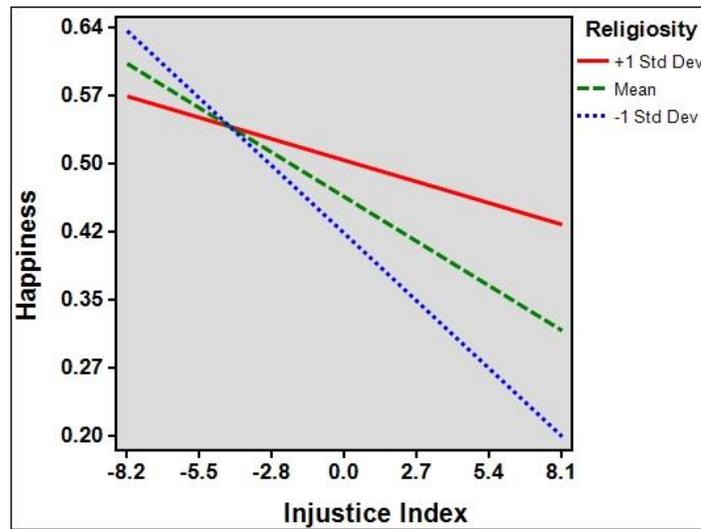


Figure 2

The interaction of injustice and religiosity in predicting national happiness

Note. Religiosity measures the importance of religion in individuals' daily lives. Happiness is measured by an index of affect balance.