

## Happiness strategies among Arab university students in the United Arab Emirates

Birleşik Arap Emirlikleri'ndeki Arap üniversite öğrencilerinin mutluluk stratejileri

Louise Lambert D'raven<sup>1</sup>, Nausheen Pasha-Zaidi<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

Research in positive psychology has recently shown that not only do conceptualizations of happiness vary by culture, but the ways in which individuals attain happiness also reflect how cultures are organized. Paralleling the dimensions of individualism and collectivism, recent research in positive psychology interventions (PPIs), activities undertaken by individuals to increase their level of happiness, has recently delineated between approaches that are 'self' and 'other' oriented. The goal of this study was to determine how members of collective societies pursued happiness and if these strategies were indeed "other" oriented. University students ( $N = 109$ ) from over 12 Middle Eastern countries, considered collectivist, participated. Participants predominately used 'other' oriented strategies to attain happiness, but not exclusively. They reported activities such as engaging in good deeds, being of service to others and gaining social acceptability as a result reflecting a collective orientation. Religion and stable political settings were also noted as contributing factors to happiness. They also pursued happiness through goal setting and reaching accomplishments, enjoying pleasures, and asserting greater control over their personal affairs reflecting an individualist approach. A balance of self and other approaches to happiness was evident.

**Keywords:** Culture, positive psychology interventions, individualism, collectivism, happiness

### Özet

Pozitif psikoloji alanındaki araştırmalar son dönemde, yalnızca mutluluğun kavramsallaştırılmasının kültüre göre değişmekte olduğunu değil, aynı zamanda bireylerin mutluluğu elde etme yollarının kültürlerin nasıl organize olduğunu yansıttığını da göstermiştir. Bireysellik ve kolektivizm boyutlarıyla paralel olarak pozitif psikoloji müdahaleleri (PPM) üzerine yapılan son araştırmalar, mutluluk düzeylerini arttırmak için bireyler tarafından üstlenilen etkinliklerin 'kendi' ve 'diğerleri' odaklı yaklaşımlar arasındaki çizgiyi belirginleştirdiğini göstermiştir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, kolektif toplum üyelerinin mutluluklarını nasıl devam ettirdiklerini ve bu stratejilerin aslında 'diğerleri' odaklı olup olmadığını araştırmaktır. Çalışmaya 12 Orta Doğu ülkesinden, kolektivist olarak değerlendirilen üniversite öğrencileri ( $N = 109$ ) katılmıştır. Katılımcılar, mutluluğu elde etmek için yalnızca 'diğerleri' odaklı stratejileri kullanmamakla birlikte baskın şekilde bu stratejileri kullanmışlardır. Kolektivist bir yönelimi yansıtan bir sonucu olarak hayır işleme, başkalarına yardım etme ve sosyal kabul edilirlilik kazanma gibi faaliyetlerde bulduklarını aktarmışlardır. Din ve sabit siyasi görüşler de ayrıca mutluluğa katkıda bulunan etkenler olarak bulunmuştur. Diğer taraftan, mutluluğa, hedef belirleyip ve buna ulaşip başararak, memnuniyetlerden zevk alarak ve bireyselci bir yaklaşımı yansıtan kişisel işlerinde daha fazla kontrol sahibi olarak ulaşmışlardır. Mutlulukla ilgili kendi ve diğerleri odaklı yaklaşımların dengesi açıkça görülmüştür.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kültür, pozitif psikoloji müdahaleleri, bireysellik, kolektivizm, mutluluk

---

<sup>1</sup> Canadian University of Dubai, Dubai. E-mail: ltlamber@yahoo.com

<sup>2</sup> Petroleum Institute, Abu Dhabi, The United Arab Emirates.

Received: 24.10.2013 Accepted: 17.12.2013

© The Journal of Happiness & Well-Being (JHW)

## **Introduction**

Positive psychology deals with human strengths and the maximization of happiness (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and also delves into the investigation of what individuals can do to be happy (Nelson & Lyubomirsky, 2012). Strategies to boost happiness, called positive psychology interventions (PPIs), are purposeful activities to increase well-being (Pawelski, 2009). Lay strategies, those undertaken by individuals independently of research, are thought to reflect who individuals are and what they value (Martin, 2009). These strategies are often in line with research about happiness (Henry, 2006) and can be useful in reflecting what is culturally important to individuals as well.

Yet, PPIs and positive psychology in general are not without criticism. The field has been admonished for its limited cross-cultural views and Western notions of individualism that assert that happiness is attained uniquely through the self and through a separation of religion and humanity (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Christopher, Richardson, & Slife, 2008; Pandey, 2011). These views stand in sharp contrast with other perspectives on happiness that are more collective, holistic and non-secular (Joshanloo, 2013; Pandey, 2011). To reflect these views, more recent studies have begun to delineate between ‘other’ and ‘self’ oriented approaches to happiness (Boehm, Lyubomirsky, & Sheldon, 2011; Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013) found across collective and individualistic orientations. Culture, it seems, matters in how happiness is understood and how it is attained (Joshanloo, 2013; Layous, Lee, Choi, & Lyubomirsky, in press; Pandey, 2011).

## **Exploring Cultural Conceptions of Happiness**

The meaning of happiness is highly influenced by social interactions, structures and beliefs that differ by culture (Oatley, Keltner, & Jenkins, 2006). Consequently, the generation of cultural constructions of happiness which reflect indigenous understandings rooted in cultural contexts is imperative (Lu & Gilmour, 2004; Pandey, 2011; Uchida & Ogihara, 2012). Studies show that there are culture-specific forms that shape how cultures experience and comprehend happiness (Diener & Tov, 2007; Mathews, 2012), and that these conceptualizations, illustrated below, are critical to consider as they have implications for practice as well as research.

For instance, White Americans emphasize autonomy and self-enhancement, such that goal achievements and positive regard for the self form perceptions of happiness. On the other hand, Asian Americans emphasize belonging, fitting in, being accepted by, and fulfilling obligations to one’s social and familial group (Uchida, Norasakkunkit, & Kitayama, 2004; Wirtz, Chiu, Diener, & Oishi, 2009). Further, Westerners emphasize happiness as something valuable to be pursued, while Asians see it as tempting fate or entailing negative results by inviting jealousy (Uchida et al., 2004), or social disharmony (Suh & Koo, 2008; Uchida & Kitayama, 2009). A review by Uchida and Ogihara (2012) also showed that European-American cultures considered happiness to involve a sense of agency, personal achievement, and high self-esteem, whereas East Asian cultures opted for a more relational view focused on inter-dependence, relationship harmony and consequent social support, and the ordinariness of individuals. These studies show that the definition of happiness appears on a continuum with intrapersonal variables (personal pleasure, independence, individual achievement and control) and interpersonal relations (social obligations, interdependence) at opposing poles (Ahuvia, 2002; Pflug, 2009; Uchida & Ogihara, 2012).

In Islamic cultures specifically, happiness is closely tied to religion contrasting with Western secular views (Abdel-Khalek, 2007; Abu-Rais, Gheith, & Cournos, 2008; Ismail & Desmukh, 2012; Joshanloo, 2013; Pandey, 2011). In this context, a state of happiness is considered secondary to the

relationship one has with God as it is posited that one of humankind's most basic needs is to worship and live a virtuous life based upon codes of conduct clearly stated in Islam (Al-Darmaki, Hassane, Ahammed, & Abdullah, 2012). Thus, positive affect and hedonic pleasures do not define happiness; rather, the rewards that await individuals in the afterlife as a reward for serving God do (Joshani, 2013). In this manner, happiness is attained through servitude to God and others, obeisance to ritual, espousing spiritual beliefs, as well as living with others peacefully. These actions bring about a state of peaceful tranquility, the reward for virtuousness in the present. The duties of servitude presume a collectivity from which individuals derive a social identity and worth (Smither & Khorsandi, 2009). Indeed, family support (not friends) is associated with greater well-being and less perceived stress across several studies in the Middle East (Brannan, Biswas-Diener, Mohr, Mortazavi, & Stein, 2011; Hamdan-Mansour & Dawani, 2008; Suhail & Chaudhry, 2004) and is due to the importance of family in collective cultures (Mortazavi, Pedhiwala, Shafiro, & Hammer, 2009) and the degree to which family members feel they are responsible for fulfilling one another's needs (Brannan et al., 2011). Therefore, an Islamic view of happiness is tied to religion and one's social group.

Thus, the understanding of happiness is not implicit across all cultures, nor is it an individual pursuit frequently upheld as a feature of mature and highly functioning individuals. Consequently, asking individuals about their understandings of happiness and what they do to achieve it can yield important information about its culture-specific forms. The present study, based in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), aimed to reveal what participants did to become happier and if indeed these strategies coincided with the dimensions of collectivism, or "other" oriented PPIs.

### **What are PPIs and for Whom Do They Work?**

PPIs are self-administered cognitive and/or behavioral activities designed to increase individual happiness (Pawelski, 2009; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). PPIs are well supported; many studies reported success in increasing happiness for up to three and six months (Bolier et al., 2013; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006). These activities are successful with they fit one's personality, are enjoyed (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013; Schueller, 2011; Sergeant & Mongrain, 2011) and personally chosen (Block & Koellinger, 2009; Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003). Extraverted individuals open to experience in particular benefit more from PPIs (Senf & Liau, 2013), and when the person-activity fit is good, greater benefits are evident (Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schonert-Reichel, & Lyubomirsky, 2011; Sin, Della-Porta, & Lyubomirsky, 2011).

The literature suggests that Westerners tend to gain more from PPIs than non-Westerners do (Boehm et al., 2011). Even when comparing various countries, preference for certain routes to happiness is evident. For instance, residents of France, Germany, and Ireland sought happiness via pleasure and engagement, whereas South Africans, Americans, and South Koreans sought it via meaning and engagement (Park, Peterson, & Ruch, 2009). Further, people in individualistic societies seem to prefer high arousal positive emotions (i.e., excitement), whereas members of collective societies appear to prefer low-arousal positive emotions (i.e., contentment) (Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006). For Muslims in particular, maximizing positive emotions and pleasures and minimizing negative emotions as a strategy is discouraged as worldly hedonistic pleasures are not conducive to happiness in the afterlife (Joshani, 2013).

It may be that people in individualist cultures benefit more from happiness interventions as their culture supports their efforts, whereas in collectivist cultures, the means to seek happiness are expressed differently (Lyubomirsky, 2009). It appears that the assumptions made about happiness and how it can be attained must match those made about success and healthy functioning in that society and may explain why certain PPIs work best in certain societies.

## **Examples of PPIs**

There are a number of PPIs, many of which can be categorized into a ‘self’ (individualist) or ‘other’ (collective) orientation. ‘Self’ oriented interventions include goal setting via the introduction of discrepancies between immediate and future desired states and the development of action plans to bridge these gaps (Kee & Wang, 2008; Lutz, Karoly, & Okun, 2008). Reflecting autonomy and individual choice is the development of meaning that emerges by choosing purpose and deciding what philosophy will guide one’s actions (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Having a purpose can minimize life’s setbacks as one’s purpose remains intact and provides direction (Diener, Fujita, Tay, & Biswas-Diener, 2012). Affirming values (Creswell et al., 2005), benefit-finding (Folkman, 2008), looking for positives and infusing events with positive meaning (King & Hicks, 2009), are other means, along with savoring (Bryant & Veroff, 2007), mindfulness (Baer, 2009), and optimism (Schueller & Seligman, 2008).

‘Other’ oriented PPIs are collective in nature. These PPIs involve considering with whom one chooses to spend time and in what activity (Aaker, Rudd, & Mogilner, 2011; Dunn, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2011). Sharing good news with others (Gable & Reis, 2010) is associated with satisfaction with life, positive affect, and feelings of support. Further, individuals can generate gratitude by considering the beneficial actions taken on their behalf by others (DeWall, Lambert, Pond, Kashdan, & Fincham, 2012; McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen, 2008). Social interactions with others, generating acts of charity, cooperation (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008; Reyes-Garcia et al., 2009), and kindness (Della Porta, Jacobs Bao, Lee, Choi, & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005) enhance social integration (Post, 2005). Likewise, spending money on others (Aknin, Dunn, & Norton, 2011; Aknin, Sandstrom, Dunn, & Norton, 2011), donating to charities and volunteering also boost happiness (Dunn et al., 2008).

‘Self’ oriented strategies largely involve the individual manipulation of thoughts, emotions, motivations, decisions, and actions. These represent normal functioning in individualistic societies, but in collectivist societies where decisions are often made by considering a relational perspective in terms of a recognized social hierarchy, strategies that favor individualism can generate stress. Thus, by overlooking collective norms that may be less supportive of the attainment of individual goals, self-oriented approaches may generate discontent rather than happiness in people who follow a collectivist worldview (Boehm et al., 2011).

## **Method**

The present study merited a qualitative design suited to understanding phenomena not easily separated from context (Mathews, 2012; Pandey, 2011), such as cultural phenomenon. This involved the use of a free writing assignment administered to a sample of convenience constituting English and Introductory Psychology students at two universities in the UAE. Participants were asked to respond to the following written prompt: What would make you happier? The objective of this single open-ended question was to elicit responses identifying the strategies participants use to actively pursue a state of happiness. Class credit was given for the assignment. Data were collected in the spring of 2013 and analyzed by the principal authors (Lambert D’raven & Pasha Zaidi) and three Emirati and expatriate Arab student researchers. Participants were informed of the research purpose and given the option to decline participation or withdraw their statements. No identifying information beyond demographic data was requested.

## Participants

The present study took place in two educational institutions in the UAE, a Muslim country located in the Arabian Gulf. The final sample consisted of UAE nationals ( $n = 54$ ) and residents from Other Arab countries ( $n = 55$ ), such as Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt currently living in the UAE. The data are presented as one group. Table 1 shows the demographics for the total sample. Overall, participants came from over 11 countries across the Middle East and North Africa. The sample was largely all Muslim (95%), and participants ranged in age from 16 to 35 and with 59% of males.

The countries reflected in the samples are considered collective societies based on Hofstede's (1991) cultural dimensions of Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, and Masculinity. According to this model, the Arab World values hierarchy and distinct power roles. Rules and obedience to codes of conduct are expected. It is also an area driven by competition and success, but as a collective society, winning in the Arab world is defined by the success of the group rather than the individual, and social position within the group has a great deal of influence on interpersonal and organizational decisions (The Hofstede Center, n.d.).

**Table 1.** *Sample demographics*

Emirati (EM) ( $N = 54$ )		Other Arab (OA) ( $N = 55$ )	
EM Age range	16-31 years	OA Age range	18-35 years
EM Female	43% ( $N = 23$ )	OA Female	40% ( $N = 22$ )
EM Male	57% ( $N = 31$ )	OA Male	60% ( $N = 33$ )
EM Religion	100% Muslim	OA Religion	Muslim 89% ( $N = 49$ ) Christian 11% ( $N = 6$ )
		Nationality (% of sample)	Egypt (EGY) 27% ( $N = 15$ ) Jordan (JDN) 18% ( $N = 10$ ) Syria (SYR) 16% ( $N = 9$ ) Lebanon (LEB) 13% ( $N = 7$ ) Palestine (PAL) 11% ( $N = 6$ ) Libya (LBY) 4% ( $N = 2$ ) Morocco (MRC) 4% ( $N = 2$ ) Saudi Arabia (KSA) 2% ( $N = 1$ ) Algeria (ALG) 2% ( $N = 1$ ) Iraq 2% (IRQ) ( $N = 1$ ) Yemen 2% (YMN) ( $N = 1$ )

---

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a process whereby data is examined for recurring patterns, or themes, important to the description of a phenomenon, was used to analyze the participants comments. This involved reading all of the data in its entirety to become familiar with it and notice patterns. All distinct ideas, no matter how seemingly irrelevant, were underlined and tentatively grouped into categories. Over time, these solidified into major themes. Triangulation, the use of at least two or more means of obtaining convergence (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used to ensure validity and involved five researchers who analyzed the data helping to establish the legitimacy of the thematic inferences. The research team had lived in the UAE or the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region for some time and considered aspects of the culture that might help explain the data. Once compiled, we obtained consensus from the research team to approve of the final draft. As the data were considerable, only significant quotes from selected participants are given for illustration purposes and typify the range of examples given. The frequency quotes are included for each category.

## **Results**

A total of seven broad categories through which individuals sought to increase their happiness emerged. These included the role of family and friends, goals and achievements, service and social acceptability, pleasures, greater control over one's self, religion, and political affairs. Each is complemented below with verbatim statements.

### ***Theme 1: Happier with Family and Friends***

Family and friends were identified as the preferred manner of attaining happiness. Commonly noted was the idea that one's happiness was dependent on the happiness of others, as well as one's ability to ensure that happiness for others. Over 66 responses supported this theme. The importance of the group's well-being and the interconnectedness of one's happiness to that of others were clear. Responses included items like, "when I see my friends happy and together [for] fun and joy" and "when I see my family, specially my parents, happy". Hopes for family and friends to be satisfied were noted, i.e., "knowing that my parents and little brother have everything they desire"; "knowing that my parents and family will live a long healthy life"; "not losing the people I love - family makes me happy".

Others suggested that the happiness of others was a condition for their own, adding "when the majority of friends and family around me are happy and forget their problems and live to the fullest, then I would be happier; "for people in my life to be able to accept the things around them and not worry about what other people think"; "If people would learn to be happy for the little things in life rather than getting a present and being happy about that instead of being happy about their religion or happy that a baby took its first step". Participants also identified that they had a role in contributing to the emotional state of others; "I think the thing to make me happier is making my mother happy", and "do something that my parents feel happy about".

The desire to spend time with loved ones was vital, i.e., "spending precious time with my family" and having family members nearby was also important; "having everyone I love around me". Not only was the time spent together important, i.e., "when I sit with my parents for a long time", but the support and involvement received as a result as well: "If I want to get something and my family tries to achieve it for me"; "when I sit with my family at breakfast, lunch, and dinner and discuss with my

parents about something interesting”. Some wished to start a family or relationship of their own, i.e., “having my own small family, me, my husband, and my small kid, being with them and spending my time with them makes me happier”; “I want to have a loving husband and start a family with the man I want and choose to be with”, “What would make me happier? A girlfriend”. Friends were also valued: “I always feel happy when I spend more time with my family and friends”, as was the desire to make new friends; “be more social”; “gain new friends who are kind and [have a] white heart”.

### ***Theme 2: Happier with Accomplishments and Goals***

Typical for students, the desire to finish academic programs, attain high grades, and begin careers was evident as a means to increase happiness (39 responses), i.e., “I feel happy when I see my dreams accomplishing in front of me”; “at the university and in work as well”. Graduating and working were important; “If I also achieve my goals and be a chemical engineer”; “If I found a job that I really enjoyed; basically to love my work through finding a job related to my field”. Finishing with distinction was also noted: “If I get good marks” and “pass all my subjects”. Working and doing good work also brought happiness; “I feel happier when I finish my work day in a good way”.

Even so, goals seemed vague and finite as though there were only a few to attain: “when I am done with my goals” and “to be successful in what I want”. Goals were general; “I have certain goals in my life, so reaching them would make me happy”; “Living the life I always dream about”; “achieving what I want to after working so hard for it”. Other goals were extrinsic, i.e., “to be the first in my class” and to attain an education that would offer “prestige in the community”. For others, non-academic goals of being “organized” and “responsible” served to increase happiness.

### ***Theme 3: Happier through Service and Social Acceptability***

Participants expressed the desire to be of service and have a positive impact on others’ lives (26 responses). This entailed making others happy, proud and satisfied by obeying, doing what was asked, and fulfilling social obligations: “I feel happy when I obey my parents”. Feeling accepted and proud of one’s actions also determined happiness. A 16-year old female Emirati noted, “I just feel happy when my parents feel proud of me because of being me,” while another added “my parents are satisfied from me... when I make others happy, when I leave the bad thing and do the right thing”. Fulfilling social expectations and being recognized was identified: “I would be happier if I make a strong family by being a good wife and a good mother. I would be happier if I make my husband happy and proud”. Attaining the positive regard of others was critical; “making everyone proud”; “to make my family and parents happy will make me happier”. Others wanted to contribute to their society’s development, such that happiness would be assured “if I become a successful person in my society and contribute to it”; “having a high rank in the country to support those who need support”; “when I contribute in helping my society and serving my country”. A 21-year old male Emirati concurred: “When I can give a hand for anyone who needs it and when I see the smile in people’s face,” and “being there for those who need help”.

### ***Theme 4: Happier with Pleasures***

This category (19 responses) involved recreational pleasures participants engaged in or wanted as a means to attain happiness, such as watching television, shopping, travelling, and being active. To describe these, participants made lists, such as this 19-year old Emirati female: “nature, smiling, enjoying, meeting multicultural people; flowers, reading, knowledge, counting the stars of a pure sky; travelling all over the world; acting, making people laugh; even the smallest things make me happy.”

Others added: “watching my favorite show”; “saying different jokes, enjoying new friends, dreaming about tomorrow, planning for the future, remembering wonderful days”. For an 18-year old male Emirati, happiness was “to do what I want to do that is reasonable.”

Consumerism was also noted. “When I feel bad, shopping is the best way to fix that. Every tiny item I buy makes me feel like I am starting new life with new visions”; “Shopping also makes me happier”. Other participants identified money and its ability to attain objects: “Money—being able to buy stuff”. Connecting with others and being noticed boosted happiness: “If someone tries to make me laugh or someone I don’t know smiles at me”; “small things in life, such as a person that you don’t know smiles or some beautiful flowers from someone you love, or laughing with your friends”. Being physically active, such as “play(ing) football”, was also identified.

### ***Theme 5: Happier with Religion***

Religion comprised an important theme. Nine comments included the importance of prayer and one’s relationship with God. Comments included: “Being close to Allah and keeping my prayers”; “when I pray and when I listen to Qu’ran”; “When Allah is satisfied with me”. This student felt that her relationship with God helped her immensely; “Allah is always with me. He helps me kick my fear and be strong. I am strong when Allah is with me because I know that he feels what I feel and no one else can do that. Being a Muslim is one of the greatest gifts I ever had”. Another comment included, “obeying what God asks me to do will make me happy and getting away from the wrong things and following his orders”.

### ***Theme 6: Happier with More Control***

Attaining greater personal control over “how I respond to situations” and one’s own thinking was identified, i.e., “if I stopped over thinking about mundane things and focused on my future”, or “when I can solve problems and discover new things. If I learn strategies of stress reduction, I will be happy”. Others felt that attaining a sense of identity and autonomy would help such that participants noted: “Getting married and having my own life”, “becoming the person I want to be”, and “if my family lets me work... I want a driver’s license and degrees”. Finally, characteristics such as “being brave” and having a “better, sexier body” also were noted within these nine responses.

### ***Theme 7: Happier with Political Stability***

For eight participants, political circumstances were identified as playing a role in happiness. Participants alluded to peace, freedom, safety, and the avoidance of war. Syrians in particular identified conditions within their country, i.e. “What would make me happier is the war ending in Syria as I believe my mind would be more relaxed towards my other family who lives there”; “peace in my country”; “for my country to be safe again, for the war to end”; “If Syrian people have peace and no longer have to live in torture, having freedom in their own country and living life like everyone else”. For one Palestinian, “having a country”, was a path to happiness.

## **Discussion**

Consistent with the literature relative to collective societies, participants noted the importance of the social group, composed of immediate or extended family, friends, and/or social groups such as the communities in which they lived (Brannan et al., 2011; Hamdan-Mansour & Dawani, 2008; Mortazavi et al., 2009; Suhail & Chaudhry, 2004). Attaining happiness through “others” seemed to be a heavily



endorsed strategy, whether by merely seeing the happiness on others faces, or actively doing something to make others happy. They received support, belonging, acceptance, and love in return, and presumably the objects of their affection did too. Participant comments highlighted the interconnectedness and interdependence of their relationships and the reciprocal benefits each provided (Tay & Diener, 2011). PPIs such as engaging in good deeds (Della-Porta et al., 2013; Dillard, Schiavone, & Brown, 2008), increasing social time, and purposefully planning to spend time with those who are infrequently seen (Lambert, 2009), such as distant relatives, family members, or friends seemed to be congruent with the collectivist worldview.

Participants identified being of service and fulfilling social obligations (Uchida et al., 2004; Wirtz et al., 2009) to maintain their social group's acceptance and approval. These strategies were instrumental in building positive regard for the self as the pride of others signaled acceptability and allowed participants to fit in. They also increased group cohesiveness; the more obligations were fulfilled, such as making parents happy, presumably the more satisfied others were. Strategies that allowed individuals to fulfill social obligations and to feel accepted into the broader community were chosen. PPIs like spending time with others (Reyes-Garcia et al., 2009) and showing gratitude (DeWall et al., 2012; McCullough et al., 2008) may well serve to increase social connectedness and support. Finally, reminding one's self of one's morals (i.e., religion), purpose, resources, identity and position in the midst of a social group (Creswell et al., 2005) were reflected.

From a 'self' perspective, participants also identified the importance of future goals and achievements. Yet, as noted in Hofstede's (1991) dimensions, achievements were sought to increase the group's status and were not entirely for the self. This may explain why goals appeared vague, finite, and ill-defined. Several hypotheses can be ventured. Perhaps it is the case in interdependent relationships that the group decides what is best for the individual rather than individuals themselves, reducing one's sense of goal ownership. This is reflective of the notion that people who are socialized within a collectivist society are likely to place more emphasis on obedience, compliance and group responsibility (Kim, 1994). In situations where assuring security and material needs is important, one's individual choices or desired lifestyle might be superseded by the opinions of the group upon whom all depend for survival.

Additionally, the desire to please parents or other authority figures may override the desire to commit to one's chosen goals. As Arab societies tend to follow a patriarchal lineage wherein both gender and age contribute to one's authority in the family and community, older generations and male members of society may hold greater levels of power in decision-making (Al-Oraimi, 2013; Olmstead, 2005). Thus, choosing goals based on the advice of others who hold greater authority in the family or community may lessen one's ability to clearly define future plans. This, in turn, can contribute to the appearance of goals as less structured and imprecise.

Participants also noted the influence of pleasures, such as flowers, money, and shopping, as a contributing factor to happiness. Despite this perception, a lack of recreational and growth-oriented engagements, such as sporting teams, university clubs (like debate, music, chess, or language clubs), volunteering, or part-time work was apparent. Perhaps securing one's education and career prospects leaves less time for engaging in recreation. Nonetheless, within these pleasures, participants identified strategies such as savoring (Bryant & Veroff, 2007), using optimism (Schueller & Seligman, 2008), and pursuing physical activity, all known ways to increase happiness.

Religion was also noted as a means to attain greater happiness, although it was not as frequently noted as relationships. Religion points to the importance of meaning and purpose (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Plante, 2008; Steger, 2009) and parallels the importance of spirituality found in other studies (Abdel-Khalek, 2007; Abu-Rais et al., 2008; Ismail & Desmukh, 2012; Joshanloo, 2013; Pandey,

2011). Additional interventions in this category could involve spending more time connecting with one's religious or spiritual group, and prioritizing and making more time for prayer and other religious rituals. As the majority of participants in this study were self-reported Muslims living in an Islamic mainstream context, the opportunities to engage in religious practices are plentiful.

Finally, the absence of political and civil strife was identified. PPIs have only recently been aimed at individuals who experience trauma as well as those in the armed forces (Nelson & Lyubomirsky, 2012); thus, their potential use with individuals who are faced with the challenges of war in their home countries may be an area of interest. As this is one circumstance to which people do not readily adapt and which contribute to reductions in individual and population well-being (Frey, Luechinger, & Stutzer, 2007; Shmotkin & Lomranz, 1998), PPIs that address the effects of war may be relevant for Arab expats who are connected to their home country through their social networks. Thus, improving resiliency, hope, and encouraging civil society engagement may be useful.

Several limitations are noted. This study relied upon a small sample from many countries and participants were all university students with limited life experience and who tend to be more liberal in general (Brannan et al., 2011; Mohammadi et al., 2006). Participants were also graded on this assignment; thus, social desirability may have had an influence. Further, individual differences and the rate of individualization of collective societies should also be considered. Many countries in the Arab World have traditionally followed a collectivist worldview, but social changes due to shifting demographic, political, economic and cultural movements in the MENA region are influencing the psychological fabric of individuals and the societies in which they live (Mortazavi, 2006; Brannan et al., 2011). As a result, aspects of individualism have begun to seep into the culture, especially among the younger generations (Simadi & Kamali, 2004). Replicating this study across participants of varied ages and other MENA countries may yield variable responses; thus, results may not be generalized to all collective societies in the MENA region.

## **Conclusions**

The goal of this study was to determine how members of collective societies pursue happiness and if these means coincide with the literature on positive psychology interventions that are "other" oriented. Many known PPIs were indeed reflected. Our results showed that members of the Arab collective societies in our study, i.e., the UAE, Syria, Egypt, and so forth, predominately use 'other' or collectively oriented strategies, but not exclusively. Relationships and service to others were endorsed, yet so was a reliance on individualistic or "self" oriented strategies, such as goal setting and savoring.

The results serve to highlight the importance of future research developing indigenous understandings of happiness in the Arab world rather than relying on Western ideals of what the good life should represent. This indigenous understanding would put "other" oriented cultures on par with "self" oriented cultures, which is not the case at present. Overwhelmingly, conceptions of happiness found in the literature are based on Western individualistic and secular foundations that place collective and non-secular cultures at a disadvantage (Brannan et al., 2011; Joshanloo, 2013; Pandey, 2011). Further, the development of indigenous Arab psychological interventions (Zebian, Alamuddin, Maalouf, & Chatila, 2007) in helping to increase happiness, in the manner collective cultures define and understand it, must begin with an emic view of understanding of what individuals already do to become happier and what they feel would contribute the most to their well-being. Thus, the development of theory should be led from participants' inside views of what already exists rather than the imposition of outsiders' understandings of what should exist. To minimize intellectual dependence on Western research (Pandey, 2011; Zebian et al., 2007), encouraging future research in a Muslim-Arab collective context on these issues cannot be overstated.

**Acknowledgments:** A very warm thank you to our student researchers who gave their time, interest, and insight to this research project. Thank you to Salihah Al Zaabi, Shames Al Hashemi, and Omar Talaat from the Canadian University of Dubai

## References

- Aaker, J., Rudd, M., & Mogilner, C. (2011). If money does not make you happy, consider time. *Journal of Consumer Psychology, 21*(2), 126-130.
- Abdel-Khalek, A. (2007). Religiosity, happiness, health and psychopathology in a probability sample of Muslim adolescents. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture, 10*(6), 571-583.
- Abu-Ras, W., Gheith, A., & Cournos, F. (2008). The Imam's role in mental health promotion: A study of 22 mosques in New York City's Muslim community. *Journal of Muslim Mental Health, 3*(2), 155-176.
- Ahuvia, A. C. (2002). Individualism/collectivism and cultures of happiness: A theoretical conjecture on the relationship between consumption, culture and subjective well-being at the national level. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 3*(1), 23-36.
- Aknin, L. B., Dunn, E. W., & Norton, M. I. (2011). Happiness runs in a circular motion: Evidence for a positive feedback loop between prosocial spending and happiness. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 13*(2), 347-355.
- Aknin, L. B., Sandstrom, G. M., Dunn, E. W., & Norton, M. I. (2011). It's the recipient that counts: Spending money on strong social ties leads to greater happiness than spending on weak social ties. *PLoS ONE, 6*(2), e17018.
- Al-Darmaki, F., Hassane, S., Ahammed, S., & Abdullah, A. (2012). Developing counselor education identity in UAE: Evaluation of an undergraduate program. *Journal for International Counselor Education, 4*(1), 1-28.
- Al-Oraimi, A., & Zayed, S. (2011). The concept of gender in Emirati culture: An analytical study of the role of the state in redefining gender and social roles. *Museum International, 63*(3-4), 78-92.
- Baer, R. (2009). Self-focused attention and mechanisms of change in mindfulness-based treatment. *Cognitive Behavior Therapy, 38*(S1), 15-20.
- Block, J., & Koellinger, P. (2009). I can't get no satisfaction—necessity entrepreneurship and procedural utility. *Kyklos, 62*(2), 191-209.
- Boehm, J. K., Lyubomirsky, S., & Sheldon, K. M. (2011). A longitudinal experimental study comparing the effectiveness of happiness-enhancing strategies in Anglo Americans and Asian Americans. *Cognition & Emotion, 25*(7), 1263-1272.
- Bolier, L., Haverman, M., Westerhof, G. J., Riper, H., Smit, F., & Bohlmeijer, E. (2013). Positive psychology interventions: A meta-analysis of randomized controlled studies. *BMC Public Health, 8*(13), 119.
- Brannan, D., Biswas-Diener, R., Mohr, C., Mortazavi, S., & Stein, N. (2013). Friends and family: A cross-cultural investigation of social support and subjective well-being among college students. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 8*, 65- 75.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*, 77-101.
- Bryant, F., & Veroff, J. (2007). *Savoring: A new model of positive experience*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Christopher, J., & Hickinbottom, S. (2008). Positive psychology, ethnocentrism, and the disguised ideology of individualism. *Theory & Psychology, 18*(5), 563-589.

- Christopher, J., Richardson, F., & Slife, B. (2008). Thinking through positive psychology. *Theory and Psychology, 18*(5), 555-561.
- Creswell, J. D., Welch, W. T., Taylor, S. E., Sherman, D. K., Greunewald, T. L., & Mann, T. (2005). Affirmation of personal values buffers neuroendocrine and psychological stress responses. *Psychological Science, 16*(11), 846-851.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Hunter, J. (2003). Happiness in everyday life: The uses of experience sampling. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 4*(2), 185-199.
- Della Porta, M. D., Jacobs, B. K., Lee, H. C., Choi, I., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2013). Does supporting autonomy facilitate the pursuit of happiness? Results from an experimental longitudinal well-being intervention. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- DeWall, C. N., Lambert, N. M., Pond, R. S., Jr., Kashdan, T. B., & Fincham, F. D. (2012). A grateful heart is a non-violent heart: Cross-sectional, experience sampling, longitudinal, and experimental evidence. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 3*(2), 232-240.
- Diener, E., Fujita, F., Tay, L., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2012). Purpose, mood, and pleasure in prediction satisfaction judgments. *Social Indicators Research, 105*(3), 333-341.
- Diener, E., & Tov, W. (2007). Culture and subjective well-being. In S. Kitayama & D. Cohen (Eds.), *Handbook of cultural psychology* (691-713). New York: Guilford.
- Dillard, A. J., Schiavone, A., & Brown, S. L. (2008). Helping behavior and positive emotions: Implications for health and well-being. In S. J. Lopez (Ed.), *Positive psychology: Exploring the best in people, Vol. 2: Capitalizing on emotions experiences*. Westport, CT: Praeger/Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Duckworth, A. L., Steen, T. A., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2005). Positive psychology in clinical practice. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology, 1*(1), 629-651.
- Dunn, E.W., Aknin, L. B., & Norton, M. I. (2008). Spending money on others promotes happiness. *Science, 319*(5870), 1687-1688.
- Dunn, E. W., Gilbert D. T., & Wilson T. D. (2011). If money doesn't make you happy then you probably aren't spending it right. *Journal of Consumer Psychology, 21*(2), 115-125.
- Folkman, S. (2008). The case for positive emotions in the stress process. *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping, 21*(1), 3-14.
- Frey, B.S., Luechinger, S., & Stutzer, A. (2007). Calculating tragedy: Assessing the costs of terrorism. *Journal of Economic Surveys, 21*(1), 1-24.
- Gable, S., & Reis, H. (2010). Good news! Capitalizing on positive events in an interpersonal context. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 42*, 195-257.
- Hamdan-Mansour, A. M., & Dawani, H. A. (2008). Social support and stress among university students in Jordan. *International Journal of Mental Health, 6*, 442-450.
- Henry, J. (2006). Strategies for achieving well-being. In M. Csikszentmihalyi & I.S. Csikszentmihalyi (Eds.), *A life worth living: Contributions to positive psychology* (pp. 120-138). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hofstede, G. (1991). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind*. London: McGraw-Hill.
- Ismail, Z., & Desmukh, S. (2012). Religiosity and psychological well-being. *International Journal of Business and Social Science, 3*(11), 20-28. Retrieved from [http://www.ijbssnet.com/journals/Vol\\_3\\_No\\_11\\_June\\_2012/3.pdf](http://www.ijbssnet.com/journals/Vol_3_No_11_June_2012/3.pdf)
- Joshanloo, M. (2013). A comparison of western and Islamic conceptions of happiness. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 14*(6), 1857-1874.

- Kee, Y., & Wang, C. (2008). Relationships between mindfulness, flow dispositions and mental skills adoption: A cluster analytic approach. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 9*, 393-411.
- Kim, U. (1994). Individualism and collectivism. *Cross-Cultural Research and Methodology Series, 18*, 19-40.
- King, L. A., & Hicks, J. (2009). Detecting and constructing meaning in life events. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 4*(5), 317-330.
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Lambert, L. (2009). *Happiness 101: A how-to guide in positive psychology for people who are depressed, languishing, or flourishing (The Facilitator Guide)*. Xlibris Corporation.
- Layous, K., Lee, H., Choi, I., & Lyubomirsky, S. (in press). Culture matters when designing a successful happiness-increasing activity: A comparison of the United States and South Korea. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*.
- Layous, K., Nelson, S. K., Oberle, E., Schonert-Reichl, K., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2012). Kindness counts: Prompting prosocial behavior in preadolescents boosts peer acceptance and well-being. *PLOS ONE, 7*, e51380.
- Leech, N., & Onwuegbuzie, A. (2007). An array of qualitative data analysis tools: A call for data analysis triangulation. *School Psychology Quarterly, 22*(4), 557-584.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA, USA: Sage.
- Lu, L., & Gilmour, R. (2004). Culture and conceptions of happiness: Individual oriented and social oriented SWB. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 5*(3), 269-291.
- Lutz, R., Karoly, P., & Okun, M. (2008). The why and the how of goal pursuit: Self-determination, goal process cognition, and participation in physical exercise. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 9*, 559-575.
- Lyubomirsky, S. (2009). *Positive interventions: Theory, research, and practice*. Paper presented at the First World Congress on Positive Psychology, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 18-21 June 2009.
- Lyubomirsky, S., & Layous, K. (2013). How do simple positive activities increase well-being? *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 22*(1), 57-62.
- Lyubomirsky, S., Sheldon, K., & Schkade, D. (2005). Pursuing happiness: The architecture of sustainable change. *Review of General Psychology, 9*(2), 111-131.
- Martin, M. W. (2009). Happily self-deceived. *Social Theory and Practice, 35*(1), 29-44.
- Mathews, G. (2012). Happiness, culture, and context. *International Journal of Wellbeing, 2*(4), 299-312.
- McCullough, M. E., Kimeldorf, M. B., & Cohen, A. D. (2008). An adaptation for altruism? The social causes, social effects, and social evolution of gratitude. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 17*(4), 281-284.
- Mohammadi, M. R., Mohammad, K., Farahani, F. K. A., Alikhani, S., Zare, M., Tehrani, F. R., Ramezankhani, A., & Alaeddini, F. (2006). Reproductive knowledge, attitudes and behavior among adolescent males in Tehran, Iran. *International Family Planning Perspectives, 32*, 35-44.
- Mortazavi, S. (2006). The Iranian family in a context of cultural diversity. In J. Georgas, J.W.; Berry, F. J. R. van de Vijver, C. Kagitcibasi, & Y.H. Poortinga, (Eds). *Families across cultures: A 30-nation psychological study* (pp. 378-385). New York, NY, US: Cambridge University Press.
- Mortazavi, S., Pedhiwala, N., Shafiro, M., & Hammer, L. (2009). Work-family conflict related to culture and gender. *Community, Work and Family, 12*(2), 251-273.

- Nelson, S. K., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2012). Finding happiness: Tailoring positive activities for optimal well-being benefits. To appear in M. Tugade, M. Shiota, & L. Kirby (Eds.), *Handbook of positive emotions*. New York: Guilford.
- Oatley, K., Keltner, D., & Jenkins, J. M. (2006). Cultural understandings of emotion. *Understanding emotions* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Olmsted, J. C. (2005). Gender, aging, and the evolving Arab patriarchal contract. *Feminist Economics*, 11(2), 53-78.
- Pandey, D. (Nov 22-24, 2011). *Positive psychology: Blending strengths of western, eastern and other indigenous psychologies*. Paper presented at 1<sup>st</sup> International Conference on Emerging Paradigms in Business & Social Sciences (EPBSS-2011), organized by Middlesex University, Dubai, United Arab Emirates.
- Park, N., Peterson, C., & Ruch, W. (2009). Orientations to happiness and life satisfaction in twenty-seven nations. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 4(4), 273-279.
- Pawelski, J. (2009). *Positive interventions: Theory, research and practice*. Paper presented at the meeting of the First World Congress on Positive Psychology, Philadelphia, PA.
- Pflug, J. (2009). Folk theories of happiness: A cross-cultural comparison of conceptions of happiness in Germany and South Africa. *Social Research Indicators*, 92(3), 551-563.
- Plante, T. (2008). What do the spiritual and religious traditions offer the practicing psychologist? *Pastoral Psychology*, 56(4), 429-444.
- Post, S. G. (2005). Altruism, happiness and health: it's good to be good. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 12(2), 66-77.
- Reyes-Garcia, V., Godoy, R. A., Vadez, V., Ruiz-Mallén, I., Huanca, T., Leonard, W. R., McDade, T. W., & Tanner, S. (2009). The pay-offs to sociability. *Human Nature*, 20(4), 431-446.
- Schueller, S. M. (2011). To each his own well-being boosting intervention: Using preference to guide selection. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 6(4), 300-313.
- Schueller, S., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2008). Optimism and pessimism. In K. Dobson & D. Dozois (Eds.), *Risk factors in depression* (pp. 171-194). New York, NY: Elsevier Inc.
- Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 5-14.
- Sergeant, S., & Mongrain, M. (2011). Are positive psychology exercises helpful for people with depressive personality styles? *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 6(4), 260-272.
- Seligman, M. E. P., Rashid, T., & Parks, A. (2006). Positive psychotherapy. *American Psychologist*, 61(8), 774-788.
- Senf, K., & Liau, A. K. (2013). The effects of positive interventions on happiness and depressive symptoms, with an examination of personality as a moderator. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 14, 591-612.
- Shmotkin, D., & Lomranz, J. (1998). Subjective well-being among Holocaust survivors: An examination of overlooked differentiations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75(1), 141-155.
- Simadi, F. A., & Kamali, M. A. (2004). Assessing the values structure among United Arab Emirates University students. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 32(70), 19-30.
- Sin, N. L., Della Porta, M. D., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2011). Tailoring positive psychology interventions to treat depressed individuals. In S. I. Donaldson, M. Csikszentmihalyi, & J. Nakamura (Eds.), *Applied positive psychology: Improving everyday life, health, schools, work, and society* (pp. 79-96). New York, NY, USA: Routledge.

- Sin, N., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2009). Enhancing well-being and alleviating depressive symptoms with positive psychology interventions: A practice-friendly meta-analysis. *Journal of Clinical Psychology: In Session*, 65(5), 467-487.
- Smither, R., & Khorsandi, A. (2009). The implicit personality theory of Islam. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 1(2), 81-96.
- Steger, M. (2009). Meaning in life. In S. J. Lopez (Ed.), *Oxford handbook of positive psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 679-687). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Suh, E. M., & Koo, J. (2008). Comparing subjective well-being across cultures and nations: The "what" and "why" questions. In M. Eid & R. J. Larsen (Eds.), *The science of subjective well-being* (pp. 414-427). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Suhail, K., & Chaudhry, H. R. (2004). Predictors of subjective well-being in an eastern Muslim culture. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 23, 359-376.
- Tay, L., & Diener, E. (2011). Needs and subjective well-being around the world. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101(2), 354-365.
- The Hofstede Center (n.d.). What about the Arab World? Retrieved from <http://geert-hofstede.com/arab-world-egiqkwblblysa.html>
- Tkach, C., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2006). How do people pursue happiness?: Relating personality, happiness-increasing strategies, and well-being. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 7(2), 183-225.
- Uchida, Y., & Kitayama, S. (2009). Happiness and unhappiness in East and West: Themes and variations. *Emotion*, 9(4), 441-456.
- Uchida, Y., Norasakkunkit, V., & Kitayama, S. (2004). Cultural constructions of happiness: Theory and empirical evidence. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 5(3), 223-239.
- Uchida, Y., & Ogihara, Y. (2012). Personal or interpersonal construal of happiness: A cultural psychological perspective. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 2(4), 354-369.
- Wirtz, D., Chiu, C., Diener, E. & Oishi, S. (2009). What constitutes a good life? Cultural differences in the role of positive and negative affect in subjective well-being. *Journal of Personality*, 77(4), 1167-1195.
- Zebian, S., Alamuddin, R., Maalouf, M., & Chatila, Y. (2007). Developing an appropriate psychology through culturally-sensitive research practices in the Arabic speaking world: A content analysis of psychological research conducted between 1950 and 2004. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 38(2), 91-122.