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Inhibition, regression and isolation in a cultural context

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The Theory of Social Control and the Social Psychology of Dissatisfaction: Inhibition, regression and isolation in a cultural context.

Orsolya Selymes, PhD Candidate

Abstract

The Theory of Social Control (TSC) is grounded in satisfaction and happiness research. The study investigated the reasons behind relatively low levels of civil and personal satisfaction, subjective social well-being and experienced happiness in the post-communist Hungarian social context. The basic social process uncovered in the research is *self-situating*, which involves a continuous assessment of *social control*, which occurs on three psychological dimensions: *activity*, *fairness* and *connectedness*, operated via *social flow*. The culturally salient outcome of self-situating in Hungary is *self-victimizing*, meaning a subjective loss of control on all three dimensions. Some of the most important emotional-motivational consequences of self-victimizing are *inhibition*, *regression* and *isolation*, which contribute to various socio-cultural phenomenon such as distrust, bystander strategies, pessimism or anomie across a number of social situations. Based on the emerging theory, the concept of subjective social control is introduced and an expanded three-dimensional model of civil satisfaction, comfort and contribution, along with psychological and cultural implications, are discussed.

Key words: social control, self-situating, self-victimizing, activity, fairness, connectedness, inhibition, fury, isolation

Introduction

Happiness, satisfaction and subjective well-being stem from the social aspects of everyday life as much (or even more significantly) as they are tempered by individual goals, emotions and evaluations (Ryff, 1989; Ryff and Keyes, 1995; Diener and Diener, 1995; Diener, Oishi and Lucas, 2003). Regardless of whichever particular aspect of happiness we are trying to grasp (the emotional or the evaluative,) one thing will

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be salient across any scientific viewpoint: that happiness is a social phenomenon. It is both timely and desirable therefore to expand the scope of happiness research so that it includes the social and the public aspects besides the individual features of our subjective experiences.

The aim of my research was to discover and highlight the social psychological mechanisms behind happiness and to determine the main factors (main social psychological processes) behind social, political and personal satisfaction and civil comfort. The antecedent to such a concept of social well being exists in the research on cultural aspects of subjective well-being (Diener and Diener, 1995; Diener, Oishi and Lucas, 2003). By cultural aspects, I refer to culturally transmitted psychological predispositions that determine subjective well-being of people on a large scale. Compared to other countries with similar economical performance, similar system features and levels of political freedom or even with similar historical and political background, Hungary falls behind in most cross-national studies that examine differences in subjective well-being and civil/personal satisfaction (Andorka 1994; Rose és Haerpfer 1994; Rose, Mishler és Haerpfer 1998; Spéder és Kapitány, 2002; Sági, 2002). With these in mind the main question of the research was: *what is going on* in the Hungarian socio-cultural setting that explains such deficiencies in the subjective and personal well-being of the citizens? I was looking for social, cultural, psychological patterns that are salient in people's experiencing of their social circumstances, and in the affects and reactions of people to the various personal, societal and political changes and events in their lives.

Methodology

Classical (Glaserian) Grounded Theory (CGT) was used as general methodology in the study (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser 1978; Glaser, 1998). CGT, rather than beginning with developing a hypothesis, starts out with data collection through various methods (in-depth interviewing, direct observation, text analysis, questionnaires, statistical data, and so on). From the collected data, key points are marked by codes that emerge from the transcribed interviews. Coding is followed by conceptualizing (memo writing and sorting),

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during which further observations and field notes are produced, concepts are formed from the codes then concepts are organized into categories. The emerging categories will provide the skeleton or the frame for the emerging theory, which is condensed only in the last phase of the research.

The two most important aspects to GT in this particular research were constant built-in verification of emerging categories and concepts by constant comparison (1) and the use of all observed stimuli as data (2). Other elements of the method included theoretical sampling, theoretical coding, memo writing and sorting. GT helps researchers define a problem in its most natural context, discover relevancies of certain factors in a complex question regarding the social world, and make it relatively easy to find out what is going on. GT was used as a general methodology for this study because it provides the researcher with a careful balance of the inductive and deductive approach, making it relatively easy to discover new concepts and categories relevant in a given research area and test multiple hypotheses emerging at the same time. CGT in its regular procedure generally focuses on one core category, that is, one basic psychological or social psychological process to discover and particularize. However, with a complex psychological issue such as happiness and personal (dis)satisfaction, multiple GTs had to be carried out to fully understand underlying principles. This means that hypothesis generating, coding and conceptualizing did not stop at one emerging basic social psychological process, but rather, a set and a network of social psychological processes were handled in the line of the research.

Data collection started out in Hungary. Participants were volunteering via the largest Hungarian online social network. Criteria for selection were Hungarian nationality and mother tongue, samples included 30 in-depth interviews of residents. Hungarian mother tongue was the only requirement at this point. Theoretical sampling guided the research later for more carefully conceptualized data selection following GT requirements.

The interviews started out with the following question: “When you think through your life, what turning points come to your mind that have been significant emotionally to you –

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be it any type of personal or social incidence?” This way of discrediting helped the research participants to start out from their own, subjectively important life events and give a narrative-evaluative frame to their accounts to which an affective evaluation were attached inherently.

Theoretical sampling shifted the focus onto direct observations of real-time social interactions between people as well as onto the analysis of public texts both live (political, public or other media-based, such as internet comments and conversations) and symbolic (songs, tales, proverbs.) My aim was to test the emerging core category (*subjective social control*) and its emerging dimensions. The three emerging dimensions of social control are: *activity*, which is personal potency and situational ability, with extremes towards the regressive and the aggressive pole (1); *fairness*, which occurs via social comparisons, measuring the self to others involved in the given social situation (2); and *connectedness* implying a range of modes from isolation through positive social involvement to symbiotic inclusion (3). Theoretical sampling called for further examination in the context of social conflicts, social losses and gains, victory and defeat (both nation-wide accounts such as culturally relevant texts, or the narratives and conversations involving sports results, e.g. a losing/winning match/game/race of national sporting; and personal accounts such as a forum discussion/blog of a break-up or a support forum for pregnant women and women with infants). As a general consequence of the emerging theory, particular cultural patterns in relation to affective and evaluative aspects of happiness and assessment of social control become salient and easily accessible.

A Theory of Social Control

Worldviews are sets of beliefs and assumptions that describe reality. A given worldview encompasses assumptions about a heterogeneous variety of topics, including human nature, the meaning and nature of life, and the composition of the universe itself, to name but a few issues (Koltko-Rivera, 2004, p. 3.)

Worldviews are primarily realized through our social perceptions and involve the self through the processes of *self-*

situating. Worldviews imply attitudes and patterns of behavior, or in other words social strategies, including all forms of mental or physical activities in one's social context. From the data, various particular, mutually exclusive patterns of complex social attitudes/social strategies may be pointed out. Examples are: *self-victimizing*, *achieving*, *celebrating*, *protesting*, *withdrawing*, *complaining*, *defying* and *contributing*. These are in line with and could be described along the three dimensions of self-situating (e.g. complaining implies an inactivated, unfairly treated self that bonds with someone on a particular negative experience; achieving implies an active self that accepts its social circumstances but acts isolated; protesting occurs when several people wish to express their being mistreated in a joint effort, and so on.)

Self-victimizing

A strikingly salient social pattern (implicit social psychological strategy) in post-communist Hungary is *self-victimizing*, which occurs at the intersection of these three social noetic processes. Self-victimizing is in social terms a possibly disadvantageous outcome, which results in self-estranging and the extreme splitting of *the I*, and *the other*. Self-victimizing occurs when the self is perceived as fully differentiated from its social surroundings: it is relatively and subjectively inactive, isolated and is being treated unfavorably. The victimized self lacks *social control* and the person experiences a subjective estrangement from the rest of the social world, and in particular *inhibition*, *regression* and *isolation*. Self-victimizing seems to contribute not only to the decreased level of social and psychological well-being of individuals or groups but also to certain socio-cultural phenomenon such as distrust, bystander behavior, pessimism or anomie.

[...] there is a certain degree of helplessness because now nobody takes care of us, its all men for themselves, but the transition period has been handled pretty badly and I think they still can't get a grip on it, because they have no set script.

Contrary to the victimized self, the *contributing* self is integrated to and actively involved in its natural social

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community, experiencing fairness, potency, a possibility for control and a relatively high level of social and personal comfort and satisfaction. These subjective experiences may be noted on the conceptual level such as a social aspect of the *flow experience* (optimal experience, see Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; 1990.)

[...] this is a private initiative, that by helping others also helps me [...] we started this volunteering scheme, say to organize Kids' Day, or revamp classrooms or donate blood and we were organizing such programs, so I really don't know maybe helping the helpless is also part of it, to be able to help someone in need [...]really, when I see that people are willing to make a difference and do it selflessly, that was a good feeling, to help, that there are people like that.

In general, the emergent theory indicates that that evaluative processes (social situating) affect subjective social well-being (SWB) by the mediating effect of *implicit social control* assessed in the particular situation. The levels of assessed/perceived control will affect well-being and comfort experienced by the person (see the example below).

[...] for example, my parents did not buy me a microscope, though everyone else had [...] the rich kids went to that school and Zsolnay method, I did not really feel good there, then I transferred and there I felt good, I still have my friends from there and nobody became a crook, so everyone can become someone, but there it was different, we never had a cent, but still had a good time. Because nobody had money.

Apart from shaping civil (dis)satisfaction and (dis)comfort, the operations of cultural patterns bear enormous social relevance in every society by determining modes of civil contribution and social (in)action. Depending on the social processes in motion, next to self-victimizing various further social strategies of varying levels of social control may be pointed out in a descriptive manner. Cross-cultural, situational and personal differences in the probability of prevalence of these are all emerging from the data, and differences in the levels of subjective, personal and social

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satisfaction at each strategy are also present. These strategies or reaction modes differ in their components: *defying* is the reaction mode of the isolated and active citizen, who is discrediting his or her social setting; *protesting* is different from defying in that it involves a grouping up of individuals who are therefore not isolated but connected; *celebrating* is the passive collective behavior of people who experience awe over their circumstances (*awe* is in this framework the opposite extreme of discrediting), *withdrawing* is a reaction mode that involves the isolated and inactive individual to accept his or her circumstances, *complaining* means grouping up but staying inactive while discrediting certain ways of life; *achieving* occurs while self-isolating, self-activating and accepting in the social setting; while *contributing* represents the social aspects of the flow experience. All forms/patterns of social attitudes and action involve gains (e.g. an active role or positive affections) as well as losses (e.g. solitude, negative emotions such as anger, guilt, shame or a lack of contribution) and contribute to the varying levels of subjective well-being.

Self-victimizing: a relative loss of social control and well-being

According to the emerging theory of social control (TSC) the variances in the levels of SWB between individuals, groups and (sub)cultures arise as a consequence of varied implicit evaluations of the levels of *social control* which the self attains in a given social setting. Satisfaction in a social setting is modulated by evaluative and behavioral strategies of the individual to gain and/or to hold on to social control in one's particular environment. From the data, three core dimensions of social control (*activity*, *fairness* and *inclusion*) have emerged. Subjective experiences range from regression through flow to aggression (*activity*), from inhibition to through integrity to awe (*fairness*) and from isolation through fit to symbiosis (*inclusion*.) These implicit subjective experiences and their consequences can be identified with some of the most distinguishable sociocultural patterns or strategies (a possible descriptive typology as follows: *self-victimizing*, *complaining*, *defying*, *withdrawing*, *protesting*, *celebrating*, *achieving* and *contributing*) of varying levels of

happiness.

The results of the research indicate that psychological and cultural factors predominate in influencing civil satisfaction and contribution over both actual life events or running public affairs, and current economic or political states of the nation. According to results the most relevant modes of mediation between actual events and civil comfort are those culture-specific patterns of social perception, cognition and action, which guide the latent framing of the *self* and the *other* and implicitly direct the interpretation of social/societal situations. This emerged consistency is in line with previous literature (see Mussweiler, Strack, 1999; Mussweiler, Strack, 2000; Mussweiler, Bodenhausen, 2002 on self evaluation and Mead, 1934; Bourdieu, 1972; Bruner, 1990; Giddens, 1984; Goffman, 1959; Kitayama, Markus, 1999, 2003; Markus, Mullally, and Kitayama, 1997; etc on the culturally embedded and socially interrelated self). The most important notion here is that as the participants' experience and narrative reports demonstrated it is impossible to perceive and frame a social event or situation meaningfully without situating the *self* in relation to the particular or generalized *other*. This implicit and unconscious placement (or in other words, a complex and multi-dimensional social comparison) of the self may be called *social situating*. Although previous research (see above) has indicated the significance of the *self* in both cognitive and affective aspects of social functioning, these interdisciplinary concepts have, apart from a few examples, not yet sufficiently pervaded SWB research. The emerging theory highlights the importance of the cultural and inter-relational nature of evaluations on life satisfaction. It also underlines the limitations that previous SWB concepts (Ryff, 1989; Ryff and Keyes, 1995; Diener and Diener, 1995; Diener, Oishi and Lucas, 2003) imply. These concepts consider multiple variables when examining well-being, however, they fail to note that SWB functions are not individual and arbitrary mechanisms but rather consequences of the human existence in a primarily social and cultural 'pond'.

Social situating is the general social or *socio-noetic* process by which people give meaning to their social

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surroundings and at the same time define and interpret the self in the given social situation. During everyday social contact the person's own self is experienced not as a finite, stable, steady entity; it is much rather assessed each time through a latent procedure of social placement and as a correlate to the general other or others in the given social setting. Social situating and the placement of the self is realized on three separate parallel dimensions that mark the evaluations and personal experience in each and every social situation: agency, valence and social layout. Social situating results in two, mutually exclusive outcome: *self-differentiating* and *self-accommodating* (achieving the *social flow*). The social noetic process of situating the self occurs implicitly in any instance where the self appears as operating in a social context. The surroundings can be perceived and categorized unconsciously as either similar (self-accommodating) or dissimilar (self-differentiating) with the self on any given dimension of this unconscious comparison. Self-differentiating can be observed in the following utterances:

[...] unlike the colleagues who would now say, wow it was horrible after that because they were afraid to accept tough deadlines, let me repeat: several times we also worked on week-ends.

The differentiated self is *contrasted* to its social surroundings (as opposed to being accommodated), and in this particular sample this is realized by various salient (although implicit and unconscious) subordinate social noetic processes, *self-inactivating*, *discrediting*, *self-isolating*, *self-accelerating*, *transcending* and *blending*. The several forms of self-differentiating may inhibit subjective well-being by causing a subjective sense of lost (externalized) control. From a SWB viewpoint, the emerging theory implies that satisfaction with life in this particular cultural setting will be decreased upon the processes of self-evaluation. Deviation from the flow experience (see the expression *flow* used to describe the optimal human experience in Csikszentmihalyi 1988; 1990) will involve the relative loss of self-integrity, experienced as an externalization of social control. In this sense, control is shifted from outside of the self to the other, or, in other words, the self is falling outside the nucleus of

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social control. *Self-accomodating* here stands as flow understood in the social context. Each of these processes bring about a decrease by reducing the level of subjectively experienced control over a given social situation.

Self-inactivating is the social noetic process by which the self is differentiated from others in the social setting on the dimension of agency. The inactivated self is framed as less powerful, competent, responsible, capable or active than the other or others in a particular situation. Incidents of self-inactivating could be observed both on the personal level and in evaluations of the nation's affairs.

[...] I can't do the same with a simple checking account because I have to accept what they tell me. Even if I know how the bank is stealing from me, or how they are trying to trick me, I can't do anything about it, I have no power.

Note the contrary process, *self-activating* in the following incident:

[...] it would be very cool when you have a kid and you can devote all your time to him and take care of him and teach him, because that's the best part that you teach him stuff, you decide how he will turn out or, at least you try to give everything you know to him, everything that's good in your life, your knowledge or whatever, your experience and I would really like to do this already.

Self-accelerating, on the other hand comes with a massive push the person experiences as drive. "[...] the helplessness, ignorance, indifference, lameness of people these all can really piss me off, just pump the adrenalin in my brain."

Discrediting is the social noetic process by which the self is differentiated from others in the social setting on the dimension of valence. Discrediting occurs when the social situation of the self is viewed as less favorable, just or fair than that of the other or others in a particular situation, inhibiting possibilities for acceptance of a given social circumstance and reducing experienced personal control. „[...]

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only because miserable idiots like these are leading this country.” The contrary process, *acceptance* enhances feelings of control and increases satisfaction:

[...] well, thanks God I always have been able to change workplaces and make more money than before and so it became more transparent to me that OMG how much I have to pay for taxes and of course it's unjust that I also have to pay the Solidarity Tax or whatever but after all it doesn't set me back too much, because I can afford it, and then rather me than someone who gets minimal wage.

Whereas the opposite extreme on the dimension of fairness is *transcending* – the person is overwhelmed to experience the fairness of a higher power.

Self-isolating is the social noetic process by which the self is differentiated from others in the social setting on the dimension of social layout. The isolated self is framed as less embedded or more isolated than the other or others in a particular situation. Many Hungarians experience isolation if not in physical but rather in social or in functional terms:

[...] it would be great to belong to a community where I can talk about this, or make it happen, where I can voice my opinion to someone, and that, maybe even get someone to listen to what I have to say.

When instead of subjective isolation, a feeling of connectedness is experienced, SWB is higher among participants: „[...] it really made me very happy, that I met people who make me so..., with whom I could really bond, have this feeling of unity, of togetherness.” A sense of symbiosis, however means that the self is blending into its surroundings, in which the self loses its autonomy.

Discussion

Subjective well-being (SWB) refers to how people evaluate their lives [...]. A person's evaluation of his or her life may be in the form of cognitions [or] in the form of affect. Thus, a person is said to have high SWB if she or he experiences life satisfaction and frequent joy, and only infrequently experience unpleasant

emotions such as sadness and anger. Contrariwise, a person is said to have low SWB if he or she is dissatisfied with life, experiences little joy and affection, and frequently feels negative emotions such as anger or anxiety. The cognitive and affective components of SWB are highly interrelated, and only recently are we beginning to understand the relations between various types of SWB” (Diener, et al. 1997, p.25.)

The above quote demonstrates the main premises behind and the most important characteristics of SWB research in the previous decades in social psychology. SWB is, by these assumptions primarily individualistic, static, personality-based and comprising of two types of subjective and evaluative experiences: affections and cognitive judgments. This perspective of SWB however, has its limitations when applied in the social and cultural context.

The research introduced in this paper was aimed at discovering social psychological causes and mechanisms behind unusually low levels of civil and personal satisfaction, civil comfort as well as low levels of social and subjective well-being in Hungary. Such anomalies have been experienced in the Hungarian society continually since the change of the political system two decades ago. A cultural psychological approach was taken to reveal the main social psychological processes that govern the development and endurance of these problems (Sági, 2002; Molnár and Kapitány, 2007; Tóth, 2009) apart from the structural, political, historical, economical factors (Spéder and Kapitány, 2002).

Throughout the last two decades, both public and scientific discourse in post-communist Hungary (along with some other such/post-communist societies) have conceptualized certain characteristics of the cultural and social scene as disadvantageous socio-cultural and/or system-based traits such as decreasing levels of tolerance (Hunyady, 2008); dramatic and disillusioned tone of public discourse (Nádas, 2010); or a lack of stable democratic institutional background (Hankiss, 1999.) Research also highlighted such problems as high levels of depression and other affective disorders and a high rate of suicide attempts

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(Kopp, 2008), low indicators of public mood (Sági, 2002; Kopp, 2008), high levels of alcoholism and other depression related drug abuse (Széll, 2007; Kopp, 2008), or a high occurrence of chronic disease (Kopp, 2008). Other problems are: distrust in both the political and civil sphere and in interpersonal relations (Tóth, 2009; Skrabski and Kopp, 2008); anomie and a conforming attitude towards both small and large-scale corruption (Tóth, 2009); concerning moral dysfunctions (Spéder and Kapitány, 2002); as well as dissatisfaction and forthright violence (Sági, 2002). However, so far psychological and social psychological reasons in these matters have only been considered to a limited extent. Public and scientific discourse, on the other hand have pointed out the salience of complaining, distrust, irrational expectations, anomie, perceived loss of morality and pessimism, which apart from being overall, macro-level problems, tend to influence people's everyday lives and reduce the levels of positive affect and both personal and social subjective well-being (Csepe, 2008; Kopp, 2008; Skrabski and Kopp, 2008; Hunyady, 2008).

Scientific research behind subjective well-being has been developing fast, both in body and scope, in the last few decades. SWB has been conceptualized previously in many ways, from hedonic quality of experience to experiences in personal growth; however, most commonly used indicators of SWB still remain the global life satisfaction and evaluation of personal happiness (Kahneman and Krueger, 2006). Cultural differences shown by general indicators of SWB have been pointed out earlier, just as personal differences in experiencing relative satisfaction with life (Diener, Oishi, and Lucas, 2003; Diener and Diener, 1995). Personal SWB is, according to previous results, influenced by certain personality traits such as neuroticism and extraversion, as well as situational, demographic, institutional, environmental, and economical factors (van Hoorn, 2007). So far, the main assumptions established among social psychologists are that *positive subjective well-being* is due to certain demographic factors, such as (Lee, Secombe, and Shehan, 1991; Mastekaasa, 1991; Gohm, Darlington, Diener, and Oishi, 1997; Diener, 1995; Diener, Sandvik, Seidlitz, and Diener, 1993). According to previous research, SWB is an important

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contributor to mental health (Diener and Diener, 1996); can be altered by one's worldviews (Larsen, Diener, and Croponzano, 1987); is largely culture-dependent (Diener, Diener, and Diener, 1995; Suh, Diener, Oishi, and Triandis, 1997.) SWB is, furthermore, in line with pleasant and unpleasant affect; may have a strong genetic basis, (Lykken and Tellegen, 1996; Tellegen, Lykken, Bouchard, Wilcox, Segal, and Rich, 1988; Kagan, 1994; Costa, McCrae, and Zonderman, 1987); may change considerably with significant life events but remains relatively stable over the course of time (Suh, Diener, and Fujita, 1996.) It is also related to social comparison (Taylor, Wood, and Lichtman, 1983; Will, 1981; Wood, Taylor, and Lichtman, 1985); and mediated through personality effects, via variables such as optimism, self-esteem, neuroticism and extraversion (Diener, Sandvik, Pavot, and Fujita, 1992; Costa and McCrae, 1980; McCrae and Costa, 1985).

Previous research also shows that the SWB of a nation can be determined by subjective (social and psychological) background factors in particular, apart from hard data in a country such as GDP, and some other features expressible in numbers to a lesser extent such as sociological and political factors and other cultural aspects. There is, furthermore an expansion in the concept of subjective well being, with the notion of psychological well-being added to the picture (Ryff, 1989; Ryff and Keyes, 1995). Ryff and fellow scientists promote a more complex framework of human well-being that encompasses 6 distinct dimensions of wellness (Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Positive Relations with Others, Purpose in Life, Self-Acceptance). However, there seems to be a striking lack in the literature of examination of social well-being – all SWB and PWB concepts seem to focus merely on the individual side of the human. What is the case, when we examine subjective social well-being?

Conclusion

An extended view and a complex framework of SWB and happiness were introduced in the paper. When examined from a systemic point of view, SWB turns out to be primarily a social function, which is determined mostly by social psychological factors. Such factors include implicit processes

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by which we socially situate and frame our own selves and the general or particular other in a given social/societal situation. These processes, namely *social situating* (the two basic social processes uncovered in the research were *self-differentiating* and its antagonism, *self-accommodating*) and an involuntary and unconscious assessment of control guide our social perception, cognition and behavior. These are also the main background factors that guide human happiness and are in correlation with affective evaluations and feelings of people in a certain cultural setting. Personal dissatisfaction arise when the person experiences his or her self as outside of the natural social nucleus causing a weakening or loss in assessed control and a lack of personal comfort. Patterns of self-situating can determine both personal as well as cultural choices and tendencies influencing attitudes, worldview and behavior.

The expanded three-dimensional model of civil satisfaction, comfort and contribution described above is parallel to previous concepts and research evidence both in happiness research and in studies on cross-cultural differences. However, further examination of the relationship of these concepts to other previously discovered notions such as individualism and collectivism, self-esteem, self-regard, purpose in life, community service, personal goals and personal evaluation of control over life events would prove useful. Apart from shaping social situations *self-differentiating* may also play an important role in more broad, societal (historical even) incidents and processes, and their actual real-life operation also deserve a further detailed look (e.g. how are mistrust and isolation connected; how can an executive activate his or her listeners; which are the most striking health consequences of differentiating the self in the long run, and so on). Less distant aims for further research are to operationalize the above-introduced concepts and to perform correlation examinations to show their convergence to previous indicators of subjective well-being.

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