Cultural Patterns and Subjective Culture as Predictors of Well-Being: A Cross-Cultural Study

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Every culture has its paradise vision: desirable and external conditions which, inside the concerned culture, are infrequently observed or difficult to realize and are linked to one another. This cross-cultural study compares well-being in China, Bulgaria, France and Germany. The cultural patterns of the culture are differently, but well-being is easier to achieve if people adapt to their cultural patterns. The adjustment (positive subjective culture) is formed by culture-specific content and needs different in regards to different cultures.

Keywords: cross-cultural management, cultural patterns, well-being, China, Bulgaria, France, Germany

Introduction

Every culture has its paradise vision: desirable and external conditions which, inside the concerned culture, are infrequently observed or difficult to realize and are linked to one another.

This paradise vision influences the perception of luck. In this culture comparative examination, it was determined to what extent the cultural pattern has an effect on the life satisfaction and which characteristics is a part of the paradise vision in the different considered cultures (Abele & Becker, 1994; E. Diener & M. Diener, 1995).

Until now, it has barely been analysed how the culture affects the well-being of its people. The subjective well-being is one of the latest research areas in the field of psychology. There are different ways of analyzing well-being. Nevertheless, the well-being itself is only used as an auxiliary construct. There are more implicit than explicit approaches about well-being. The socio-psychological construct of well-being can be connected to objective criteria like income as well as to subjective measurements.

When comparing cultures, mainly objective criteria, such as income or gross domestic product are used to perform a comparison of means. These criteria are used because of their good comparability.

Because of these conditions, a new questionnaire has been developed. The questionnaire contains specific questions dealing with the cultural differences in well-being. Developing a new questionnaire was essential, because no prior survey implicated questions about the subjective cultural differences or cultural comparative. Moreover, the old well-being scales used in sanitary psychology only measured limited quality of life of sick persons.

The existing surveys are not able to give a proper answer to the question of how a fulfilled life can be achieved. The approaches using a cognitive access to well-being also use a process of comparison. Thus,

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well-being arises through the comparison of the actual life satisfaction with a relative life satisfaction (Abele & Becker, 1994; Perrig-Chiello, 1997; Veenhoven, 1991; Frey, Dauenhimer, Pargé, & Haisch, 1993). Well-being arises only through the fulfilment of an individual aspiration level. This level can easily be achieved. This is a way of comparing not the real satisfaction, but the probability of satisfaction. A high aspiration level can be motivating and challenging, but it can be a pressure as well and can decrease the personal well-being. This means someone is afflicted with wishes and goals he/she cannot achieve; for example, to love someone or to achieve a certain job. Nevertheless, it is no solution to simply decrease the aspiration level (Bruggemann, Groskurth, & Ulrich, 1975). Job satisfaction cannot be achieved in this way. Women especially tend to give up their work goals to oblige their families and children. If these women do this because they want to and not because the society demands them to do so, it will not decrease their levels of well-being. Michalos (1985) said that satisfaction is higher if the performance is close to the demands. Expectations and needs are based on comparisons with other people and past experiences. In this context, the public opinion and the demanded social models in a culture play an important, and maybe the most important role. The theories of comparison state that personal quality of life can go in two directions. Life satisfaction can go in a positive direction due to personal experiences or the expectation of enjoyable social interactions and due to physical and psychological symptoms, life satisfaction can go in a negative direction as well. State-variables play a more important role than trait-variables (Lewinsohn, Redner, & Seeley, 1991). During critical events in someone's life, the well-being depends, for example, on successful coping. Coping means a dynamic relationship between context and social support, age, sex and the structure of personality (Filipp & Klauer, 1991). Well-being is a result of satisfied needs. It is a balance between positive and negative experiences. The subjective actual condition is the perception of past, current or future experiences. The subjective valuation of this condition is a way of weighting upcoming feelings of dissonance and congruency (Mayring, 1991; Michalos, 1980, 1985). The higher the standard, the higher the gap between current and target values. This gap decreases the well-being. The level of the standard is influenced by personal experiences and wishes as well as social comparison and socio-cultural demanded models.

The importance of the assessment of the aspiration level can be explained by using the model from Bruggemann, Groskurth, and Ulrich (1975). In this model, a diffuse dissatisfaction according to a cut of the aspiration level, can lead to pessimistic work satisfaction. The perpetuation of the aspiration level can, on the other hand, lead to pseudo-satisfaction respectively to a structural or fixed aspiration level (Bruggemann et al., 1975; Semmer & Udris, 1995). Pessimistic satisfaction means that someone gives up their goals and dreams. Nevertheless, the current condition is judged positively. The experience of satisfaction is determined by the way of harmonizing the perceptions, attitudes, expectations and behaviours. Dissonances between cognitive elements need to be avoided in order to stabilize the internal consistency (Frey & Gaska, 1993; Weber, 1994).

According to these ideas, it seems to be rather easy to say that the key to perceived personal luck are a realistic perception in addition to realistic goals. However, empiric results show that not the frequency of positive events but the intensity of positive events are important for the creation of luck for a long period of time, luck was defined as the intensity of positive vs. negative emotions. But, during some longitudinal selection studies, it was clearly shown that "being lucky" is caused by the frequency of positive experiences. However, these statements cannot be generalized. Young people need more intensive emotions, while elders need a higher frequency of emotions (E. Diener & C. Diener, 1996).

The loss of resources and the need for model of compensation is more present during old age. During

seniority, expected changes are less favourable and comfortable because one cannot have a fresh start every time (Heckhausen & Baltes, 1991; Heckhausen, Dixon, & Baltes, 1989). This model implicates the theory that there is a perfect timing for everything.

The RDT (relative deprivation theory) uses an actual-theoretical comparison of the personal well-being. Moreover, the theory considers the compensation processes because these processes include social and cultural schemes. Therefore, the impact on groups and social processes can be pointed out. As a result, the theory can explain the development of discrimination, moral indignation, and anger which can lead to collectivistic behaviour, like civil disturbance. The origin of the RDT observed that the feeling of discrimination and the objectively measured condition of a person do not always correlate. That means not everyone who should feel objectively bad is truly unsatisfied and vice versa.

Measures and Samples

In order to clarify the connections stated above, a comparison of cultures was conducted. The aim is to find congruencies and differences in these patterns related to subjective cultural life satisfaction depending on universal cultural patterns in cultural heterogeneous samples. These are connected with different cultural traditions. The sample consists of 577 test persons from China (105), Germany (180), France (120) and Bulgaria (172).

This composition tries to cover a range of cultural areas. Using this method, comprehensive, respectively universal, tendencies can be observed. Bulgaria covers the Slavic culture, Germany the Germanic culture, China the Asiatic culture and France the Romanic culture.

The research work in Germany and China was done by student assistants. The students came from either Germany or China and studied at the University of Passau, Germany. They were compensated as student assistants. The interviews in Bulgaria and France were handled by colleagues. They were also compensated accordingly. At the end of the interviews, the data were translated into German. All of the students and colleagues were native speakers and paid attention to local peculiarities.

It was required that the interviewers came from the middle class and the same culture as well as the test persons. The interviewers were some kinds of test persons themselves and, therefore, could help with their knowledge to understand specialties of the cultures.

Moreover, to assure comparability, a cohort design was used subject to age and sex. As a result, the comparability is assured and the demands for an ANOVA (analysis of variance) are met. The parallelization of the test persons according to relevant variables was conducted. The demographic variables are connected to a specific cultural evaluation. Only age and sex are the definite comparable variables.

The allocation of age and sex is equal in every sample. The cohorts between 18 and 55 years old are limited and thereafter open-ended. The cohorts contain the following design: 18 to 25 years old, 26 to 35 years old, 36 to 45 years old, 46 to 55 years old and 56 years old and above. The youngest person in all samples is 18 years old; the oldest is 89 years old. The mean is 40.73 years old. In Bulgaria, the range is from 19 to 71 years old with a mean of 40.66 years old. The test persons in Germany are from 18 to 89 years old and have a mean of 41.4 years old. In France it ranges from 19 to 71 years old. Their mean is 40.36 years old. China is from 18 to 89 years old, with a mean of 40.73 years old. Every sample group contains 35 women and 35 men.

The following methods were used to check the hypotheses: Individualism/collectivism (Triandis, 1996), right-wing-authoritarianism questionnaire by Altemeyer (1988) and a questionnaire by Genkova (2003)

containing some open questions.

The question has to be examined differentially because of the quantitative and qualitative approach. Therefore, interviews about specific well-being were used.

The survey (Genkova, 2008) was conducted in terms of structured interviews and questionnaires about life satisfaction of each society. The following scales were constituted: subjective culture (internationalised cultural standards), performance and society as a field of the subjective life satisfaction. The scale from Rosenberg (1965) regarding self-esteem was also used.

Hypotheses

In this study, the following hypotheses were stated:

Hypothesis 1: The determined cultures differ in the context of the subjective life satisfaction, society and performance.

Hypothesis 2: Subjective culture and self-esteem are cross-cultural moderators in the context of life satisfaction.

Results and Discussion

Hypothesis 1: The Determined Cultures Differ in the Context of the Subjective Life Satisfaction, Society and Performance.

ANOVA was used to check whether the four cultures differed subject to the “specific subjective” quality of life. With regard to the three scales, there are significant differences. In view of the scale “sense of community” ($F = 8.278$; $df\ 3$; 575 , $p = 0.000$; Levene-test = 1.382 , $df\ 3$; 575 ; $p = 0.249$), the German test persons have the highest means (4.92 ; SD (standard deviation) = 0.86). The French test persons have the lowest (4.15 ; $SD = 0.86$). The Chinese (4.64 ; $SD = 0.88$) and the Bulgarians (4.69 ; $SD = 1.05$) show similar results (see Figure 1). Nevertheless, the SD is in all cultures very high. That could be a result of very heterogeneous statements. But, it is not obvious whether culture-related answers caused these results.

Figure 1. Mean differences in the determined cultures.

When comparing the four cultures' significant differences regarding to the scale of “performance” become obvious ($F = 10.58$; $df\ 3$; 574 , $p = 0.000$; Levene-test = 0.267 ; $df\ 3$; 574 and $p = 0.001$). The highest value is for Germany (4.35 ; $SD = 0.75$) and the lowest for France (3.60 ; $SD = 0.86$). China (4.11 ; $SD = 0.85$) and Bulgaria

(3.95; $SD = 0.81$) differ as well.

With regards to the “subjective quality of life”, German test persons again have the highest values (4.84, $SD = 1.04$). The lowest values were observed in Bulgaria (3.81; $SD = 1.47$). In addition to this, the highest SD also occurred in Bulgaria. The Chinese (4.30; $SD = 1.14$) and French (4.01; $SD = 1.09$; $F = 9.81$; $df\ 3; 573$; $p = 0.000$; Levene-test = 4.058; $df\ 3; 573$; $p = 0.008$) values are in between. Thus, an interesting tendency occurs. Germany has the highest values regarding to performance and sense of community. Stereotype attitudes describing Germany as a welfare state and a meritocracy back up these results. Except for “subjective life satisfaction”, France always has the lowest values.

In order to compare the means, the Scheffe-procedure and the Bonferroni-adjustment were used. Looking at performance and sense of community, China and Bulgaria, as traditional collectivist cultures, have similar values. No significant differences occurred during the entire survey. In regards to subjective quality of life, the four countries have similar values. At this point, difficulties regarding the specific filling out of the questionnaires arise. The complex-problem of the explicit and implicit attitudes should not be handled by this survey. It could be, however, a motive for further research work.

Hypothesis 2: Subjective Culture and Self-esteem Are Cross-Cultural Moderators in the Context of Life Satisfaction.

The cultural patterns are supposed to predict cross-culturally the higher life satisfaction; the interdependency among the cultural patterns has to relate to culture specific tendencies. Subjective culture and self-worth are supposed to be cross-cultural moderators regarding subjective satisfaction. Moreover, performance and sense of community should be moderators in regards to specific satisfaction.

It is the aim to prove this even under the influence of the culture. This method is essential because of the cultural-heterogeneous samples. A normal distribution between 50 and 100 test persons is given. Therefore, it is not problematic to make separate interpretations. It is important to keep in mind that even proper models could be rejected. To assure comparability, a method is chosen which respects technical developments of recent statistical programs. “Culture”, for example, was operationalized as a multi-nominal variable in regression analysis. There are four single variables with the values 1 and 0.

This leads, in the end, to a chi-square distribution, which, in the broadest sense, is equal to the normal distribution. Therefore, this method of analyzing is valid. In regards to the models of structural equation, this method is impossible to use. Both models and their fits in the entire sample were reviewed step by step using AMOS (a statistic program to calculate structural equations, designed by IBM SPSS Statistics). The structural equation is not based on data, but on theories. Therefore, the models were modified until the fits suited to the data. In the first constituted model, the specific satisfaction will be predicted under the influence of the cultural patterns and throughout the moderator variables subjective culture and self-worth. During the first construction, a low explained variance of self-esteem is noticed. Furthermore, the expected correlations between the cultural patterns are partly not significant. The model fit was improved by the elimination of the insignificant correlations.

Beyond this, it was considered that a theoretical justification should back up the model. Thus, the regression arrows concerning individualism and collectivism in relation to subjective culture and self-esteem are retained. The pro- and contra- authoritarian attitudes are only connected to the subjective culture. Moreover, it was attempted to predict self-esteem by using only individualism and collectivism, due to the fact that only

the adjustment to a culture causes the subjective culture. This is not valid regarding the pro- and contra-authoritarian attitudes, because they are judgmental.

After the elimination of the insignificant regressions and correlations, the following model containing proper fit-indices occurs: chi-square 12.152; df ; $p = 0.033$; CMIN (Chi^2/df) 2.430; CFI (Comparative Fit Index) = 0.970, RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation) 0.072 (LO (lower end of a 90% confidence interval on this estimate) 90 0.019 and HI (upper end of a 90% confidence interval on this estimate) 90 0.124). It is important to note that the sample contains more than 200 test persons (280). Significance is very common above 200 test persons when using AMOS. Looking at CMIN/ df values, a value < 3 seems to be fair. RMSEA < 0.08 is also fair for a fit. CFI > 0.90 is also accepted as a good value. The fit-indices are used in relation to a model by Kline (1998) and as well in relation to AMOS. We have to keep in mind that the fit-indices can tell us about lack of fit, but give no information about the plausibility *vs.* falsification of the model. The researcher has to do it himself by using theoretical, statistical and practical methods. Consequently, all of these criteria are considered here. Furthermore, it was checked what could possibly be eliminated from the model to improve the fits. The fits would also improve if the arrow from self-esteem to subjective culture could be removed. Another possibility is to eliminate the arrows from collectivism to subjective culture and self-esteem. The decision not to do so is, on the one hand, based on the theoretical conception, and on the other hand, rationalized by the comparability. It is the aim to create a model which can show several correlations. Finally, the model should allow us to prove correlations concerning the four cultural-heterogeneous samples (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Structural equation 1 regarding to the coherency between cultural patterns and specific, subjective satisfaction in the whole sample.

Furthermore, this model was used to explain correlations within the cultures (derived etc). In Bulgaria, the following results occurred chi-square 5.731, df 5; $p = 0.333$; CMIN/ df 1.146; CFI 0.975; RMSEA 0.046 (LO 90 0.000; HI 90 0.179). This rating seems fair. Looking at CMIN/ df values, a value < 3 seems to be fair. RMSEA of < 0.05 indicates good fit. CFI > 0.90 is also accepted as a good value. Obviously, this model better suits to

the Bulgarian sample. However, the ratings for the German, French and Chinese sample indicate a poor fit. CMIN/*df* values as well as RMSEA are unsatisfactory. The German sample gives the following rating chi-square 3.220, *df* 5; $p = 0.666$; CMIN/*df* 0.644; CFI 1.0; RMSEA 0.000 (LO 90 0.000; HI 90 0.132). The data for France are chi-square 8.373, *df* 5; $p = 0.137$; CMIN/*df* 1.675; CFI 0.964; RMSEA 0.099 (LO90 0.000; HI 90 0.212). Lastly, there are China's fit-indices chi-square 10.626, *df* 5; $p = 0.059$; CMIN/*df* 2.125; CFI 0.894; RMSEA 0.128 (LO90 0.000; HI90 0.235). The chi-square test offers no significant results for all samples. Looking at the figure, all standardized coefficients can be found.

Regarding the subjective satisfaction, Bulgaria and Germany as well as China and France have equal values. Nevertheless, neither individualism nor collectivism can be the proper explanation. The means of France and Germany differ too strong, even though both cultures are known as traditional individualistic cultures. Pointing out the uniqueness and the differences is one main feature of individualism. Furthermore, little social cohesion within the society and critical dispute concerning rules are individualistic features. But they are not as important as the others. One cannot forget that attitudes are always more important than rules and values (universal cultural patterns-values). Most surveys (Diener, 1995) showed that Germany has a low level of satisfaction. These results are used to highlight the well-being paradox. Even though Germany has a high standard of living and the objective values are very good, the subjective satisfaction is low. Nevertheless, the culture-related satisfaction is also high. It is a kind of subjective satisfaction which is based on one's own society and culture, not the individual satisfaction. Therefore, low values occur in socio-critical France as well. In Bulgaria, the subjective satisfaction is low not only because of its economic problems. The low values fit to the other results. In the test person's view, Bulgaria offers no possibility to achieve wishes and dreams. This is caused by the high unemployment, economic circumstances, fear of losing one's livelihood and low quality of life. Interesting results showed up when China and France are compared. China has even higher values than France. One explanation could be that the Chinese will change their country, or the low French acceptance of their country's current conditions.

All in all, it can be assumed that the relations between cultural patterns and the subjective specific well-being are not as distinctive as predicted, but nevertheless, they are significant. The subjective culture and the description of their own culture give information which cannot necessarily be related to the former chapters, but can help explaining existing coherencies.

Even though the same research methods are used as in former works, the results differ. This can be explained by changing connotations in the observed cultures. The statements from the subjective theories show that internalized collectivistic patterns can be detected within the Bulgarian and Chinese culture. In Germany and France, individualistic patterns can be seen. These changes do not affect the individual paradigms and behavior patterns which already have been internalized within the process of socialization.

The assumption that cultural patterns can predict culture-specific subjective satisfaction could only be proved partially. Instead, a cross-cultural tendency for subjective culture being a strong predictor for the culture-related well-being was observed cross-culturally. Different tendencies can be deducted from the fact that cultural patterns have less influence on subjective satisfaction and that performance and subjective culture have more influence and act as moderators. Some cultures have rules and patterns which hinder individual target achievement and wish-fulfillment. However, people pursuit a balance with their environment to be healthy and successful. This effort relates to the original state as well as the expected imagination, e.g., the image of the paradise. Both factors differ in every culture. They define the current subjective theories and the

missing parts of the well-being. As a layman, people could say that happiness is a universal aim independent from one's culture. This aim is easier to achieve if people adapt to their cultural patterns. The adjustment is formed by culture-specific content and needs different in regards to different cultures. Moreover, the patterns and personalities play a role. But, this will be the work of further research.

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