



Components of Emotional Meaning: A sourcebook

Johnny J. R. Fontaine (ed.) et al.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199592746.001.0001>

Published: 15 August 2013

Online ISBN: 9780191762765

Print ISBN: 9780199592746

Search in this book

CHAPTER

35 The meaning of happiness in Japan and the United States



Keiko Ishii

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199592746.003.0036> Pages 473–476

Published: August 2013

Abstract

In order to show additional evidence regarding cultural differences in the meaning of happiness, data related to happiness from Japanese and Americans in the GRID project were analyzed. Although many features of the meaning of happiness were common between the two cultures, cultural differences reflecting divergent modes of agency (i.e., independence vs interdependence) were also found. In the US, happiness was more related to a sense of control and high-arousal states, whereas in Japan happiness was more related to the fulfilment of other's expectations, as well as low-arousal states. Overall happiness was connected to both pride and love in both cultures. Regarding the physiological features, however, happiness was connected more to pride than love in the US, whereas the pattern was reversed in Japan.

Keywords: [happiness](#), [independent vs interdependent agency](#), [high- vs low-arousal state](#), [pride](#), [love](#)

Subject: [Developmental Psychology](#), [Social Psychology](#)

Collection: [Oxford Scholarship Online](#)

It is well known that there is a strong belief of independent agency in North American cultural contexts, whereas there is a strong belief of interdependent agency in East Asian cultural contexts including Japan (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). Research in cultural psychology has suggested that the culturally different views of agency encourage divergent modes of motivation and emotion. Independent agency is likely to associate with a tendency toward personal goal pursuit and control, whereas interdependent agency is likely to associate with a tendency to orient to the goals and desires of surrounding others (e.g., Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). Reflecting this diversity, for people with independent agency (e.g., North Americans), happiness is likely to depend primarily on personal achievement, whereas for those with interdependent agency (e.g., Japanese), happiness is likely to depend primarily on social harmony and adjustment to others (Kitayama, Ishii, Imada, Takemura, & Ramaswamy, 2006; Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000; Kitayama, Mesquita, & Karasawa, 2006).

In order to show additional evidence regarding the difference in the meaning of happiness, data related to happiness from Japanese and Americans in the GRID project were analyzed (see Chapter 6 for details on these data samples). The Visual Hypothesis Testing with Confidence Intervals (see Chapter 5) was used to confirm the significance of cultural differences for each item. For 31 out of 144 emotion features, the confidence intervals were non-overlapping or they were overlapping, but with the means outside the respective confidence intervals (which is referred to as significant and marginally significant differences, respectively) (see Table 35.1 for more details). Results on specific items which are relevant for the framework of independence and interdependence were summarized below.

Table 35.1 Thirty-one features in which there were differences between Japan and the US regarding the meaning of happiness

Features	Japan	US	
Appraisal (five features)			
confirmed expectations	8.05	6.03	**
inconsistent with expectations	3.16	4.77	*
required an immediate response	3.37	5.00	*
enough resources to avoid or modify consequences	2.53	5.84	**
consequences able to live with	4.95	6.58	*
Bodily reaction (four features)			
heartbeat slowing down	5.37	3.13	*
muscles relaxing	7.53	5.90	*
breathing slowing down	6.05	4.26	*
breathing getting faster	4.05	6.06	*
Expression (eight features)			
had eyebrows go up	3.53	5.87	*
showed tears	7.26	4.94	*
moved against people or things	2.37	3.84	*
did not show any changes in gestures	4.11	2.68	*
decreased the volume of voice	7.21	3.39	**
had a trembling voice	5.53	2.84	*
spoke faster	5.53	7.06	*
spoke slower	6.84	3.55	**
Action tendency (nine features)			
wanted to go on with what he or she was doing	4.37	6.84	*
wanted to be in command of others	3.00	4.55	*
wanted to be in control of the situation	2.74	5.13	**
wanted to move	6.68	5.23	*
wanted to be hurt as little as possible	2.37	4.97	*
wanted to be seen, to be in the center of attention	5.42	6.87	*
wanted to take care of another person or cause	4.47	6.55	*
wanted to be near or close to people or things	4.89	6.97	**

wanted to be tender, sweet, and kind	5.37	7.97	**
Feeling (four features)			
felt submissive	2.58	3.87	*
felt at ease	6.58	7.71	*
felt energetic	6.42	7.97	*
felt alert	3.32	6.94	**
Regulation (one feature)			
showed the emotion to other less than s/he felt it	5.53	3.97	*

Note: * overlapping confidence intervals, ** non-overlapping confidence intervals

It would be expected that North Americans regard happiness primarily as personal achievement and control, whereas Japanese regard it primarily as realization of social harmony and adjustment. Consistent with this prediction, “wanted to be in control of the situation” was more related to the meaning of happiness in the US than in Japan ($M = 5.13$ vs 2.74). The difference was significant. Moreover, the same tendency was found in the item “wanted to be in command of others” ($M = 4.55$ vs 3.00), although the difference was marginally significant. On the other hand, “(an event) that confirmed the expectations of the person” was more connected to the meaning of happiness in Japan than in the US ($M = 8.05$ vs 6.03). The difference was significant. The pattern was reversed, however, for the item “(an event) that was inconsistent with the expectations of the person” ($M = 3.16$ vs 4.77), although the difference was marginally significant.

p. 474

↳

p. 475 In addition, in Japan, compared to the US, a low-arousal state indicated by some Bodily reaction features such as “felt his/her heartbeat slowing down” ($M = 5.37$ vs 3.13), “felt his/her muscles relaxing (whole body)” ($M = 7.53$ vs 5.90), and “felt his/her breathing slowing down” ($M = 6.05$ vs 4.26) and Expression features such as “spoke softer” ($M = 7.21$ vs 3.39) and “spoke slower” ($M = 6.84$ vs 3.55) was associated with the meaning of happiness. The differences on the two Expression features were significant, while those regarding the three Bodily reaction features were marginally significant. In contrast, in the US, compared to Japan, the high-arousal state indicated by some features such as “felt his/her breathing getting faster” ($M = 6.06$ vs 4.05) and “spoke faster” ($M = 7.06$ vs 5.53) was associated with the meaning of happiness, although these differences were marginally significant. The results are consistent with those in Tsai, Knutson, and Fung (2006) and Uchida and Kitayama (2009).

Furthermore, the extent to which the meaning of happiness was connected to love, a socially engaging positive emotion, or pride, a socially disengaging positive emotion, was examined in each culture. Because socially disengaging emotions affirm independent self, while socially engaging emotions affirm interdependent self (Kitayama, Mesquita, et al., 2006), happiness would be more connected to pride than to love in the US, whereas it would be more connected to love than to pride in Japan. Relevant regression coefficients are summarized in Table 35.2. In both cultures, happiness was significantly connected to both love and pride over 144 features. In addition, when regression analyses were performed for each of the five subcategories of the features (i.e.,

p. 476 Appraisal, Bodily ↳ reaction, Expression, Action tendency, and Feeling) in each culture, the same tendency was found in all the subcategories except for the Bodily reaction. For the Bodily reaction features, happiness was significantly connected to pride, not love, in the US, whereas it was significantly connected to love, not pride in

Japan, consistent with the prediction. This suggests that cultural differences in predictors of happiness may be limited to a specific type of feature.

Table 35.2 Regression coefficients (β) that predict happiness as a function of pride and love

Culture	Pride	Love
Over 144 features		
Japan	0.54***	0.42***
US	0.58***	0.41***
Appraisal		
Japan	0.41**	0.57***
US	0.18 +	0.80***
Bodily reaction		
Japan	0.14	0.83***
US	0.88***	0.04
Expression		
Japan	0.44***	0.54***
US	0.71***	0.28*
Action tendency		
Japan	0.55***	0.34**
US	0.34***	0.68***
Feeling		
Japan	0.73***	0.29**
US	0.74***	0.26*

Note: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$ + $p < 0.10$

In summary, although many features of the meaning of happiness are common between the two cultures, there are also cultural differences reflecting divergent modes of agency (i.e., independence vs interdependence). In the US, happiness was more related to a sense of control and high-arousal states, whereas in Japan, happiness was more related to the fulfillment of other's expectations, as well as low-arousal states. Moreover, overall happiness was connected to both pride and love in both cultures. Regarding the Bodily reaction features, however, happiness was connected more to pride than love in the US, whereas the pattern was reversed in Japan. Further analyses will be needed to examine the details for dimensions, which consist of happiness in the two cultures, as well as to evaluate the validity of previous findings on culture and happiness.

Notes

-
- 1 Correspondence concerning this chapter should be addressed to: Keiko Ishii, Faculty of Letters, Kobe University, 1-1 Rokkodai-cho, Nada-ku, Kobe 657-8501 E-mail: ishii@lit.kobe-u.ac.jp