CULTURAL ORIENTATION AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

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ABSTRACT

There is a plethora of literature that attests to the important implication of cultural orientation for many spheres of human existence. In previous research the individualism-collectivism construct has been associated with, and most predictive of, subjective well-being. However, these studies have predominantly, though not solely, focused on Western and non-African samples. The present study examined the relationship between cultural orientation and subjective well-being in the Ghanaian context. The prediction that in a predominantly collectivist cultural context such as Ghana higher levels of collectivism will be associated with greater subjective well-being was confirmed. Contrary to a priori prediction, individualism was also positively associated with subjective well-being. Findings are discussed in light of characteristics of the individualism-collectivism construct and implications for further research.

Keywords: Individualism, Collectivism, Cultural Orientation, Subjective Well-Being, Satisfaction With Life.

INTRODUCTION

Human perception and behavior are importantly influenced by cultural orientation (Earley et al, 1999; Oettingen and Maier, 1999; Oettingen, 1995). Several studies attest to this important relationship between cultural orientation and behavior because inherent in culture are philosophical and ideological assumptions that provide a framework within which an individual conceptualizes or organizes his/her world as well as interpret experiences and respond to the environment (Hofstede, 1980; Jones and Zoppel, 1979; Kambon, 1998). The individual, as it were, perceives, interprets and responds to the environment through 'cultural lens' because embedded

in cultural beliefs are schemas that inform about how the 'world works' and thus forms the basis of the individual's understanding and construction of 'reality' (Abeles, 1990).

According to Triandis and others (1993, 1995, 1998) groups may be categorized as collectivists or individualists in cultural orientation and distinguished by their definition of self, priority of goals, nature of relationships and other determinants of social behaviour. It is these shared beliefs, attitudes, norms and value systems embedded in culture that influence personality, perceptions, and behavior (Sarpong, 2002; Triandis et al, 1995). Therefore, cultural values for example provide the framework for deciding what is important, true, right and good; the ingredients central for defining relationships and meanings (Eckersley, 2003).

In predominantly individualist cultures behaviors that emphasize independence, competition, and idiocentric characteristics that increase the chances of personal ascendancy and uniqueness appear prominent and highly valued (Menon et al, 1999; Weisz et al, 1984; Wong and Piran, 1995). Indeed, healthy psychological functioning and maturity are typically associated with the ability to construct distinct boundaries between the self and the other (Enns, 1994).

On the other hand in collectivist cultures, the self is conceptualized and defined in terms of meaningful relationships to others (Kojima, 1984; Tufuor and Donkor, 1989). Interdependence, self-control and deference, formation and maintenance of harmonious interpersonal relationships and behaviors promoting the common good are highly valued.

Research on the individualism-collectivism construct and well-being reports mixed findings. In consumer cultures, characteristics of individualism such as an independent self, personal control and competition, have been implicated in increases in national wealth and Gross National Product (GNP) (Ahuvia, 2004). In addition, associations between well-being and individualistic qualities such as self-esteem and optimism have been reported (Suh and Shigehiro, 2002; Ahuvia, 2004).

However, individualism has been suggested to have adverse effects on other qualities essential for well-being such as intimacy, belonging, self-restraint and meaning in life (Ahuvia, 2004). Furthermore, research has shown that individualism as an orientation to life that is self-focused, and materialism are detrimental to well-being as these breed emptiness, dissatisfaction, depression, anxiety, isolation and alienation. More importantly, highly materialistic individuals tend to be less satisfied with many life domains including family life (Eckersley, 2003).

If the secret to subjective well-being is meeting one's intrinsic needs as suggested by Ahuvia

(2004), then one may argue that in collectivist cultures essential intrinsic needs may include the need for affiliation since interdependence and sense of belonging are highly valued. In such cultural context cultural norms and obligations may be observed in exchange for security and loyalty of the group.

It may be further posited that in a predominantly collectivistic cultural context, the highly collectivistic person is more likely to have intrinsic needs met and therefore is more likely to enjoy greater life satisfaction and well-being. This is so predicted because psychological well-being is enhanced when there is a goodness of fit between an individual's needs and context-specific desires (Wallace and Bergeman, 1997). In other words, in a highly collectivist culture such as Ghana (Hofstede, 1980; Sarpong, 2002) subjective well-being may be importantly linked to congruence between individuals' behavior and the norms and expectations of the culture since this may enhance social acceptance and a sense of belonging which are important psychological needs.

Current Research Questions and Exploratory Hypotheses:

Based on the preceding literature and the Ghanaian cultural context which is predominantly collectivist (Hofstede, 1980; Sarpong, 2002), the main question explored in this study is whether in the Ghanaian cultural context highly collectivistic persons have greater satisfaction with life than highly individualistic persons. As already suggested, in a predominantly collectivistic culture the more collectivist may have characteristics and behaviors that are more congruent with societal norms and obligations. Therefore, they may have a greater chance of attaining and maintaining group loyalty, sense of belonging and security that may be important context specific psychological needs for greater life satisfaction. In the light of the above, the following exploratory hypotheses are made:

1. A positive correlation is expected between collectivism and satisfaction with life, which is an index of subjective well-being.
2. A negative correlation is expected between individualism and satisfaction with life.

METHOD
Subjects
Participants consisted of 185 students from the School of Medical Sciences at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST). Descriptive statistics of the sample are presented below in Table 1.

Procedure
All items, including demographic information, were combined to create a single packet of questionnaire. Inquired demographic information included age, gender, education, marital status and ethnicity. Participants were provided with information about the study and on confidentiality before their participation was solicited. Consent forms were provided and completed before questionnaires were administered. Particular effort was made to ensure consistency in the collection of data. For example, instructions on the study (e.g. information and procedure) were written out to ensure that all participants received and followed the same instructions and one person collected all the data.

Instruments
Questionnaires consist of scales on cultural orientation and life satisfaction as well as demographics on age, marital status, ethnic background and education.

Life satisfaction: Well-being was measured with the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SLWS) (Diener et al, 1985) that assesses overall satisfaction with life (Table 4a). The scale consists of five statements assessing overall satisfaction with life and rated on a 7-point scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). Higher scores indicate higher satisfaction with life and an index of

greater subjective well-being. The SWLS has good internal consistency and stability with desirable convergent and discriminate validity (Diener, 1984; Diener et al, 1985; Diener et al, 1999).

Cultural orientation: Subjective cultural orientation was measured with Triandis and Gelfand (1998) Collectivism-Individualism Scale that consists of 16 items with equal numbers of items assessing the two constructs (Table 4b). Items were rated on a 9-point scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (9) with high scores indicating high collectivism or high individualism. The scale has good internal reliability and validity and found useful for assessing subjective cultural orientation (Triandis et al, 1993; Triandis et al, 1995; Triandis and Gelfand, 1998).

Table 1: Demographic Variables

Variable		
Gender	50.3%	Female
	49.7%	Male
Age	22.69	Mean
	3.39	SD
	18-47	Range
Education	98.9%	University (1-3 years)
	1.1%	Completed Bachelors degree
Ethnicity	94.6%	Ghanaian
	4.3%	Nigerian
	1.1%	Other (Ghanaian-Nigerian)
Marital Status	85.9%	Single in no relationship
	10.8%	In a significant relationship Married
	2.7%	Separated
	.5%	

N = 185

RESULTS

The collectivism-individualism items were rated on a 9-point scale with high scores reflecting either high collectivism or high individualism. Items on the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS), were rated on a 7-point scale with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction with one's life and an index of subjective well-being. Coefficient alphas of measures obtained for this sample were consistent with previous research (Diener et al, 1985; Triandis and Gelfand, 1998). Descriptive statistics and internal consistency reliabilities for these measures are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: **Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistency Reliabilities for Culture and Well-being Variables**

	Mean	SD	Median	Range	Possible Range	Coefficient Alpha
Collec-	7.42	.85	7.50	2-9	1-9	.51
Indivi-dualism	6.47	1.24	6.63	1-9	1-9	.59
SWLS (Well-being)	4.30	1.17	4.40	1-5	1-5	.72

Mean scores were subjected to bivariate correlations. The two hypotheses posed in this study investigated whether in a predominantly collectivistic cultural context persons with higher collectivist tendencies enjoy a greater sense of well-being. Though the correlation between individualism and satisfaction with life was not significant, the finding that both collectivism and individualism were positively correlated with the criterion is suggestive of the importance of both cultural orientations for well-being even in a predominantly collectivist cultural context such as Ghana. It is noteworthy, however, that consistent with a priori expectations, higher levels of collectivism were significantly associated with greater satisfaction with life relative to individualism.

Table 3: **Correlations between culture variables,**

	Collectivism	Individualism
Satisfaction with Life	.16* (p = .032)	.14 (p = .066)
Gender	-.18* (p = .01)	-.10 (p = .17)

*Information in parentheses indicates p-value for statistical significance test of the difference from correlation of zero. * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2 tailed).*

Given the exploratory nature of the present study, though no specific hypotheses were made about the variables of interest and demographic data, examination of the relationship of the culture and well-being variables to these data showed some interesting findings for future investigation. There was a minimal non-significant, though measurable, negative correlation between age and collectivism ($r = -.11$, $p = .14$), an interesting finding for further future exploration. A significant negative correlation between gender and collectivism showed that increases in collectivism were associated with male participants (see Table 3). Linear regression of collectivism on gender, controlling for age, also showed that gender accounted for 4.7% of the variance in collectivism $F(2, 182) = 4.48$, $p = .01$.

DISCUSSION

The prediction that in a predominantly collectivist cultural context such as Ghana there will be a positive correlation between collectivism and satisfaction with life was confirmed. Persons with higher levels of collectivism were more satisfied with their lives. Congruity between cultural norms and expectations and individuals' collectivist tendencies may explain this finding. In other words, in a collectivist cultural context more collectivistic persons seem better able to negotiate and live in accordance with the dictates and culture specific situational constraints and so attain goals that are valued or judged important for happiness within the culture.

It has been suggested that the secret of subjective well-being is satisfaction of intrinsic needs (Ahuvia, 2004). Security and relatedness or a sense of belonging are basic and universal human needs essential for well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Similarly, strong social relationships are essential for high subjective well-being (Ahuvia, 2004). The intrinsic needs of the collectivist may well include the ability to establish and maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships that a predominantly collectivistic culture already supports and values. Therefore, it makes sense that within this cultural context persons who are more collectivist oriented are more likely to evaluate their lives as satisfying since the culture within which they live provides the mechanism for promoting, solidifying, and organizing group harmony and meaningful interpersonal experiences. Thus it appears that the question about *who is happy* and *why* is arguably culture specific and culture determined.

Individualism was not negatively correlated with satisfaction with life as predicted. It had a positive, though non-significant, relationship to the criterion variable. This seems to suggest that there are aspects of individualism that promote subjective well-being even within a predominantly collectivist cultural context. Individual freedom, autonomy and ascendancy, and that sense of "independent self" a hallmark of individualism, have been implicated in subjective well-being (Ahuvia, 2004; Suh and Shigehiro, 2002). Speculatively, these aspects of individualism allow the individual to be 'true to one's inner self' and to have the freedom to pursue self-determined goals for one's happiness and life satisfaction instead of coerced conformity to group norms and expectations which can be a down side to collectivism. That both collectivism and individualism were positively associated with subjective well-being suggests that satisfaction with one's life requires personal development as well as meaningful social affiliations. Indeed healthy individuals exhibit both collectiv-

ist and individualist tendencies (Vandello and Cohen, 1999).

Limitations

The use of a single instrument (SWLS), which provides a global assessment of well-being, can be considered a limitation in this study. Evaluating one's life as a whole to be satisfying or dissatisfying requires much cognitive effort. In theory a respondent is expected to examine all relevant life domains and mentally combine the evaluations to give a numeric rating. Individuals are more likely to take a mental shortcut than go through this exhaustive process. Inclusion of other indices of well-being that allow for domain specific evaluations may have augmented responses to provide more comprehensive assessment of individuals' subjective well-being. This will be taken into account in a future study.

To my knowledge, the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) and the Collectivism-Individualism Scale have not been used in Ghana for assessment of subjective well-being and cultural orientation. This may be considered a limitation. However, the scales has been used, and found valid, in cross-cultural studies and in collectivist-oriented cultures similar to Ghana (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis et al, 1993; Lucas and Gohm, 2000). It is for these reasons that the scales were deemed appropriate for use in this cultural context. Moreover, the internal consistency reliabilities obtained in this study on these scales are consistent with those obtained in previous studies (Diener, 1984; Diener et al, 1985; Triandis and Gelfand, 1998; Diener et al, 1999) thus suggesting their utility in this cultural context. Undoubtedly more research is needed for a greater understanding of these constructs for the Ghanaian.

Implications and directions for future investigation

Although this study is basically exploratory, the findings have potential research and clinical implications. It stimulates intriguing questions and

TABLE 4a

The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SLWS)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly						
				Strongly Agree		

In most ways my life is close to my ideal

The conditions of my life are excellent

I am satisfied with my life

So far I have gotten the important things I want in life

If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing

TABLE 4b

Collectivism-Individualism Scale

Strongly			1		2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	Strongly				
Disagree								
							Agree	

Individualism items:

It is important to me that I do my job better than others
I often do "my own thing"
Winning is everything
I rely on myself most of the time; I rarely rely on others
Competition is the law of nature
My personal identity, independent of others, is very important to me
I would rather depend on myself than others
When another person does better than I do, I get tense and aroused

Collectivism items:

If a coworker gets a prize I would feel proud
To me, pleasure is spending time with others
The well-being of my coworkers is important to me
It is my duty to take care of my family, even when I have to sacrifice what I want
I feel good when I cooperate with others
It is important to me that I respect decisions made by my groups

offers some germinal insights for further exploration of the variables that contribute to well-being in the Ghanaian context. For example, in what ways may individualist tendencies contribute to well-being in a predominantly collectivist cultural context? In the Ghanaian society, are there additional context-specific or domain specific criteria that people use to evaluate their life satisfaction? Is cultural orientation indeed moderated by age? Similarly, we need to explore further why gender, particularly male, was significantly associated with collectivism. All these questions warrant further investigation for greater understanding and potential beneficial utility in clinical practice.

Many will agree that for several decades psychologists, particularly clinicians, have concerned themselves with problems such as depression, anxiety, and other maladies. Positive psychology research that concerns itself with helping people live more satisfied and fulfilling lives has been relegated to the background (Diener and Diener, 2000). An important element in developing positive psychology within Ghana is to accumulate indigenous research findings. It is in this light that the findings of this study stimulate further research of context-specific correlates of well-being that can help expand the activities of psychologists as not just skilled helpers in problem alleviation but also in helping people live more rewarding lives.

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