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Chapter 1 : Not Everyone Wants to Be Happy - Scientific American

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Thinkstock Advertisement Everyone wants to be happy. We, as a society, spend millions trying to figure out what the key to personal happiness is. There are now even apps to help us turn our frowns upside down. So everyone wants to be happyâ€™right? A new research paper by Mohsen Joshanloo and Dan Weijers from Victoria University of Wellington, argues that the desire for personal happiness, though knitted into the fabric of American history and culture, is held in less esteem by other cultures. There are many parts of the world that are more suspicious of personal happiness, defined in the paper as experiencing pleasure, positive emotion, or success, and now empirical research is catching up with these cultural beliefs. The researchers focused on how eastern versus western cultures approach happiness. In one study from , Taiwanese and American students were asked their opinions about what happiness is; whereas many of the American participants considered happiness to be the highest value and supreme goal in their lives, Taiwanese participants made no such statements. In contrast, the dialectical balance between happiness and unhappiness was more strongly endorsed by Chinese than American participants. When Chinese volunteers were shown different graphs of how happiness might change over the course of a life â€™ in a linear vs. Whereas Americans were likely to choose the linear graph, Chinese respondents were more likely to choose the nonlinear graph in which their personal happiness reverts or oscillates. What explains these major cultural differences? Part of the answer lies in the fundamental values that different cultures emphasize. In Eastern cultures, the emphasis is on attainment of social harmony, where community and belonging are held in high regard. In Western cultures, the emphasis is on attainment of happiness, where the individualistic self tends to be celebrated. These values translate to different weights placed on personal happiness. In one paper, Oishi and his colleagues examined the definition of happiness in dictionaries from 30 nations, and found that internal inner feelings of pleasure defined happiness in Western cultures, more so than East Asian cultures. Instead, East Asians cultures define happiness more in line with social harmony, and it is associated with good luck and fortune. Indeed, when researchers measure feelings of positive affect or pleasure, they go hand in hand with enhanced feelings of happiness by North America individuals but not by East Asian individuals. Instead, social factors - such as adapting to social norms or fulfilling relational obligations â€™ were associated with enhanced feelings of happiness in East Asia. Put differently, personal happiness can become aversive, particularly when it comes at cost to the social harmony or moral obligations held in high esteem by collectivistic cultures. Should Americans rethink their love affair with personal happiness in light of this research? But prioritizing personal happiness leads to a number of problems, like focusing too much on the self. Perhaps we need a more balanced approach to happiness in American culture. Personal happiness is beneficial in some contexts, a limitation in others â€™good in moderation, but harmful in excess. In some moments, we may need and benefit from feeling good, but in other moments, we might be better served anchoring on balanced, meaningful life focused on others. Happiness, in this light, is not the proverbial goal to chase, but a happy outcome of a life well lived. And have you read a recent peer-reviewed paper that you would like to write about? Please send suggestions to Mind Matters editor Gareth Cook. Gareth, a Pulitzer prize-winning journalist, is the series editor of Best American Infographics and can be reached at garethideas@att.net. Her research delves into the psychology of time, money, and happiness, and how the consideration of those factors impact choice. Emily Esfahani Smith is a writer in New Haven. She writes about culture, relationships, and psychology.

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His work has appeared in a number of other publications, including The American Scholar, Discover, Natural History, and The New York Times Book Review, as well as anthologies such as The Norton Reader, The Best American Science and Nature Writing, and The Best Writing on Mathematics.