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Striving for a Happier America: Lessons from Denmark

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Running head: WELL-BEING IN THE U.S. AND DENMARK

CLAREMONT McKENNA COLLEGE

STRIVING FOR A HAPPIER AMERICA: LESSONS FROM DENMARK

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PROFESSOR KETAN MHATRE

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DEAN GREGORY HESS

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Abstract

American society has lost sight of one of its most valued virtues: Happiness. Research has showed that the United States is behind many other countries in the overall happiness of its citizens. Leading the world in well-being is Denmark. This paper's aim is to explore possible factors that could be facilitating the well-being of Danish citizens, and applying them to American society. In this search, I explore universal individual factors, as well as factors that lead to the development of a culture and dispositions of its citizens. From these factors, as well as unique characteristics of both countries, I hypothesized determinates of well-being in Demark, as well as factors that are detrimental to American's well-being. Factors for Demark include uniform cultural ideals, social equality, social programs, and unique perspectives on happiness. Conversely, the lack or low levels of these factors for Americans might attest to lower well-being. By emulating these Danish policies and ideals, the U.S. could produce happier, less stressed Americans.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In American culture and many other cultures around the world, one of the most important virtues in life is happiness. In fact, one of the most important phrases in United States history grants all Americans the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. However, although most of us Americans are actively involved in this pursuit of happiness, we are still not even in the top 20 “happiest” nations according to the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven, 2009). According to this source, the U.S.—the wealthiest country in the world—ranks 23rd in overall life satisfaction, behind countries like Costa Rica, Canada, and Israel. Topping the list for many years in a row (Veenhoven, 2009) is Denmark: the small, cold, Scandinavian country which some Americans would have a hard time pointing out on a map. If money, power, and climate are not clear determining factors, what *really* makes a country happy? For that matter, what makes a person happy? Through investigating empirical research on happiness and well-being at an individual level as well as on a cultural level, I seek to gain more insight into the real contributing factors for an individual and a country’s well-being. This, combined with examining the economy, culture, and social agenda of Denmark, in comparison to ours, we can learn more about how to make ourselves and our country a little happier.

Understanding Happiness and Subjective Well-Being

The word “happy” is a loose and somewhat complicated word to define. One way to define happiness is as an elated emotion with feelings of joy, pleasure, or delight. We might also characterize it as a contentment or satisfaction with something. When

psychologists refer to happiness in a general sense, especially when referring to a country's happiness, the meaning is more the latter: a contentment or satisfaction. Even still, there can be differences in "satisfaction" and "contentment" between individuals as well as between cultures (Triandis, 2000). These differences will be due to personal preferences, personality traits, cultural dispositions, and many other factors.

In order to conduct experiments, write surveys, and collect data, psychologists needed to quantify happiness in some way. To broaden the word happiness, psychologists began to use the term "subjective well-being" as a more overarching definition of an individual's happiness and well-being. Subjective well-being (SWB) can be described more as people's emotional and cognitive evaluations of life, including things like happiness, peace, fulfillment, contentment, and life satisfaction (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas 2003). Surveys testing for well-being might ask a question such as, "Do you feel like you're a happy person?" or, "In general, how happy would you say you are?" However, when measuring SWB, psychologists also evaluate overall satisfaction at home and at work, moods, reactions to negative events, evaluation on fulfillment, joy, and peace in their own lives. The Oxford Happiness Inventory, another source in happiness data, makes statements that people have to choose from. Some of these statements include "I don't feel particularly pleased with the way I am" and "I'm very pleased with the way I am" (Argyle, 2001). For measuring a country's overall well-being, collecting data by using surveys and random sampling account for the SWB scores we use to rank and compare countries. Further examining the individual responses within a country can tell us a great deal about the influence of culture and circumstances have on the happiness of an individual.

The Study of Subjective Well-Being

The study of subjective well-being is a part of the larger field of positive psychology. Positive psychology uses psychological research to facilitate optimal human functioning on the level of the individual, group, organization, community or society (Linely, Joseph, Maltby, Harrington, & Wood, 2009). Although the field of positive psychology is relatively new (Larson & Eid, 2008), for centuries branches of psychology such as social, abnormal, and developmental psychology have had elements associated with well-being. However, many of these fields focused on negative emotions. Clinical and abnormal psychology aim to find antecedents for ill-being, for example depression, anxiety, and developmental disorders. Positive psychology on the other hand, focuses on the contrary: factors contributing to the happiness and satisfaction of an individual. These other sects of psychology such as social, cognitive, and humanistic extend and enhance the research on happiness and subjective well-being. For example, there are many studies in cognitive psychology research that show correlations between serotonin levels in the brain and mood (Schimmack, 2008). The use of research from these different fields has all been valuable in the growing field of positive psychology and the study of well-being.

As for studies comparing SWB in different nations, there are differing opinions on the real reasons for the differences in scores and ranks. Surveys in general will always have some errors. Since the surveys are self-reported, there are always inaccuracies due to self-presentation or the inability to accurately assess one's own well-being. (Diener & Suh, 2000). For one thing, many people tend to think of themselves in terms of their circumstance and many, consciously or subconsciously, report that on a survey (Veenhoven, 2000). For example, people who live among happy, well-adjusted people

tend to think of themselves as one of those people even if that is not necessarily true. Same goes for people in harder circumstances; the expectation of unhappiness may manifest and true feelings may not be accurately portrayed in a survey. Another problem with the data of SWB studies is that some countries are known to have a certain rank on the happiness scale and the expectation to maintain or improve that rank may also play a factor in reporting data. For example, the people of Denmark take pride in their country's number one happiness ranking which could motivate them to report higher levels of happiness. Lastly, a different cultural interpretation of satisfaction and happiness is also something that could influence scores (Triandis, 2000). Implications of satisfaction and what it means to be happy vary for culture to culture as well as language to language. Accurate translation of these surveys is also something that can be suspect when evaluating these results (Triandis, 2000).

Besides reporting problems in these surveys, there are many differing factors from country to country that have been thought to be reasons for the difference in overall SWB scores between countries. While there is a slight correlation between wealth and SWB (Argyle, 2001; Diener & Oishi, 2000; Inglehart & Kingemann, 2000), the effect of wealth mostly comes into play for very poor countries where basic human needs surpass and overwhelm a need for happiness. In addition, countries where people are not as comfortable in everyday life will usually have a lower SWB score compared to countries where people are more comfortable as a whole. While these are examples of somewhat intuitive reasons why one country would score above another, some of the most interesting and telling comparisons in investigating happiness are the differences between

the wealthier countries with stark differences in SWB scores. A great case study: #1 Denmark and #23 the United States.

Individual and Cultural Predictors

Psychologists use methodology such as surveys and experiments to control for variables that they hypothesize are causing a certain phenomenon. When researching well-being of individuals there are two overarching factors at play: 1) personal preferences and dispositions on an individual basis, and 2) influences of specific culture and environment on the individual. There is an immense number of factors that influence an individual's SWB in both areas. Personal factors found to universally affect SWB include positive emotions, satisfaction, humor, social relationships, work and employment, leisure, money, education, personality, age and religion. In this paper, I will examine personality, positive emotions, satisfaction, and social relations—some of the most researched factors and some of the most relevant in the two countries I am comparing. While testing for traits and circumstances within the individual is important for learning more about this field, examining these trends cross-culturally can tell us about demographics and characteristics of some of the happiest and least-happy people in the world.

Because there are so many factors and unique circumstances in every country, it is very difficult to pinpoint the specific factors that will predict the subjective well-being of nations. There is however research that suggests that there are certain societal resources that enhance the life of an individual and could lead to the greater happiness of the country (Diener & Suh, 2000; Triandis, 2000). In a study by Diener, Diener, and Diener (1995), they used data from national and college student surveys to test what they thought

would be predictors of SWB of nations: martial well-being, political and civil rights, income growth, social comparison, equality, independence and interdependence, and cultural homogeneity. Because of the difficulty of isolating these factors, I wanted to further examine a few of these while also looking at some less researched predictors. In this paper, I explore at the influence of history, climate and environment, freedom, social equality, and wealth on the SWB of individuals.

Comparing Denmark and the United States

Using Veenhoven's study (2009) as the standard, the gap in well-being between the U.S. and Denmark is considerable. For life satisfaction, Denmark scores an average 8.3 out of 10 and the U.S. reports an average 7.4 out of 10 (Veenhoven, 2009). This study also investigates what they call "happy life years," which they describe as an estimate of how long and happy the average citizen will live in a nation (Veenhoven, 2009). Denmark's data shows 65 happy life years compared to the U.S.'s 57.9 (Veenhoven, 2009).

These world-wide longitudinal studies tell us about overall trends in well-being, however it is hard to make inferences about the points of departure between countries that are fairly close in ranking. This could be due to the difficulty of measuring key factors leading to higher well-being and life satisfaction. These factors include more social ideals such as cultural values and the effects of children's upbringing and education. In this paper, I will not only be analyzing the effects of the Danish model of society and economy on SWB, but also will be examining their unique social perspective and the effect that it might have on their SWB as well.

Denmark has consistently been in the top three of international surveys of well-being (Biswas-Diener, Vittersø, & Diener, 2010). There is also a strong pattern for all Scandinavian countries; Sweden and Norway also occupy some of the top spots on the surveys. This is not very surprising considering that all three countries are similar in many ways. Still, the three small countries are consistently out-performing the most powerful, wealthiest country in the world on these well-being surveys. It is true that Scandinavian countries are also wealthy; Norway, Sweden, and Denmark all beat out the U.S. in GDP per capita according to the International Money Fund, the World Bank, and the CIA World Factbook. However, this according to studies, does not seem to be the leading factor of their happiness. In addition to the wealth of these countries, there are many aspects of Scandinavian society that seem to be leading them to the top spots on the SWB charts. Denmark, seems to have a particularly unique set of factors helping them be consistently number one.

Denmark is an especially interesting country to examine in terms of well-being. Not only have Danes had a history of happiness, it seems that their well-being has actually been increasing since 1974 (Veenhoven, 2009). There is also evidence that the quality of life for children has increased from 1984 to 1996, from a study done by Berntsson and Kohler in 2001. This is in contrast to the other Scandinavian countries, Sweden and Norway where quality of life actually decreased (Berntsson & Kohler, 2001). So what makes Denmark so special? What kind of things can a nation like the United States learn from the 5.5 million people living in Denmark? While there are many different points of speculation, there are unique aspects to Denmark that could be

contributing to the high SWB numbers, some of which can be adopted by the United States.

There are some leading theories that psychologists and Danish people have on reasons contributing to “the Happy Danes”—as they call themselves. Denmark has some unique features—low income inequality, low poverty, and high welfare expenditures—compared to other countries. The overwhelming number of factors and variables that may contribute to happiness makes it difficult to conclude that this specific set of variables is the only important true factors. I hypothesize that while they contribute a great deal, other variables such as culture, social structure, and economics could also be the keys to Danish’s well-being. All of these variables are further examined in this paper.

Importance of the Research

The true meaning of the “good life” has been something that people have debated about for centuries. Although we may think that societies and individuals cannot thrive or even function solely on their happiness, we like to think that it is a vital component for a successful one. Therefore, finding trends and recognizing economic and social indicators that lead to a higher SWB is central for an individual’s life as well as the success of the society. There are great obstacles that many people in the world face and not every country, community, or individual will have the luxury to be simply “happy” with their lives. However, to understand and build on what we know about characteristics of a happy individuals and a happy state will allow individuals and leaders to drive their nation in that direction.

A specific aim of this paper is pointing out beneficial and detrimental societal infrastructure to the well-being of individuals. A society that creates an environment for

optimal human functioning will naturally produce citizens with positive well-being.

Using Denmark as model, recognizing and implementing these programs/ideals that foster these beneficial results can create a cycle of positive benefits for Americans' well-being. In order to do so, I will be exploring 5 essential things: 1) universal individual factors for well-being, 2) universal cultural factors for well-being, 3) the unique characteristics of Denmark leading to well-being, 4) specific characteristics lowering American well-being, and 5) the lessons the U.S. can learn from Denmark.

Chapter 2: Universal Individual Predictors for Well-Being

In order to understand more fully the impact and importance of the study of well-being it is important to understand the history of research and the past perceptions of well-being. The history of empirically studying positive well-being is sort, however, the history of philosophical questions of “the good life” have been addressed for centuries. This paper’s main purpose is to find strengths and weaknesses in *societies* in order to create an optimal society for individuals to improve their well-being. However, ancient philosopher’s view of well-being was centered around enlightening *individuals* to realize their goals, strengths, and own personal ideas of happiness and this in turn would help strengthen a society. Therefore, in writing about the improvement of the structure of societies to facilitate well being, it seems vital to also discuss some factors that can personally help individuals with their own well-being.

A fundamental question dating back to Socrates’ era is: “How ought one to live?” Socrates explored questions such as: what will make life best for a person, what will a person benefit from, how will a person better themselves and the people around them (Larson & Eid, 2008). Philosophers in the past were serious on the issue of defining the good life and anything pertaining to one’s goal of achieving it. This differs from new modern views of happiness mostly because of the superficial evolution of the word “happiness.” Many people today might share the opinion that the study of “happiness” lacks a deep meaning or importance. What positive psychologists are aiming at—similarly to the aim of ancient philosophers—is not merely questioning what makes us feel a certain pleasant emotion, but also questioning if that emotion can lead to a

snowball of positive effects for an individual and a society. Broader effects from positive emotions and increased well-being could include a more open and flexible mindset (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2009). This in turn allows a more optimal attitude for more positive emotions and well-being (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2009). It is important however to note that philosophers and psychologists do not think all instances of an elated emotion is conducive towards a person's well-being. People find enjoyment, pleasure, peace in very different ways and feeling these positive emotions, like joy, had a right place and a right time.

This deep thought and importance placed on well-being shifts in the modern era. There is a lack of critical thinking about these previously central ideas to the well-being of mankind. There is also a lack of work produced in this time period compared to the work of the ancient philosophers and scholars. One reason that is argued as responsible for the change is the shift in views on self-authority and the ability for people to self-govern their own lives. The ancients believed that all people need some sort of guidance and enlightenment in order for them to live the way they truly want to. In all aspects regarding a person's welfare, it was considered that none of these areas could be simply self-realized and self-governed; there was always room for more enlightenment. Modern views however, evolved into "the good life" being easily obtainable; people ought to know what feels good for themselves, so what they get is simply whatever they happen to want. This notion is something with which ancient philosophers would have strongly disagreed. To them, people needed help finding their strengths and their likes, their way to the good life, and the best state of mind to get them there. A possible defining factor in this shift was the emergence of the Enlightenment. This was a time of realizing the power

of the self, freedom, and self-government. In this period, people began to think that what they thought was best for them *was* best for them, and no one else should have a say in that.

Although this notion still holds true to many people in the today, within the last 30 years, there has been a surge in the study of well-being. Modern day psychologists have found that people are not as good as they might have thought in predicting their own happiness, thus the importance for the “new” science of subjective well-being. Through the scientific method, data analysis, and interpretation, the age-old philosophical questions about “the good life” are answered in a modern context. Recognizing these true predictors for well-being can improve the lives of individuals and their societies.

Subjective well-being is a relatively new term in a relatively “new” field, however, all of these terms in reality refer to a more refined and quantified way of studying the same questions that were central to philosophers for centuries. Although there were some studies in the mid 1900s, the most important figure in the refurbished study of well-being came in the 1980s with Ed Diener. It would be difficult to mention SWB without mentioning Diener who has pioneered the new movement of research. Diener has published over 200 papers and three books on the subject, all having a large amount of citations and praise in the field (Larson & Eid, 2008).

To define subjective well-being, it is fitting to take the definition from the pioneer himself: “a person said to have high subjective well-being is she or he experiences life satisfaction and frequent joy and infrequently experiences unpleasant emotions such as sadness and anger.” (Diener, 1984) In short, SWB is when one judges life positively and feels good. While this seemingly simple and small definition, unfortunately this can carry

an extremely long list of contributing factors—all of which vary on an individual level and are interconnected to forces like culture and environment. While this interplay between the individual and culture is extremely important to the overall SWB of an individual, it is necessary to look at the two separately in order to fully understand this interplay. Dispositional and personal determinates of well-being are some of the most critical to an individual's well-being. When discussing the well-being of Denmark and the United States, it's important to keep in mind the following factors.

Personality

One of the most consistent findings in the field of positive psychology is the strong effect a person's personality has on their well-being (Lucas, 2008). There is even research that suggests that only 15-20% of variance in individual's SWB is due to environmental factors (Lucas, 2008), leaving a large portion to dispositional factors. When personality is broken down, there are studies that find people with different types of personalities are more primed to be happy (Larson & Ketelaar, 1991). Some studies suggest that extroverts are found to be not only happier but more responsive to "pleasant" stimuli and that neurotic people are more reactive to "unpleasant" stimuli (Larson & Ketelaar, 1991). Extroverts are also more likely to make more friends, join more clubs, and put themselves in more situations to have fun (Argyle, 2001). While extroverted, introverted, and neurotic personality types are the most studied links from personality to SWB, there are other personality characteristics such as agreeableness, conscientiousness, optimism, and self-esteem that have also been at least moderately linked to a person's SWB (Argyle, 2001).

There is also interesting research on genes and their relation to well-being. Varying genes between individuals create differences in the amounts of dopamine and serotonin levels are released into the brain between different people (Inglehart & Klingemann, 2000). To some extent, the higher the levels of dopamine and serotonin the more a person's mood is increased (Inglehart & Klingemann, 2000). Therefore, individuals that have a gene that regulates for higher amounts of dopamine and serotonin could have increased positive affect as a result. To further demonstrate the effect of genes, twin studies that found that identical twins had similar levels of happiness even if they had different environmental circumstances, fraternal twins did not. (Inglehart & Klingemann, 2000). Although genes do seem to play a role, however the extent of their influence is rather unclear.

As discussed previously, there are obvious intrinsic factors in an individual's personality, although all personalities and behaviors are influenced by the societal/social context of the individual. When examining personality in a societal context, the "self-determination theory" is something that should be mentioned. The self-determination theory attempts to explain personality and behavior through innate and environmental determinates within social contexts (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The theory supports the claim that some social contexts are more conducive to intrinsic motivation from an individual than others (Wehmeyer, Little, & Sergeant, 2009). Social contexts that are more conducive to intrinsic motivations are environments that support three basic psychological needs—competence, autonomy, and relatedness. When environments support these needs, people integrate their own core ideals when acting on extrinsic motivators (Wehmeyer, Little, & Sergeant, 2009).

However, as mentioned previously, Lucas's (2008) study implies that the variance of people's SWB has little to do with environmental factors. Though there is significant research that suggests a strong importance of personality on SWB, if this study was completely accurate there should be little variation between cultures nations. There are over 35 countries reporting less than a five on a ten-point scale of life-satisfaction while some many countries are between eight and seven (Veenhoven 2009). Saying that personality is the primary cause for happiness would also discount many findings on other predicting factors and would also abate the need for social programs for increasing happiness for individuals and nations. There is significant research that suggests the large amount of other factors leading to a person's well-being; even if personality does play a large role in a person's well-being there is always room for more findings and more directions for research.

Positive Emotions

Most people might define happiness as feeling joy and other positive emotions. Although all people have felt some kind of elated or pleasant feeling, the frequency of these feelings are what positive psychologists are looking for in surveys of SWB. Positive emotions can range anywhere from calm or at ease to aroused and excited. The frequency of these emotions is not only an indicator of a person's overall happiness, but is something that has been shown to increase a person's SWB in different ways (Argyle, 2001).

In order to understand why some people experience more positive affect than others, it is important to understand what causes these positive emotions. While it seems rather intuitive that what personally makes us happy would give us positive emotions,

there are some factors that we might not immediately associate with our positive feeling. The most common sources of joy are: eating, social activities and sex, exercise and sport, alcohol and other drugs, success and social approval, use of skills, music, other arts and religion, weather and the environment, and rest and relaxation (Argyle, 2001).

When people engage in these activities of their preference, the positive emotion that is gained is something that can strengthen a person's overall growth and success (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2009). Fredrickson (2001), in her theory "broaden-and-build", explains how positive emotions such as joy, interest, contentment and love all have ancillary benefits that go beyond the good feeling of a positive emotion. Fredrickson (2001) explains that these emotions "broaden an individual's momentary thought-action repertoire: joy sparks the urge to play, interest sparks the urge to explore, contentment sparks the urge to savor and integrate, and love sparks a recurring cycle of each of these urges within safe, close relationships." Furthermore, once these emotions are broadened to subsequent emotions and behaviors, one can build on these enhanced emotions over time (Fredrickson, 2001). A person with these frequent emotions can consequently have a heightened well-being in all aspects of their lives.

In the past, negative emotions have been the most researched because of the motivation to find remedies, while positive emotions were merely an after-thought (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2009). Negative feelings or changes in mood are part of life, however, people who have frequent low feelings will naturally have a decreased outlook on their life (Argyle, 2001). Decreasing negative emotions like stress, fear, sadness, is a valid, quick way to increasing a person's positive affect and overall well-being. Similarly to positive emotions, if a person has frequent negative emotions associated with important

life domains like work, family, and relationships, they are likely to have a decrease overall well-being.

Satisfaction

Something that may give Denmark citizens an advantage in their high ranking in SWB is their high level of satisfaction of their lives as a whole (Veenhoven, 2009). Along with feeling positive emotions, satisfaction is one of the main components of an individual's well-being (Argyle, 2001; Triandis, 2000). Feeling joy or happiness is more emotional and more on a day to day or even an hour to hour basis, while satisfaction is more cognitive—an evaluation of how satisfied a person is about specific domains such as work or marriage or as their life as a whole (Argyle, 2001).

Because happiness studies are usually based upon a survey of life as a whole, the question, “Are you satisfied with your life?” has become fairly synonymous with, “Are you happy with your life?” This is especially true with world-wide studies such as the World Database of Happiness or the World Values Survey. Another scale that is used often by psychologist for individual life satisfaction is Diener's “Satisfaction with Life Scale,” which measures overall life-satisfaction (Diener, 1984). Other scales that are used in measuring satisfaction include domains. The most common domains on these scales include family/marriage, work/ school, sex life, leisure, health, standard of living, relationships and social life (Argyle, 2001).

Social Relationships

Social relationships are said to be one of the greatest single causes of happiness for individuals (Argyle, 2001). Humans are social animals with an intrinsic “need to belong” (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2009). Therefore, quality of relationships is one of the

greatest defining factors of an individual's well-being. Social relationships that have been shown to increase happiness in people are friendships, love and marriage, and family. It has been shown that a person's happiness and satisfaction directly correlates with their satisfaction with friends (Argyle, 2001). Furthermore, a study showed that the quality of and quantity of friends had a correlation of .29 with happiness (Argyle, 2001). Loneliness is a negative feeling that can be avoided by at least one close friend and as well as a group of friends (Argyle, 2001). As stated earlier, extroverts are more prone to having more positive moods, as well as having more close relationships. Extroverts are also prone to doing more enjoyable activities that are of a social nature like going to parties, playing games with friends, or joining sports teams or clubs (Argyle, 2001). Friends not only help with positive affect and enjoyment, but they also help with mental and physical health. Emotional support and talking out issues is a major source of therapy for many people. These conversations with friends about negative emotions can help alleviate feelings, causing less stress, anxiety, and depression (Argyle, 2001).

Family, spouses, and significant others all have a profound effect on a person's happiness. In one study, family life accounted for the highest correlation with life satisfaction, .45 (Rojas, 2006). Intimate relationships with partners and the feelings of love are also strong predictors of happiness and well-being (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2008). The feelings of protection, positive affirmation and psychical pleasure from a partner is something that will natural increase a person's happiness (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2008).

Social relationships, while at times extremely beneficial, can also be detrimental to a person's SWB. Strong support from friends, family, and significant others is something that builds character strengths such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-

determinism (Hewitt, 2009). All three of these things are essential in living a happy, rewarding life (Fredrickson, 2001). Conversely, negative relationships with the people close to an individual can result in a reverse effect, creating lower levels of all three of these things. Also, excessive comparisons to the people in an individual's social circle can lead to a downward comparison process that can also reduce levels of these essential keys to happiness.

Chapter 3: Universal Cultural Predictors of Well-being

As discussed in the last chapter, there are many individual characteristics and factors causing the overall SWB of an individual. However, it is important to distinguish the analysis of well-being on an individual and an ecological level. Individual dimensions of a person's well being are more emotional and perceptual on a personal level, while ecological or cultural factors refer to an overarching societal influence on a person, such as governmental structure, underlining ideals, and economy. Combining an individual's cultural and geographical perspective will create an overarching analysis on a person's well-being, thus getting us closer to understanding the general trends of the individuals within a certain culture. While looking at certain cultural factors the happiness of an individual is important, it is also important to realize that these are not independent of individual factors discussed in the previous chapter. There is an interaction of cultural and individual factors that is unique to each individual in *any* culture/nation. While not everyone in a nation is going to have same demographics or characteristics, general trends in things like values, socioeconomic status, and social trust can help us better understand the quality of life in different nations.

The unique experience of the individual constitutes a unique pathway to living a happy, fulfilled life. This was a notion that ancient philosophers believed required enlightenment to help guide an individual to his/her pathway (Haybron, 2008). Similarly, on a more macro level, it has been said by philosophers that a desirable society is one that maximizes pleasure for all people (Deiner & Suh, 2000). Studies that focus on the

relationship between underlying ideals and structures of a society and well-being, will aid the society to maximize pleasure for its citizens.

There are many studies that have compared specific countries, specific cultures, or focused on the well-being of one country. For example, there is extensive research on the differences between collectivist and individualistic cultures (Deiner & Suh, 2000; Triandis 2000) When comparing two countries like the U.S. and Denmark, many of the comparisons can be drawn from data collected in world-wide surveys such as the World Values Survey (1997) or the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven, 2009). These are longitudinal studies that attempt to create surveys that will most accurately assess the life satisfaction of people all over the world (Veenhoven, 2009). Translations of surveys are done and individuals all over the world are randomly sampled.

Although there may be some inaccuracies, these studies can be used as benchmarks for comparison between countries. Using surveys that provide scores for different dimensions of culture combined in conjunction with life satisfaction scores, we can make inferences about what dimensions lead to more satisfaction.

The categories I discuss in this chapter encompass specific factors that have been found to influence well-being and vary from nation to nation. These include history, climate and environment, freedom, social equality, and wealth. These are not the only important cultural factors, however, these are all vital to the underlying ideals that make up the culture of any nation. Extending these further, examining what psychological qualities these cultural aspects instill in the people of the culture will be the most telling in their well-being. Qualities such as life-expectancy, resilience, and self-efficacy are all factors that can stem from the following cultural parameters.

The following factors are important to examine when making comparisons between countries based on cultural factors and well-being. These are by no means the only cultural components that should be investigated, however, the following factors are universally strong determinates of the type of culture a nation develops. Some of these factors are important in the comparison between Denmark and the U.S. while some carry a lesser relevance, however, other extremely relevant factors will be discussed in later chapters.

History of a Nation

Just as we must examine an individual's history to understand the causes of their well being, when we look at the subjective well-being of a nation as a whole, we must look at the nation's past. Historical background and critical events such as won battles, lost battles, and independence can play a great role in people's affection for their own country and also their satisfaction being part of the culture and relating with their fellow countrymen. Also, cultural traditions and historical fundamental ideals of a society can explain many of the modern cultural dispositions of a society. For example, the ideal of "the American Dream" is something that had probably stemmed from America's appeal of opportunity, success, and financial gain. These traditions and ideals that people adapt are all obtained through the history of a country, thus examining the historical context of a country is a good first step to analyzing the ecological factors in the well-being of individuals in Denmark and the United States.

Climate and Environment

Weather and environment can be a factor in a person's happiness. People are happier when the sun is shining and when it's fairly warm (Argyle, 2001). Not only do

people respond to the warm feeling of the sun and the bright blue sky, they also respond to sunlight as it has been shown to improve health, both mentally and physically. Vitamin D from the sun can also be beneficial to health and mood. Sunlight can also increase the production of endorphins and serotonin in the brain, two chemicals that have directly been linked to happiness (Argyle, 2001). Also, mood is increased when people are surrounded by wilderness or beautiful nature (Argyle, 2001).

The general environment, such as climate and geological features, can also shape a culture and explain certain personality traits typical in a given culture. Societies that have limited resources probably have had a history of making the best out of the resources could gather. Another example, if a country has a climate that is very hot and dry, the society probably has an ability to save and conserve water very well. These learned behaviors can manifest themselves into personality traits and create similarities between people of one culture and differences among different cultures.

Freedom

According to research on the cultural component of “freedom” on well-being there is a positive relationship between high levels of freedom and well-being (Veenhoven, 2000). In Veenhoven’s (2000) study, freedoms such as economic freedom, political freedom, personal freedom and summed opportunities were all assessed in 44 countries and compared to the country’s happiness scores from The World Database of Happiness. It was found that economic freedom was closely related to happiness, while surprisingly political freedom and private freedom was shown to be less related to happiness.

Although there is a correlation between freedom and happiness in countries, we know in psychology that correlation does not always mean causation. It could be the case that happier nations create an environment of open-mindedness and respect for one another that fosters freedoms. If it is the opposite, and freedom gives way to happiness, then there are theories that freedom can give individuals more gumption to live how they wish to live.

Because this data is fairly limited to generic ideas of the different aspects of freedom, it would be interesting to do a study on personal freedoms in different countries. Societies such as Japan, that are socially “tight” where there is little wiggle room to do out of the realm of social acceptability, people might have higher levels of stress (Triandis, 2000). There have been papers examining the fear people live in these societies, worrying that they will make a mistake that will ostracize them from society (Triandis, 2000). In the U.S. one is allowed to express themselves how they wish, with fairly minimal intervention from laws; however there are social constructs and social consequences that prevent people from acting certain ways. These social constraints are rather universal. Though, it would be interesting to see if there was any variance between nations and if it correlated with happiness.

Social Equality

In a study attempting to predict the factors of the SWB of nations, social equality is one of Deiner, Deiner, and Diener’s (1995) hypothesized factors that showed to be connected with SWB. The factors the researchers examined were length of life, equality of length of life, equality of income, and equal access of the sexes to education. Intuitively, the researches predicted that that people would be more easily able to achieve

their goals and reach happiness in a nation with high equality. On the other end, they predicted that countries high in inequalities would have more frustrations by the people and a high demand for social justice.

Equality in all aspects of life will lead many people thinking similarly about the satisfaction in their own life. In the World Database of Happiness (2005), Denmark is just behind the Netherlands with the standard deviation of life satisfaction scores between its citizens. This means that not only do people in Denmark rank their happiness highly, but *most* people in the country rank their happiness highly.

Wealth

There have been countless studies that have shown a significant correlation between the wealth of a nation and its happiness (Deiner & Oishi, 2000). More developed, higher GDP per capita countries are more likely to be able to foster successful, happy people. However, this is not a perfect correlation. The most recent survey in the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven, 2009) had Costa Rica, Mexico, and Panama in the top ten, all with over a 7.8 on life satisfaction on a scale of one to ten. These countries are 75th, 61st, and 67th in the world for GDP per capita respectively (International Monetary Fund 2010). Clearly the prosperity of nations is not as important as some people might think. However, the poorest countries such as Togo, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, are on the bottom of both the GDP per capita scale and the life satisfaction scale, reporting a mean score below 3.0 on a 10 point scale. As Maslow's theory of needs suggests, people who's basic needs like food and water are not being met, all other "needs" in life are no longer plausible.

Although there are some outliers, there is a correlation between wealthier nations and higher levels of SWB. (Diener and Oishi, 2000). Because there are so many other correlates to SWB besides wealth such as, human rights, social equality, and individualism, even when wealth is a controlled variable, researchers still get conflicting results. This is an example of the difficulty when testing for these different variables because of the huge web of factors contributing to a person's and a country's SWB.

Chapter 4: Explaining High SWB in Denmark

In the previous chapters, this paper examines universal individual and cultural factors in SWB. In this chapter, I aim to explore these factors previously examined within the context of Denmark as well as explore specific, unique factors I hypothesize have a great impact on their happiness. This chapter, as well as the next chapter, will delve deeper into the key cultural and ideological aspects of both Denmark and the U.S., respectfully, to reveal possible reasons for discrepancies in well-being between the two countries.

Historical Background

People have lived in Denmark for over 200,000 years. In fact, it is one of the oldest kingdoms in the world. Denmark was once a very powerful nation, however, since then it has reduced in size to about one third of its original territory. The constant loss of territory and power might attest to the now mild-tempered, humble nature of the Danes. In Danish history, in times of territory loss, the whole country had a defeated temperament. Since then, Danes have embraced their small, powerless country as part of their culture. Danes are happy to be small and “hygge”(pronounced who-guh)—a Danish word meaning something close to cozy—and think of their country as a peaceful, non-dramatic place.

Christianity was introduced to Denmark over 1,000 years ago and has been part of the history there, today 86% of people belong to the protestant Danish church although few actually attend church on Sunday (CIA World Factbook, 2009). Denmark has been ruled by a monarch, but has made a democratic constitution since 1849. This constitution

is similar to America's with freedom of speech, freedom of press, and free elections. In the sake of tradition and history, Denmark still has a royal family with the Queen as the leader of the state.

In Denmark, the climate is fairly cold and cloudy. In 2004, Copenhagen had 1,539 sunshine hours, this compared to U.S.'s sunniest city, Phoenix with 3,752 hours and the least sunniest, Seattle with 2,049 hours. Denmark also has long, dark winters. On the shortest days in Denmark, the sun rises at 9:30 a.m. and will set at 4:30 p.m. However, the summer in Denmark has very long days with the sun rising at 3:30 a.m. and the sun setting at 10 p.m. Because of the extreme seasons there are many cases of seasonal affect disorder. This is where a person's mood is greatly decreased to the point of depression when the seasons change, especially to winter. One study showed that the rate of seasonal affect disorder was over twelve percent in Denmark (Dam, Jokobsen, & Mellerup, 1998).

Negative side-effects of the weather such as seasonal affect disorder or decreased mood could be a contributor to a lower SWB for some individuals; however their history of a cold climate could have a factor in the Dane's temperament and traditions. Danes' love for "hygge" most likely directly stems from their history of a cold, dark climate. Also Denmark's less-than-optimal land and environment might also be a benefit to them. Denmark's land is flat and has limited natural resources. Triandis (2000) suggests that having a history of fewer choices and fewer expectations could have lowered desires leading to a higher SWB. Also, personality traits such as self-sufficiency could be a possible stem from years of reliance on limited resources.

Homogeneity

One key reason that could lead to Denmark's high SWB numbers is its extremely homogenous population. Denmark is exceptionally homogenous on almost all levels—racially, culturally, and socioeconomically. There is conflicting data whether homogeneity of race and culture leads to higher SWB, however some of this data is skewed due to high race/culture equality in developing countries where there is also lower SWB. However, Denmark has a unique cultural identity where equality and homogeneity is an integral aspect.

Denmark's population consists of 90.1% Danish people. This is a staggering difference to the percent of one race in the U.S., however similar to other high-ranking happy nations such as Sweden with 85% and Norway with 84%. Although there seems to be some sort of pattern with homogeneity of countries and happiness levels, cultural homogeneity is a variable that has conflicting conclusions in regards to SWB. A theory however, on why homogeneity might lead to higher happiness is two-fold. One reason is that it binds the country in a common cultural and ideological state, creating a stronger sense of cultural identity. Another consideration is that it could lead to less conflict. Many countries, including the United States, have had a history of unrest or tensions between different peoples or cultures living under one rule. Putting race and ethnicity aside, when a nation is more united by religion, language and culture, it is less likely for the people to clash over opposing views based on these things.

With cultural homogeneity comes uniform cultural ideals between the people. Danes have a saying that is that Denmark is a "tribe not a nation." To them, this means that they feel as if the people and the government act as a cohesive unified "tribe." With most

people in a country having very similar views on the world, some aspects of society might run more smoothly. The people running the country, implementing laws and governing the state will probably have the best interest of the people because most likely they will have the same agenda as the masses. The saying “tribe not a nation” also gives the sense of inclusion. Danes do not want to feel that they are disconnected from their fellow countrymen as well as their government. When a country is unified all the way to the governmental level, there will be more trust and faith within the country as well in general and more trust towards the government and their policies.

But today, there is a threat to Denmark’s homogeneity: immigrants. Denmark has always had fairly strict immigration laws. A person must live in Denmark for 28 years in order to apply for citizenship, a long wait that showcases the exclusivity Denmark wishes to maintain. Danish homogeneity is slightly decreasing due the ever growing is the Islamic and Muslim presence in Denmark. Because of the changing demographics, there are tensions that have never existed before in Denmark. One Danish cartoonist gained worldwide attention in 2005 for publishing a cartoon of a character “Muhammad” that deeply offended not only the Muslims in Denmark, but Muslims around the world. The Muslim population is estimated to be about four percent of the population, a number that has risen about 25% since 1998 (World Factbook, 2009). Escalating discomfort between the two cultures, could have a possible effect on SWB in the future.

One aspect of society that coincides with the homogeneity of Denmark is their small gap between the rich and poor. Low income disparity, similarly to cultural homogeneity, leads to less political and ideological differences between people. The economic equality of Denmark largely is due to the fundamental values of Danes. Part of

homogeneity is that everyone feels like they are equal and on the same level. So, if paying higher taxes means better education, health, and living conditions for everyone, they are willing to pay it. Danes happily and willingly pay about 40 to 50% of their income in taxes. There are obviously differences between incomes, however, professions in Denmark don't have the same salary differences we see in the U.S. Because all professions are paid well in Denmark and social benefits are covered by taxes, there is little reason for anyone to live in poverty.

Low crime rate is another characteristic of Denmark that might stem from the great equality of the Danes. A famous poster in Denmark sums up the safety of the country: a policemen blocking traffic to help ducks cross the street, as seen below.

Figure 1. *Famous Danish Poster*

Recently when Oprah Winfrey aired a segment about Denmark on her talk show, viewers were shocked as one woman talked about leaving her children in their stroller outside on the street while she shopped. Of course crime still exists in Denmark, the most recent homicide rate per year per 100,000 people is .85, still fairly low compared to other countries. This trust and security that comes with a low crime rate could also be a contributing factor to the country's happiness. In 1981, Denmark had the highest score out of all nations in interpersonal trust with a score of 66. That year, the U.S. had a score of 47. (Argyle 2001).

Social Programs

While parent involvement, care, love and support is something that is going to vary to some degree between households within a country, there is a certain degree of cultural support on those fronts. For example, in Denmark, family is not simply classified as a value in the country, but the value is integrated into governmental programs and spending. In Denmark, new parents are entitled to a year of work-leave between the two of them. After the baby is 14 months old, the parents are entitled to an additional 32 weeks of leave between the two of them, all of which is paid. The mother can also take four weeks off before the birth and are actually required to be on leave for the first two weeks of pregnancy. This is a stunning difference between the U.S. that has no official maternity and paternity leave requirements, and rarely as a paid, employee benefit. Not only is this a beneficial policy for mothers and fathers, but it is extremely beneficial for the well-being of a child. Infants that are securely attached to their mother show more smiling and enthusiasm when playing with their mothers and also predicts later child well-being (Diener & Diener McGavran, 2008).

Americans would attest to the foundation strong family values, however, we are also very work and success driven—two things that can be difficult for some American families to balance. Like the benefits of maternal and paternal leave, all who work in Denmark are allowed six weeks paid vacation time a year. This promotes time for travel—which many Danes take advantage of—and more time to spend with friends and family. In the U.S. there is no required vacation time, however only a week to three weeks is common with employers.

While some people might think that vacation time is pleasant, but not necessarily necessary to increase one's well-being, there is a lot of data to suggest that it does increase well-being (Diener & Diener McGavran, 2008). Leisure time, reduced feelings of stress, more interaction with family and friends and a better work-life balance all lead to higher levels of SWB (Diener & Diener McGavran, 2008). More time off from a stressful job, a set time to relax, or spending time with family will all increase an individual's well-being. Therefore, something as simple as giving employers more time off could be a step in the right direction for the American's overall SWB.

There are other invaluable social programs in Denmark I would hypothesize are adding to the country's high levels of satisfaction and SWB. One reward that I mentioned about maternity and paternity leave and paid vacation time is that they alleviated negative primers that decrease SWB such as stress and overwhelmed feelings. Another social program that can alleviate these similar feelings are the covered health and education systems.

Many people throughout the world, who do not have universal health care, may possess stress and worry stemming from the uncertainty of getting care for an ailment. In Diener's definition of SWB, he states that people need to have infrequent unpleasant emotions like sadness or anxiety. Taking away this anxiety that many people feel regarding healthcare—especially when they need it and cannot afford it like millions of Americans—is exactly what countries like Denmark are doing when they universalize health care. Though strongly funded by the taxes of the people, the system covers every person's healthcare needs.

Education

Similarly as with healthcare, many American families and young adults suffer financial strife and worry when having to pay for extremely expensive college educations. Also, individuals who cannot afford to pay for college and are unable to attend miss out on a lifetime of better opportunities. All Danish public education is free, even higher education. Of course, as with the U.S., there are private schools that have a charge, but an individual can go all the way through school, even graduating from a university, without paying anything. In fact, Danish students who choose to go to a university—about 82% of students do—(CIA World Factbook, 2009), are actually given a stipend of about 5,000 Danish Kroner—the equivalent of \$900 U.S. dollars—by the government. Most students use this toward rent, food, and the general costs of living. Because of these things, it's no wonder that Denmark is tied for first in the UN's Education Index (2010), which takes into account the literacy of a country's population, the educational attainment, GDO per captia, and life expectancy.

Some U.S. studies show some correlation between education and happiness (Argyle 2001). The cause for this correlation could be due to a wide range of factors, such as a large disparity of income between people who did not graduate high school and college graduates. Studies have shown that income does not make a great difference in happiness between high and medium income. However, people with low income have shown to have lower levels of happiness. Removing income as a variable, education, especially higher education, can have a great effect on many different aspects of a person's life. Higher education is usually very goal oriented and future minded. It requires deep thought about future goals, evaluation of strengths, and encouragement to

think critically. When people make realistic goals, they are naturally driven to achieve those goals (Oishi, 2000).

Not only is Denmark's education free and accessible, Danish schooling has unique characteristics that, in many Danes' opinion, are vital to the people's knowledge and personality. Education strives for high standards, lifelong learning, active participation, and project work, according to the Danish Ministry of Education (2008). "Lifelong learning" has been a long Danish tradition that was instilled by a Danish philosopher in the 19th century, who thought that a prerequisite for active participation in a democratic society is education for all its citizens on a lifelong basis (Danish Ministry of Education, 2008). Group projects and cross-disciplinary work are also core values in the Danish education system, emphasizing the importance of leadership and teamwork.

Education in Denmark has various goals according to the Danish Ministry of Education (2008). One priority is placing an emphasis on holding students responsible and trusting them to make the right decisions. This creates a unique teacher-student dynamic that allows students to be given responsibility and trust by the teacher. Teachers hold the belief that only when that trust or responsibility is violated should it be taken away. Instilling responsibility instead of restrictions is believed to empower children to *want* to do the right thing because they are given the opportunity to prove that they can. There is also a more open student-teacher relationship that is present in schools in Denmark. Teachers remain the facilitators, but the teacher has a strong role as a discussion leader. They clearly still engage the students in lesson plans, but also provide a role as a mentor and friend to the students. This relationship between teachers grows every year because in Danish Folkeskole—the Danish word for primary school—once

students are assigned to a class and a teacher, students stay with that class until they graduate folkeskole. This fosters close relationships with fellow students, making it a safe place for discussion and expression. Primary school is also not exam-oriented; a main goal being that each student actively attends, participates, and progresses in the classroom.

There is a strong emphasis in Danish schools on promoting not only an overall education, but encouraging students to pursue what is important and interesting to them. Not only is this promoted in the primary and high school levels, but also after completion of high school. A unique opportunity for recently graduated Danish high school students is to attend a Folkeøjskle, or folk high school. During my Danish experience, I had the opportunity to live at a Folkeøjskle. The purpose of a Folkeøjskle—which many Danes attend—is to take time to explore things that students might be interested in before going to a university. There are no grades and no tests, there are projects and field trips, and there are classes that range from international politics to ceramics. When I was there, classes left for study-trips in Bolivia, Botswana, and Turkey. Danes' desire to find what interests them for a career can be linked to a possible factor for well-being. Back to Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory, she says that interest is a key component to broadening an individual's mindset to engage in more fulfilling activities. She goes on to argue that broadened mindsets and more fulfilling activities lead an individual to build upon their own cognitive and social skills.

Danish Disposition

Research has suggested the strong impact of social relations on an individual's well-being. The fact is that Denmark has a culture that is revolved around social

retaliations. One of Denmark's favorite words is "hygge," which takes on a much deeper meaning than the translation of coziness. Feeling "hyggelit" is actually an important part of Danish culture. In Danish tradition, hygge means to be around family and friends, in a preferably dim, candlelit space, playing games or conversing. Hygge is something that Danes value greatly and enjoy often. Not only do Danes cherish their time for relaxing hygge time, Danes are also a very social and active people. Over 80% of Danes participate in some type of club, many of which are given funding by the government.

Although there should be little to no difference cross-culturally on intrinsic personality types such as introversion or extroversion, personality traits such as optimism and self-esteem are usually a product of one's environment, upbringing, and social groups (Lucas, 2008). There is little data on personality types of Danes; however, there exists data that suggests that Danes report more moderate changes in mood than people in the U.S. (Biswas-Diener et al., 2010). This could suggest a different, less emotional personality type for Danish people compared to Americans. While there is a large amount of data in the U.S. on self-esteem and different genders and ages, there is little data for Denmark to compare. This would be an interesting comparison to see if there is any correlation with higher self-esteem or optimism, say among teens, and a higher national SWB.

Danes have more subdued, but more consistent, levels of positive affect as compared to Americans (Biswas-Diener et al., 2010). In the U.S., people feel stronger feelings of positive emotions and have higher positive and negative affect (Biswas-Diener et al., 2010). This suggests that people in the U.S. are much more prone to having more peak experiences—more intense feelings of joy and excitement—while also feeling

more feelings of anxiety and depression (Biswas-Diener et al., 2010). Thus, the more emotional quality of Americans and higher levels of positive affect could be something that is misrepresented in national surveys, or their higher levels of negative emotions are canceling the benefits of their high positive emotions.

Reported Danish levels of overall life-satisfaction are usually one of the highest in the world (Veenhoven, 2009). When looking at the different domains measured in life-satisfaction surveys, it can be understood what might be causing these high scores. Denmark's culture that focuses on importance of family, social, and sex life combined with excellent health, education, and social programs could all help them take top spot in happiness in the world. However, there is another popular Danish hypothesis on why they are satisfied with their lives: lower standards. Triandis (2000) suggests that people with lower expectations, in turn, have fewer of desires, causing higher SWB.

When I lived in Denmark, many of my Danish professors were quick to say that Denmark boasts the happiest people in the world. When students would ask the professors why, one of the most surprising answers that came up frequently was "lower expectations." While most Americans would laugh of the old saying, "lower your standards and you'll be happy," the Danes might be on to something. The small, humble country is not a huge buzz country. They are involved in no wars, they produce virtually no movie stars, and they have no outstanding geological features. Because of this, there are no grandiose ideas of becoming a movie star or a millionaire; people are humbly at peace with their lives. While there is clearly a want and need for Danes to become successful, their definition of success might be more realistic and less extravagant than some Americans'. American tendencies of always wanting more or the thinking the grass

is greener on the other side, is not instilled in Danish people as it is in America. The satisfaction with what they have could attribute greatly to their high satisfaction levels.

Chapter 5: Explaining Lower SWB in the U.S.

The differences between the United States and Denmark are extreme and endless. Although the two countries share little similarities, there is validity in comparing the two on SWB, especially in the case of the U.S. learning from the Danish policies and lifestyles. The U.S. boasts over a hundred nationalities, thousands of miles, and millions of people; it seems obvious that there would be vast differences in opinions, ideas, and of course, happiness. However, the theory that most people are happy, still holds true in the U.S. (Biswas-Diener et al., 2010). Although the U.S. isn't consistently as high as Denmark on global SWB studies (Veenhoven, 2009), it is usually in the top ten or twenty. That is still almost in the top 10% of all the countries in the world, but being the most powerful, most sought after country, it seems like the happiness levels could be a little higher.

The U.S. has fundamental characteristics that make it much more difficult to have such a high score like Denmark—the most obvious being the sheer size of the country. It's only natural that in a country so big, there will be many people that are happy with their lives and also many people that are unhappy with their lives. For the latter, their unhappiness could come from individual factors or negative events or choices. However, their unhappiness could also come from circumstantial factors that are directly related to the infrastructure and/or culture of the United States. In that case, it is valid to examine these possible factors in an effort to pin point specific things that the U.S. can improve on. In this chapter, I will explain these unique factors that I have hypothesized to be the leading factors working against American's happiness. These hypothesized factors stem

from 4 main characteristics: 1) historical background 2) heterogeneity, 3) lack of social programs, and 4) pressure.

Historical Background

Unlike Denmark, the U.S. has had a short history. After being founded by English settlers in 1607, the U.S. gained independence in 1776. Since then, the U.S. has expanded the original thirteen states into what we know the U.S. as today. Founded upon the principles of a democracy and the ideas of freedom and equality, the U.S. offered a land of opportunity and success to anyone in the world. Since its founding, immigrants from all over the world have made a life in the U.S., creating a unique nation that is a cultural and racial melting pot. Although some American's heritage is still a part of many people's lives, the basic ideals that America were founded upon are things that bond and unite the people. These are positive qualities that many Americans are proud to associate with their country.

Cultural diversity, while part of our rich history, has not always been easy for Americans. However, presence of different cultures and the presumed entitlement of White Americans, quickly created massive tensions. The U.S. has viewed history of slavery, civil war, and prejudice against minorities. This is an undeniable dark cloud over U.S. history. For many, racism and discrimination has had a strong effect on the lives of many Americans. Although we have come a long way from the intense racism of the past, there is no question that tension still exists between races and cultures. The extremely heterogeneous nature of the U.S. is a stark contrast of the extremely homogeneous culture and demographic of Denmark. I would hypothesize that the homogeneity in Denmark is one of the most important factors in their lack of conflict

within the country. On the other end, although discouraging to say, one of the leading causes of U.S.'s inner strife, could be the extreme diversity and the problems it caused between people. Not only have we been involved in internal conflict, but we have been involved in many wars in our short history. One paper suggests that both internal and international conflict will predict a lower SWB score for a nation (Triandis, 2000), something that I would agree to be true.

It must be said, however, that although cultural diversity could be a leading factor in lower SWB, it also leads to positive things as well that could possibly out way the negative effects. Cultural diversity leads to a wider range of ideas and thoughts which can spark different outcomes as products, technology, music, art, and so on. Overcoming great challenges such as racism is part of our history. This could be a very positive lesson in resilience for many Americans.

Heterogeneity

Extreme ideological and political views of the people in the United States can be a dividing factor in the country. The vast country, in contrast to Denmark, fosters the growth of differing views and ideas partly due to the distances between people. There are so many extremely different environments in the United States from cold to hot, poor to wealthy, and rural to urban. Each environment has its own culture and has little connection to the overall culture of the U.S., simply because the overall culture of the U.S. is so diverse. Each State harbors a different identity—extremely different views are present in the West, East, North, and South. Furthermore, race or cultural differences, differences in religion and politics found in the states often times divide the country based on important issues.

The combination of racial, cultural, ideological, and political differences between people in one country will create many disagreements and problems between people. In addition, many Americans find themselves stressed, worried, and angered over some of these issues. These problems range from an individual level all the way to a governmental level. Not being able to identify with another group because of a lack of understanding of their beliefs or behavior creates tensions and an “us against them” mentality.

Another factor in the U.S. low SWB score is the tremendous disparity between the rich or poor. Denmark has the smallest economic disparity between its citizens in the world, while the U.S. has one of the largest (CIA World Factbook, 2009). Diener and Oishi (2000) explain that a country is probably better off in terms of SWB if they have greater income equality over overall wealth. Veenhoven (2008) also suggests that social inequality can decrease SWB, especially for the deprived.

Poverty is an overwhelming problem all over the world. In fact, the most “unhappy” countries according have the highest levels of poverty (Veenhoven, 2009). In the U.S., one of the most developed countries, 12.5 percent of its citizens live below the poverty line. Dating back to an important figure in the field of psychology, Abraham Maslow had theories in the mid-twentieth century that are applicable to modern fulfillment and satisfaction research. His theory of life fulfillment based on being able to supersede certain biological and physiological needs in order to be completely fulfilled, happy, or satisfied. Based on the data of happiness surveys, modern psychologists believe this phenomenon is true at a certain level of poverty. This is the notion that intrinsic, biological needs must be met in order to truly be happy. In a World Value Survey of life

satisfaction and income, countries with low satisfaction such as India, Nigeria, and Estonia, all have the also some of the lowest incomes (Diener & Oishi 2000).

While poverty levels are outrageously high, the U.S. still has the largest economy in the World with a GDP of \$14,624,184 millions of dollars. Some people in the U.S. seem to emulate the success and ambition of the country. Some of the most inspiring stories to Americans are when individuals go from humble beginnings to high powered, millionaires—“rags to riches.” Recently, we have become a nation obsessed with power, wealth, and fame. However, some psychologists are concerned that our new found love for material goods is getting in the way of the true indicators of happiness like love and social relationships (Diener & Oishi, 2000). As I have discussed in previous chapters, there is little difference in happiness between middle class and upper class people, so this should be an indicator that income for individuals is not a factor for happiness with the exception of the limited means of the poor.

Lack of Social Programs

There are some strong ideological and structural differences between Denmark and the U.S. One large difference is that social welfare programs such as healthcare and higher education are not covered by the government or tax dollars. There are differing political and personal opinions on the fairness of these issues, but from a well-being perspective, these absent expenditures may be detrimental. Not only are people lacking health insurance not being treated, but these people experience more stress and anxiety because of it.

Recently public schools have been under scrutiny for lack of funding, unqualified teachers, and underperforming students. In an effort to find problem areas for

improvement, students in public schools are bombarded with tests evaluating their performance level on a national merit standard. There is little room these days for both the creativity of the teacher and the student. Despite these problems, education in the U.S. is very good in comparison to many countries. Throughout the U.S., there are free public schools for children up to high school, there is financial aid and grants available, and there is an emphasis on the importance of education with the ideals of the country. These assets in the American education system are all beneficial for aiding the well-being of its citizens. Graduating college is an obtainable goal for many students; however, that goal is much more difficult for people with less means, who make up a significant portion of the population.

There are not only problems with the education system among poorer individuals, but there are structural problems that might be priming young adults for unhappiness in the future. Experiencing middle class public education myself, I can say that everything has worked how it should work. I was in public school through high school, applied myself, and was able to get into a prestigious college. Getting into that college, to me, and to many other high school students, was the goal. The perception I had in high school, was that once admitted to a great school, great jobs and great income were to follow. There is great expectation and pressure to achieve these things from the expectations of the people around me. Triandis (2000) discusses a similar phenomenon he calls cultural complexity—how cultural and social expectations can lead to stress and anxiety.

Pressure

There are other statistics that show some effect on happiness when comparisons are made. In a culture where money is a driving force and a symbol of success to many people, making comparisons is a hard thing not to do. For example, when people of lower economic status live next to someone with higher status, people tend to have a downward social comparison, meaning that they equate their life to be of lesser value than the other person's (Fujita, 2008). Conversely, when someone lives next to someone with a lower means, they tend to think higher of themselves and may rank their SWB higher because of the perceived disparity between them and their neighbor. This is a normal social behavior that most likely occurs in all nations, however, in the U.S., we are primed to make these comparisons. The U.S., especially in the last 50 years, has become obsessed with celebrities, wealth, and perfect bodies, all of which are constantly portrayed in the media. This extreme version of the American dream as a point of reference for success seems to have had an effect on how Americans evaluate how satisfied they are.

The beautiful, wealthy people we see on the on the television act as a model for the perfect person. Children and young adults might begin to think only good things come to people who are rich and beautiful. While this skews their goals and perceptions in life, many times the downward social comparison will cause problems such as low-self esteem or low body image (Fujita, 2008). These feelings of inadequacy can carry on later in life and will certainly affect a person's happiness. Although this comparison to people in the media might not apply to all people, the expectation of the fulfilling the "American Dream" is something that is a cultural pressure that affects many Americans without their realization. The ideal of success and the desire for social approval and respect are strong

motivators for all individuals. Disapproval from society or not living up to the perceived norms can affect an individual's self-perceptions and self-esteem.

It is true that social motivators can be beneficial. In our society, there exists great rewards for people who strive for greatness in many different fields. It is possible that our high aspirations could be the reason for all of the amazing things people have produced in the United States: everything ranging from technology to art. However, these people who achieve great things may come at a cost to the rest of the country's SWB. With very high standards for everyone in the U.S., the American Dream might turn out to be a nightmare trying to achieve. Not only may the bar be set too high for many people, but research suggests that the financial motivation of the American Dream is also causing negative consequences for well-being (Nickerson, Schwarz, Diener, & Kahneman 2003).

In this study by Nickerson and colleagues (2003), they found that being financially motivated lowered a person's well-being and overall-life satisfaction. Another interesting finding was that the higher a person's goal of financial success the lower the satisfaction with family life, regardless of their actual income. These success-driven people—who our culture primes many of us to be—sometimes achieve great success and end up contributing to the U.S. or the world in some way. However just the effort alone can be a cost to their own well-being.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Analysis of differences

As previously stated, there are large differences in almost every aspect of society in the U.S. and Denmark. The history, size, climate, demographics, ideals, social programs and so on are all fundamentally different. However, these differences don't impede the comparison of the well-being of the two nations. With many differences comes many factors and controlling for one can be complicated. Therefore, pin-pointing the real causes for the differences in well-being can be difficult. So using the data collected for possible predictors of well-being on both the individual and ecological level, I hypothesized some of the unique characteristics of each country that lead to their position on the world happiness map. Although my discussion of these factors in chapters four and five are based partly on general trends through observation and known tendencies of the citizens, I think that examining these things not only brings to light possible reasons for well-being, but also reasons that explain we are the way we are.

In the paper, I discuss many different ways the U.S. has possibly gone wrong in providing its citizens with the most optimal environment to improving their well-being. I do not want to discount all the important positive things about American culture and things that do make Americans happy. However, for argument's sake, in my paper I focus on areas that might be leading to a lower happiness score than many Americans would expect. This, I hope, in contrast to Denmark's social and cultural structure, will bring to light some of the areas that the U.S. can improve on or follow closer to the Danish model.

After compiling data and research on some of the most common things that lead to a person's individual and cultural happiness, combined with the unique factors in each culture, I have constructed a table of my hypothesized leading factors to higher well-being in Denmark and lower well-being in the U.S.:

Table 1. *Leading Factors to Danish Well-being over the U.S.*

Factor	Denmark	United States
Historical Background	Reduced in size, Small county, Limited resources, "hygge"	Expanded, Large, Populous, History of Racism, War
Race/ culture	Homogenous	Extremely heterogeneous
Income equality	High	Low
Social Trust	High	Average
Social Programs (Covered)	Health, Education (upper education included), Maternity, Paternity leave	Education (through high school), Other based on employee benefit program
Perspective	Interest motivated, Satisfied with what they have	Financially motivated, Always striving for more

As I mentioned before, it is extremely difficult to be able to define and quantify many abstract cultural differences and be able to discount other factors. However, when it comes to the complexity of individuals, the combination of these factors, as well as many unique factors of an individual, are what leads to an individual's well-being in a particular society. Only once we understand individual's happiness in a culture or society will we be able to make general conclusions about the happiness of that people as a whole.

Denmark is an ideal environment for a very satisfied people. Although it may seem like a strange country to be the happiest in the world, from a psychological perspective it makes sense. The extreme homogeneity of race in the country might be a

small factor but more importantly is the homogeneity of culture. A unified culture eliminates tensions caused by discrimination and lack of voice in policies. Uniform cultural ideals also bind the people and make the government run more smoothly. Also, on the same vein of homogeneity, Danes are all fairly homogenous in their income as well. All of these characteristics make Danes feel as if they are all on the same level, possibly leading to the willingness of Danish people to pay higher taxes to assure everyone receives universal health, education, and other social benefits. These universal programs eliminate any stress or financial strain that might have been associated with paying for these things as many Americans must do.

Within the cultural and political structure of Denmark, there also are several factors that could be contributing to the content nature of the Danes. The Danish Jante Law has been a common rule of thumb in Denmark throughout its history. The law—that no person is better than any other person—goes along with Danish equality. While American sayings like “be the brightest star in the sky” encourages individuals to strive above the rest, the Jente law discourages judgment and belittling of people who chose to live a certain way. The Jante Law places everyone equal: in Denmark, a lawyer is no better than a garbage man. These equalities can lead to a very satisfied existence, where everyone might have similar levels of self-esteem, feelings of success, and overall content with life.

Like most people in the world, Americans are, as a whole, happy and satisfied with their life. While most Americans, including myself, would probably rank their life satisfaction above, say, a seven on a ten point scale, there a great number of people in this

country with very low levels of happiness, reducing our mean happiness scores to less than what we should be as a country.

America, although built on principles of freedom and opportunity, it also has a history of war and inequality. Freedom and opportunity have possibly directly affected the well-being of many Americans. Perhaps if there was more focus on the well-being of the citizens internally and money being spent on more social programs, such as education and health care, and less money being spent on war, we would see a rise in well-being. Not to mention eliminating the negative effects of war, such as disability and post-traumatic stress disorder that many veterans experience. Equality of all people and eliminating the negative feelings associated with discrimination is something that the U.S. has been improving every generation. However, discrimination of gender, race, and sexual orientation are still very present in today's society. Poverty is obviously a very serious issue in the United States. With over 12% of the population under the poverty line, many people have frequent negative emotions such as stress, fear, and sadness. Strong class differences also create yet another rift in the country and another opportunity for Americans to discriminate or have differing opinions on policies. Because of the lack of free health and education programs, these people sometimes are not able to receive the care or opportunities that they need and deserve. Perhaps one of the most abstract and most difficult factors to change is the American way of thinking. We are a people driven by success, which is usually defined by money or high-status occupations. Pressure to fulfill the American Dream is something that many Americans, especially young adults, struggle with.

One overarching difference between the U.S. and Denmark that seems to be the main factor in their differences in well being is the level of equality of its citizens. Equality in every sense simply reduces the chances of opposition, oppression, and discrimination of any kind. Every person can feel negative emotions; however, constant put-downs and discrimination is something that will seriously affect a person's well-being. Another major difference between the two countries is the cultural implications of happiness and satisfaction. There is a fundamental difference between a culture that shoots to be "no better than anyone else" and a society that says "when you reach the top, keep climbing." Sometimes, as in the case for Denmark, not trying to over shoot and set unrealistic goals leads to less failure and comparison to others. The key here though—and something that the Danes have mastered—is to be able to be happy with the obtainable goals that are set.

Limitations

In the study of SWB there are many different emotions, affect, personality traits, cultural aspects, demographics, and so on, that are being researched and studied. There are only a limited number of factors that would be feasible to examine in this paper. A deeper analysis into the cultural influence on personality traits such as self-efficacy and high self-esteem—essential for high SWB—could have told us more about what cultural parameters foster these traits. Also, another area for future research could be to examine if the cycle of building positive effects from Fredrickson's (2004) "broaden and build theory" is causing the steady increase in well-being in Denmark.

The study of SWB is difficult just on an individual level. Adding the influence of cultural and ecological factors as well can be an overwhelming list of variables and

factors to analyze. Anytime well-being is measured at the national level, validity is reduced due to inaccuracies through surveys. That being a general limitation to all SWB studies, my analysis has several limitations. One, my data is primarily from an American perspective, with most of the data coming from American researchers and samples from the American population, especially in individual predictors of well-being. There was also difficulty finding data for Danish samples, although most of the principles are general trends in individuals universally.

Another limitation of my paper is that I chose to explore a limited amount of factors. There are hundreds of factors that have been hypothesized and tested for well-being. In these studies, if no correlation is found in a sample, it doesn't mean that it is not a factor for an individual somewhere, for example, the feeling of pride. Exploring all possible factors could have strengthened my arguments. Also, while many of my hypotheses were based on data, where limited research was available, observation also played a factor in some of the conclusions I made. Creating a survey for this missing data analysis could be done in further research on the topic.

For the sake of pointing out problem areas for the United States, I opted not to mention many things that the U.S. does well in this regard. Knowing Denmark is a model "happy" society, there could have been some biases in my hypotheses and conjectures that could have created some unintended biases.

Lessons for the United States

The U.S. can learn a great deal from the Danish model of living. As I have mentioned, there are many things that may be leading to lower average SWB, just by the nature and structure of the U.S. However, there some structural changes to the U.S. that

could potentially increase the well-being of Americans. Changes in governmental policy and some fundamental ideals are not an easy undertaking and would take time. Strictly using Denmark as a model society for happy people does not necessarily mean that all Danish policies and cultural parameters that work for Denmark are going to work in the U.S. However, small changes that emulate Danish ideals might be worth looking into.

As I mentioned, a large portion of the U.S. budget is being used externally. If the aim is to advance the well-being of Americans, more funding directly to the people could be the first step. With funding towards education, job training, and health care, more people could escape the cycle of poverty. Consequently, if the gap between the rich and the poor was reduced, it is possible that more people would be willing to pay higher taxes to sustain these benefits.

The U.S. could also implement more of the Danish subsidies and federal funding for things that encourage time spent with friends and family. Social relations are the key to most individual's happiness and part of Denmark's could be attributed to the encouragement of these relationships through the structure of the nation. Benefits like more vacation time, less work week hours, paternal and maternal leave as a requirement for employers might promote a less work-centered and more family-centered mindset. In reality, I believe people place a high importance on family, however, with pressures or obligations to work long hours, Americans work hard to balance the two. If these implantations are in place, children might have stronger bonds to their parents, and there will be more time for leisure activities and travel—all things that will lead to a higher SWB.

Conclusions

Since my overall thesis was about solely aiding well-being, there could be a potentially negative bi-product that comes with that. One question that was never asked was if Americans even have a desire to be like “the happy Danes.” The Danish mentality of lowered expectations and lowered ambitions might be a leading factor in their happiness; however, this might be too fundamentally against the attitude of Americans. It is possible that if Americans did not have high standards for themselves and other Americans, we would not create the groundbreaking technology, art, and entertainment we are known for. Perhaps setting realistic goals, instead of lower goals, we can find a balance between both success and happiness.

Changes in policies cannot only change behavior, but change a way of thinking. An issue that is overwhelming when talking about the strong roots of a culture, is that it seems very hard to change a way of thought that has been existed for many, many years. If any country can change its way of thinking the U.S. can. The U.S. has gone through many phases and different generations of ideas and change. Emulating Danish ideals and programs will bring American’s focus away from material possessions and a need to succeed and can bring happiness to this generation and many to come. Danish hygge is all about love, inclusion, and appreciating the simple things. Putting a little hygge into every American’s life could help redirect our time spent worried or stressed to, instead, happy times with friends and family.

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