



## Personal resources at the juncture of culture and life satisfaction

Moshe Zeidner<sup>a,\*</sup>, Hasida Ben-Zur<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Laboratory for Research on Personality, Emotions, and Individual Differences, Department of Counseling and Human Development, University of Haifa, Haifa 31905, Israel

<sup>b</sup>Faculty of Health and Welfare, University of Haifa, Haifa 31905, Israel

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates cultural group differences (Israeli Arab vs. Jewish) in personal resources and life satisfaction. Arab students evidenced lower levels of life satisfaction, as well as perceived personal resources, when compared to their Jewish counterparts. Furthermore, personal resources mediated the effects of culture on life satisfaction. The role of personal resources at the juncture of culture and life satisfaction was discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

In this study we compare Jewish and Arab students on personal resources and life satisfaction (LS). In addition, we probe the role of personal resources as mediators in the relationship between culture and LS. We begin our review of the literature by briefly discussing the construct of LS, and then survey a number of personal resources that have been commonly claimed to be major antecedents of LS. We then describe the backdrop for the present study and present the key hypotheses addressed in this study.

### 2. Life satisfaction

LS relates to the overall cognitive evaluation of one's life (cf. Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003). LS has been found to have important benefits in terms of a wide array of criteria outcomes in practically all areas of life, including income, creativity, sociability, and productivity (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

LS is determined, in part, by objective conditions of life. National sites and cultural groups vary considerably on indices of well-being and LS (Diener, 2000). Overall, members of wealthy nations have been reported to be higher on LS (Diener & Suh, 2000), plausibly because their basic human needs are fulfilled and they have better human-rights records. In addition, an individual's overall satisfaction

with their country or society (national satisfaction) is positively associated with their LS (Morrison, Tay, & Diener, 2011). However, research shows that objective factors (cultural group membership, income, etc.) and demographic variables age, marital status, etc., in combination, account for a small amount (8–15%) of the subjective well being (SWB) variance, which includes LS as one of its components, in modern society (Diener, 1984).

Measures of personality often contribute more to life satisfaction than life circumstances (Kahneman & Krueger, 2006). Meta-analytic research has shown that personality traits may account for close to half of the variance in well-being and LS (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). Personality may color how people perceive life experiences and lead people to experience life in a more positive or negative manner.

### 3. Resources associated with LS

Personal resources may contribute to subjective well-being and adaptive coping (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Personal resources enable individuals to experience a richer sense of LS; adapt to their surroundings more favorably; and handle stressors more effectively (Zeidner & Hammer, 1990). By affecting a variety of factors in the environment (e.g., interpretation of events, range of coping responses considered, etc.), resources may increase a person's potential for dealing effectively with the environment (Wheaton, 1983). We now briefly describe four resources related to LS.

1. *Optimism* refers to the generalized expectancy that positive future outcomes will occur when an individual considers

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [Zeidner@research.haifa.ac.il](mailto:Zeidner@research.haifa.ac.il) (M. Zeidner).

confronting major problems (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Optimists are confident about their abilities (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), expect favorable life circumstances in the future (Seligman, 1991), frame life circumstances in positive ways (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998), and feel control over future outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Overall, researchers (Scheier & Carver, 1992) have produced compelling evidence that optimists show better physical and psychological health outcomes than pessimists and are more satisfied with life. Optimism has been firmly related to well-being and life satisfaction in past research (Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996).

2. *Mastery* (perceived control) refers to the belief that one has some degree of control over events in life that are personally salient (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). People innately strive to exercise control over meaningful events in their lives (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Without a sense of mastery or control over external contingencies, life becomes a chaotic whirlwind of random events, which most people would find to be quite distressing. Grob (2000) reviews research suggesting that people who believe they are able to exert influence over the flow of events also show higher levels of self-esteem, perceive their world in a more positive light, and evidence greater LS (Grob, 2000).

3. *Self-efficacy* refers to the belief that one can do what is necessary to negotiate specific situations (Bandura, 1997). Thus, people are able to make major changes in their behavior if and only if they have specific beliefs and expectations about personal effectiveness. Persons with low self-efficacy also have low self-esteem, and they harbor pessimistic thoughts about their accomplishments and personal development (Bandura, 1997). High self-efficacy has been reported to be associated with adaptive functioning in a wide array of life outcomes, including well-being (Bandura, 1997). Although Bandura's work with self-efficacy has emphasized the specificity of self-efficacy to the challenge faced by the individual, others (e.g., Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995) have conceptualized self-efficacy as a disposition.

4. *Perceived social support* relates to information we receive from others indicating that we are loved and cared for, valued, esteemed, and part of a network of communication and mutual obligation (Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008). It is commonly held that a necessary condition of happiness and adaptive functioning is seeing ourselves embedded in a mutually supportive social network (Schwarzer & Knoll, 2007). The positive relationship between LS and the satisfaction with the support of family and friends is a robust finding in cross-cultural studies of well-being and LS (Diener et al., 2003; Okun, Stock, Haring, & Witter, 1984). We note that it is the individual's perception of their social environment, not the objective social environment that is crucial as a resource. The data on actual (objectively assessed) social support is equivocal about whether such actual social support is helpful or not, but the perception that others are supportive has been very well established in the literature as an advantage.

#### 4. The present study

This study focuses on the nexus of relations between cultural group (Arabs vs. Jews), personal resources, and LS in Israeli society. As a whole, the Arab population in Israel is socio-economically, educationally, and politically disadvantaged relative to their Jewish counterparts. Israeli Arabs evidence a continuing high rate of unemployment, relatively low mean household income, and high levels of family poverty (Rouhana & Ghanem, 1998). As a minority group, Israeli Arabs are often excluded from political, social, economic, and military centers of power (Rouhana & Ghanem, 1998). Arab-Israelis generally do not have the same access to overarching sources of support that are readily available to their Jewish compatriots; the civilian and economic inequity experienced by

the Arab minority may add to a sense of diminished resources. Israeli Arabs often perceive themselves as being discriminated against at a cultural level and report being less satisfied compared to Jewish members with Israeli society—both economically and politically (Habib, 2008). Although the two groups differ in culture, they also differ in religion and ethnicity, so there are alternate terms that could have been chosen to characterize the group differences in this study.

A body of research suggests that disadvantaged minority status is closely linked to diminished personal resources (Helliwell & Putnam, 2005). When compared to their Jewish counterparts, there is little doubt that Arab students in Israel have fewer degrees of educational, occupational, social, and political degrees of freedom, and less control and agency over their lives. This should also negatively impact upon their optimistic beliefs about the future. In addition, as a socially disadvantaged minority group, Arab students might feel less socially embedded in Israeli society and perceive that they have less social support as well. Thus, disadvantaged economic and social factors may affect Arab minority student's ability to achieve personal goals and through constrained personal resources might also show lower satisfaction with their life as well. Also, given past research suggesting that members of collectivistic cultures evidence lower mean LS than members of individualistic cultures, Arab students, who are part of a collectivistic culture (Dwairy, 2006), are predicted to show lower LS than Jewish students, who are part of an individualistic society.

#### 5. Hypotheses

First, Arab students are predicted to report significantly lower mean levels of LS when compared with their Jewish counterparts. As noted, LS has been conceptualized as being related to the degree to which individuals in society believe they are succeeding in reaching culturally sanctioned goals (Diener & Suh, 2000). Arab students, who are socioeconomically disadvantaged and have lower chances of succeeding in Israeli society, are predicted to perceive their condition in a less favorable light, and consequently show lower LS. Furthermore, past research suggests individuals' overall satisfaction with their country, i.e., national satisfaction, may impact life satisfaction in general (Morrison et al., 2011). Given the lower national satisfaction among Arab students, they are predicted to have lower life satisfaction as well.

Second, Arab students are predicted to evidence lower mean personal resources in comparison to their Jewish counterparts. Specifically Arab students are predicted to have lower convictions of mastery, self-efficacy, and optimistic beliefs, and lower perceived social support as a whole. This would be consistent with the realities of Arab students' lower economic, political, educational and social capabilities. In addition, recent experimental research (Zeidner, Ben-Zur, & Reshef-Weil, 2011) suggests diminished personal resources in Arab compared to Jewish students in Israel.

Third, personal resources are predicted to mediate the relationship between sociocultural group membership and LS. Disadvantaged cultural group membership is predicted to negatively impact upon personal resources, which, in turn, negatively impacts upon LS.

#### 6. Method

##### 6.1. Participants

Participants were 294 Jewish and 234 Arab students enrolled at an Israeli university. Arab students comprise about 20% of the student body at this university, which is representative of their

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