



Feminine values and happy life-expectancy in nations

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Abstract

Cross-national studies suggest that people are happier in feminine nations that are also economically affluent. The first objective of the present study was to replicate this finding with a quality of life index which is more comprehensive than the usual measures of subjective well-being. This comprehensive indicator termed *Happy Life-Expectancy* (HLE) combines subjective happiness with objective longevity. As predicted, in the richer countries, HLE was higher in feminine nations ($r = -0.51$, $n = 14$, $P < 0.05$, one-tailed), whereas in the poorer nations HLE did not correlate with national masculinity–femininity ($r = -0.27$, $n = 13$, NS). A second objective was to examine the mechanisms behind the significant relationship in the richer countries. Contrary to expectation, the findings could not be explained by national differences in private freedom. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

While it is possible to study the somatic and psychological health of *individuals* in relation to, for example, personality, demographic or socio-cultural variables, it is also feasible to examine average health in *countries*. At the latter level of analysis, one can gain an understanding of how social system characteristics may influence the health of populations at large. Studies of this kind fall within the so-called holocultural methodologic tradition which is a paradigm of research for testing hypotheses (cf. Rohner, 1986, p. 38) where cultures (nations or states within a nation) are treated as units of study, and culture (national or regional) scores on the variables of interest are correlated with one another (e.g. Lester, 1996, 2000; Lynn & Martin, 1995; Matsumoto & Fletcher, 1996). In this methodology, the sampling universe comprises all known cultures or nations.

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1.1. Culture

The ways in which people around the globe think, feel and act in response to the problems of life are heavily geared by shared notions, commonly referred to as ‘culture’. Hofstede (1991, p. 5) defined culture as the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another. The sources of these different mental programs lie within the social environments (family, school, workplace, living community, etc.) in which one grows up and acquires one’s life experiences. These programs affect the functioning of societies, of groups within those societies, and of individual members of such groups (Inkeles, & Levinson, 1969).

1.2. Feminine values

Masculinity/femininity (MAS) represents one of these mental programs (Hofstede, 1980, 1998, 2000). In Hofstede’s view, masculine and feminine societies differ in the social roles that are associated with the biological fact of the existence of two sexes, and in particular in the social roles that are attributed to males. In Hofstede’s formulation, “[Masculine cultures] expect men to be assertive, ambitious and competitive, to strive for material success, and to respect whatever is big, strong, and fast. [Masculine cultures] expect women to serve and to care for the non-material quality of life, for children and for the weak. *Feminine* cultures, on the other hand, define relatively overlapping social roles for the sexes, in which, in particular, men need not be ambitious or competitive but may go for a different [goal in] life than material success; men may respect whatever is small, weak, and slow” (1986, p. 308). Thus, in masculine cultures (e.g. Japan, Austria, Venezuela) political/organizational values emphasize material success and assertiveness, whereas in feminine cultures (e.g. Sweden, Norway, The Netherlands) they accentuate other values (e.g. a welfare rather than a performance society), interpersonal relationships, and sympathy and concern for the weak.

Hofstede described feminine (vs masculine) countries, as respectively, characterised by the following societal norms:

- Sex roles in society should be fluid (vs sex roles in society should be clearly differentiated).
- Differences in sex roles should not imply differences in power between the sexes (vs men should dominate in all settings).
- Unisex and androgyny as ideal (vs *machismo*-ostentatious manliness—as model).
- Both father and mother are used as models by boys and girls (vs father is used as model by boys, mother by girls).
- Quality of life and of the environment are important (vs performance and growth are crucial; Hofstede, 1980, pp. 294–295).

In addition to these norms, Hofstede (1980, pp. 296–297) pointed to some consequences for society at large. For more feminine countries:

- Less occupational segregation (e.g. male nurses).
- Men and women can both be breadwinners and follow the same types of higher education.
- Belief in equality of the sexes.
- Stronger position of the mother in the family.

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