Subjective well-being in a remote culture: The Himba

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Abstract

Existing studies of cultural differences in subjective well-being (SWB) have tended to focus on more Westernised and industrialised cultural groups, and have paid less attention to heterogeneity within cultural groups that share the same national boundary, but differ in level of urbanisation. This study considers differences in life satisfaction within the Himba of Namibia. The research looks across three groups; semi-nomadic and non-literate Himba, living their traditional lives in remote Namibian villages; Himba that have chosen to move to the local town; and, a sample of UK adults. Participants were administered the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al, 1985). Results showed the Rural Himba group had significantly higher levels of life satisfaction compared to the Urban Himba, and both Himba groups had significantly higher life satisfaction scores than a sample of UK adults matched for age and gender with the Himba. The results run contrary to the findings of other studies where more wealthy cultures tended to have higher SWB than less wealthy cultures.

Key Words: subjective well-being; satisfaction with life; Himba; Namibia; urbanisation.

Considerable advances in the scientific study of subjective well-being (SWB) have been made over the last thirty years (Diener, 1984, 2013; Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999). Definitions of SWB in the scientific literature have often emphasised that self-judgements of well-being have both a cognitive and affective component (Diener, 1984; 2013). The cognitive component of SWB is often measured as global life satisfaction, which is the degree to which one feels satisfied with their life. The affective component represents the positive and negative affective states an individual experiences in their life; positive and negative affective states are typically measured separately, and an 'affect balance' score is often created by calculating the difference between scores on positive and negative affect measures (e.g. Schimmack, Radhakrishnan, Oishi, Dzokoto, & Ahadi, 2002).

One particular feature of the previous body of research has been a continued interest in SWB across different geographic regions, nations and cultural groups. This research has focused on a number of interconnected empirical questions examining differences in SWB across nations and cultures; these include mean level differences in SWB, the role of different predictors of SWB, the structure of SWB, measurement issues in SWB, and personal and social outcomes related to SWB (Tov & Diener, 2007). There have now been a number of large scale surveys of SWB across nations, often examining predictors of SWB such as income level and the relative individualism/collectivism of nations (e.g. Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995), and there are ongoing large international surveys of SWB across a diverse body of nations, for example the World Values Survey. In broad terms, surveys have found consistent differences in SWB across nations, with more wealthy and democratic nations tending to have higher SWB compared to nations with lower income and less personal and political freedom (Diener, et al., 1995; Diener & Suh, 1999; Morrison, Tay & Diener, 2011). Importantly, culture and nation membership potentially moderates variables that contribute to

SWB. For example, affective experiences appear to be weaker predictors of life satisfaction in more collectivist countries (Kuppens, Realo & Diener, 2008).

Despite this, it could be argued that to this point much of the existing cross-cultural work has tended to focus more heavily on nations that are relatively more industrialised and Westernised. Perhaps more importantly, the existing research has often ignored substantive cultural heterogeneity within nations (Tov & Diener, 2007). In other words, much of the existing research that has sought to examine SWB across culture has assumed that 'cultural group' is isomorphic with geopolitical boundaries. While this may be a reasonable assumption in some countries or regions of the world, in other geographical areas this approach may mask potentially significant differences across groups within national boundaries. These differences may reflect a range of characteristics and processes, including ethnicity, religious beliefs, socio-economic status, cultural history, education and differing exposure to urbanisation, amongst many others.

Smaller and more geographically remote cultural groups are particularly under-represented in the existing SWB research; clearly, the imposing logistic, cost and linguistic barriers to conducting research with remote groups contributes to this. There have, however, been some exceptions to this trend in the literature. Wissing, Wissing, du Toit and Temane (2008), for example, considered differences in SWB (using the SWLS in English) between white Afrikaans and English speaking urban students, and black (mother tongue Setswanna) students and adults from a rural area in the Republic of South Africa. The results showed lower SWB within the black communities. In a further example, Biswas-Diener, Vitterso, and Diener (2005) sought to examine self-report indices of SWB, including measures of life satisfaction, in the Massai of Kenya, the Amish community in the USA, and the Inughuit of Greenland. The results from the study showed that all three cultural groups had mean scores on life satisfaction that were well above the neutral point (a score of 20), with the Massai

group showing the highest general levels of life satisfaction. The findings indicated that these groups could generally be considered ‘happy’, and had SWB scores that in broad terms were comparable to those reported in westernised and industrialised samples.

In addition to the relative paucity of SWB research examining remote cultures, there has been neglect of a further factor that may potentially influence differences in SWB within a particular cultural group; that is, degree of urbanisation, particularly in those cultural groups where some individuals have moved from living in a rural and remote setting, to living in an urban environment. As noted above, highly urbanised and industrialised societies tend to have higher mean levels of SWB in large surveys across nations, but the effect of urbanisation in a specific remote cultural group within a nation has been little studied.

The Himba are a remote herding people of north-west Namibia, most of whom still live in the open savannah in their traditional villages. These villages consist of a group of compounds, each of which house a small group of inter-related families. Traditionally the village would not have had a headman, but the former colonial power instituted such a post which has subsisted to the present day. Increasingly, the Himba are moving into a local town, Opuwo, which has a population of approximately 12,000 and basic western facilities, electricity, running water, medical facilities, internet access and shops. Given the importance of further research examining life satisfaction in remote cultures, our aim in the current study was to examine SWB in members of the Himba people. More specifically, we sought to compare scores on a measure of satisfaction with life across those non-literate, mono-lingual Himba living traditional lives in remote villages with little or no contact with the Western world, and Himba who have moved to live in the small local town of Opuwo. We also sought to compare scores for both Himba groups with a sample of adults based in the United Kingdom who were matched on age and gender with the Himba participants. It should be noted that while the Himba living in the traditional environment typically have little contact

with Western individuals and technology, some of the community have taken part in psychological research previously, largely focused on aspects of visual cognition (e.g. Caparos et al., 2012), where comparisons across rural and urban Himba have often been examined. None of the individuals in the current sample, however, have previously taken part in that research. Given the novelty of collecting data from this remote group, we refrain from making directional predictions about the level of life satisfaction across these groups.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 176 individuals in total: 55 Rural Himba (27 males; mean age = 21.53 years, *SD* = 3.38), and 33 Urban Himba (25 males; mean age = 22.76 years, *SD* = 3.30) participants. Each Himba participant was matched on age and gender with a participant recruited from the general adult community in the UK. Thus there were four participant groups in total: the two Himba samples, and their matched UK sample. Neither age nor gender correlated significantly with SWLS scores. Recruitment of Himba participants was through a locally recognised interpreter. The Rural Himba are an indigenous people who were treated as a vulnerable population. Only Himba who had lived in Opuwo continuously for more than twelve months were included in the 'urban Himba' sample. None of the Himba tested in either community had been previously assessed by use of self-report questionnaires.

Rural Himba participants received a 1kg bag of maize and sugar for participating (approximate value £2), whilst urban Himba received approximately £2 in mobile phone credit or cash to that value. The UK participants were recruited as part of a larger study; their data on satisfaction with life has not been published elsewhere previously. UK participants were recruited from a community event held at a university in London, UK. These participants had been resident in the UK for at least one year prior to participation in this study. Data was collected in Namibia over the course of two visits (2011 and 2013) by the

first author. There were no significant differences in SWLS scores for participants across the two data collection periods. The same translated measure was used on both occasions but different interpreters were used during the two visits.

Measures

The five-item Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larson, and Griffin, 1985) is designed to assess an individual's cognitive appraisal of their own satisfaction with life, with each item rated on a scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Item scores are summed to produce a total score, with higher scores indicating higher satisfaction with life. The SWLS has been used widely in cross-cultural settings and has been shown to have very good reliability and validity (Diener & Diener, 1995). Cronbach's alpha for the SWLS was 0.56, 0.72 and 0.79 for the Rural Himba, Urban Himba and UK samples, respectively. The measures were translated into Otjiherero (the Himba language) by the compiler of The New Otjiherero Dictionary (Nguaiko, 2011), and back translated in to English by the Language Centre at the University of Namibia. The local interpreter verbally back translated the inventories and completed the two inventories before they were administered to Himba participants.

Procedure

Consent to carry out the research was negotiated with the Head Man of each of the rural villages after a verbal description of the study aims and method. The Head Man received a gift of goods valued at approximately £5. Testing with Rural Himba participants took place in the open air outside the immediate boundaries of their village. Verbal consent was obtained from Urban Himba participants after a description of the study aims and method. Urban Himba participants were tested in the open air at a campsite in central Opuwo. Rural and Urban Himba were instructed verbally on the response scale for the SWLS and

asked the questions by an interpreter in Otjiherero, in the presence of the first author. In the event that a participant did not understand the question, the interpreter explained the question and translated his explanation in to English for the first author. Himba participants were initially asked to provide a broad agree/neither/disagree distinction. Once this had been determined, they were then asked to provide their specific level of agreement/disagreement with each statement. UK participants provided informed consent, completed the measure individually online, and were provided with a debrief upon completion.

Results

Descriptive statistics for the groups are shown in Table 1. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the group differences. There was a significant difference on the SWLS across group. The Himba participants had significantly higher SWLS than the UK participants, t (172) = 8.22, $p < 0.001$. The Rural Himba had significantly higher SWLS scores than their matched UK counterparts, t (172) = 9.03, $p < 0.001$, as did the Urban Himba with their matched UK counterparts, t (172) = 3.40, $p = 0.001$. Lastly, the Rural Himba had significantly higher SWLS scores than the Urban Himba, , t (172) = 4.01, $p < 0.001$. The response distributions for the 5 SWLS questions are shown in Table 2. It should be noted that there was some evidence of an extreme response bias in the Himba participants, particularly amongst those in a rural setting, with the skewness value for the Rural Himba being -1.03. Transforming the SWLS variable had no substantive impact on the group differences found, so the analyses are shown with untransformed variables.

Table 1

Means and standard deviations for the SWLS for each sample

Sample

	Rural Himba (RH)	UK Sample Matched with RH	Urban Himba (UH)	UK Sample Matched with UH	*F*	η^2
SWLS	31.16 (4.61)	21.69 (6.04)	26.30 (6.53)	21.70 (4.76)	33.71**	0.37

Note. ** = p < .001. SWLS = Satisfaction With Life Scale. Standard deviations appear in parentheses below means.

Table 2

Response distributions by sample for the five SWLS questions

SWLS Question	Response Category	Rural Himba	Urban Himba	UK Sample
In most ways my life is close to my ideal	Strongly disagree	0	9.1	2.3
	Disagree	3.6	6.1	10.2
	Slightly disagree	1.8	3	25
	Neither agree nor disagree	5.5	15.2	22.7
	Slightly agree	5.5	15.2	26.1
	Agree	10.9	27.2	11.4
	Strongly agree	72.7	24.2	2.3
The conditions of my life are excellent	Strongly disagree	3.6	0	3.4
	Disagree	0	9.1	9.1
	Slightly disagree	3.6	9.1	8
	Neither agree nor disagree	5.5	21.2	18.2
	Slightly agree	1.8	3	28.4
	Agree	7.3	15.2	25

	Strongly agree	78.2	42.4	8
I am satisfied with my life	Strongly disagree	0	0	4.5
	Disagree	0	6.1	9.1
	Slightly disagree	0	0	8
	Neither agree nor disagree	1.8	3	13.6
	Slightly agree	3.6	15.2	39.8
	Agree	10.9	15.2	19.3
	Strongly agree	83.6	60.6	5.7
So far I have gotten the important things I want in life	Strongly disagree	1.8	9.1	4.5
	Disagree	1.8	9.1	4.5
	Slightly disagree	0	0	17
	Neither agree nor disagree	5.5	6.1	23.9
	Slightly agree	12.7	15.2	29.5
	Agree	5.5	9.1	12.5
	Strongly agree	72.7	51.5	8
If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing	Strongly disagree	12.7	12.1	6.8
	Disagree	14.5	18.2	14.8
	Slightly disagree	0	12.1	18.2
	Neither agree nor disagree	0	0	12.5
	Slightly agree	3.6	12.1	29.5
	Agree	9.1	24.2	10.2
	Strongly agree	60	21.2	8

Note. Cells contain the percentage endorsement of each response category for each sample

Discussion

Our aim in the current study was to examine an element of subjective well-being (SWB), life satisfaction, in a remote and non-literate cultural group, the Himba people of

northern Namibia. Further, we sought to examine the effects of urbanisation on this variable within the Himba culture by contrasting Himba living in their traditional rural villages, with little or no contact with the typical elements of Western culture, with Himba who live in a small local town, with potential access to Western amenities and culture. Both of these Himba groups were contrasted with samples of adults from the UK who were matched on age and gender with the Himba participants. This is one of the few studies that has examined aspects of self-reported SWB in a traditional, non-literate African culture, and that has examined the effects of increased urbanisation on SWB within this culture.

The results of the study showed that the Rural Himba group had significantly higher satisfaction with life scores compared to the Urban Himba group, and their matched UK sample. The Urban Himba also had significantly higher scores than their matched UK sample. This result could be considered surprising, given that wealthier countries have often been shown to have significantly higher levels of global satisfaction with life (Diener, et al., 1995; Diener & Suh, 1999; Morrison, et al., 2011). The significant difference between the Rural and Urban Himba on satisfaction with life scores suggests the process of urbanisation within this specific cultural group might be detrimental to one's perception of personal well-being. Clearly, there are many potential factors that could help explain this apparent urbanisation effect on global satisfaction with life. For example, exposure to Western values may engender an over-commitment to unattainable life goals that leads to lower life satisfaction – especially in those who have received some education (Hofer & Chasiotis, 2003). Future studies assessing SWB in communities in transition to urbanisation might consider using larger samples to assess SWLS measurement at different levels of exposure to the urban environment, and to consider a broad array of variables that are known predictors of life satisfaction, such as affect, income level and source, degree of social support, and education level. It should be noted that group differences found in SWB across level of

urbanisation may be at least partly confounded by psychological and demographic variables that underpin the move to urban environments in the first place. For example, those who leave the rural environment may do so because they are relatively less satisfied with their life, or those newly in an urban environment may be exposed to previously unknown stressors.

Several limitations should be noted when considering these findings. Firstly, the reliability estimates for the Himba samples were lower than what we would typically see in Western samples, although they are within the range considered acceptable within the African context by Wissing et al. (2008). Biswas-Diener et al. (2005) also reported low Cronbach's alpha estimates for the measures with their remote culture samples (although they do not provide the actual values in the text). Given that all of the Himba participants in this study had never before completed self-report measures prior to this study, the lower estimates are perhaps not surprising. Although great care was taken in making sure the Himba participants understood the response scale being used for the measure and the wording of the items, it is possible that unfamiliarity with this kind of task led to inconsistencies in responses. The Rural Himba in particular tended to have more extreme responding to the questions than the other groups; this response bias suggests group differences should be interpreted very cautiously. It is difficult to know if this extreme responding reflects a more general response bias or is specific to SWB, as this was the first time the participants in the Himba sample had completed a self-report measure of a psychological construct. Related to this, a further potential issue was the difficulties in the translation process for the measures used in the study. Future studies using translated inventories within an African context, where Western psychological constructs might not be well understood or represented in the local language (Laher, 2008), should carefully consider who carries out the translation. Allik and McCrae (2004) comment that even if the translation is semantically correct, the nuance of each question in relation to a particular psychological construct might be lost if non-

psychologists translate the measures. Finally, only a small number of female Himba participants were recruited in the urban setting, as fewer females than males move from their rural location. It is also possible that, given the relative novelty of the testing situation, recruitment amongst the Himba was biased by more extraverted and braver individuals being more likely to participate. Future research should consider more seriously heterogeneity in SWB within cultural groups that share a national boundary, but differ on other key variables. In particular, a focus on predictors and outcomes of SWB in people undergoing a transition to urban environments may be a fruitful avenue for further research.

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