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Community Involvement, Culture and Happiness

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Research Question: The purpose of this study is to explore whether Community Involvement is more predictive of Happiness in a collectivist nation (Lebanon), than an individualist nation (United States).

Method

156 students from a small US Midwestern college, and 47 students from a University in Lebanon completed an Internet survey that asked about the participants' happiness, community involvement, time spent engaging in community activities, community enmeshment, and motivations for involvement. Motivations for involvement include four different sub-variables: personal development, relationship development, basic needs and volunteering. Survey items produced reliable scales assessing participants' Happiness (alpha = .75), level of Community Involvement (alpha = .84), and Identity Enmeshment with Community (centrality of community activities to personal identity; alpha = .80). The motivation for community involvement items produced four reliable scales: Personal Development (alpha = .92), Relationship Development (alpha = .88), Basic Needs (alpha = .90), and Volunteering (alpha = .85).

Results

Results demonstrate that there are significant differences between the USA and Lebanon in the levels of participants' Happiness, Community Involvement, Enmeshment with Community, and motivations for involvement for reasons of Personal Development, Relationship Development, and Volunteering,. ANOVA shows the average scores for United States participants are significantly higher on all of these variables. Regression analyses reveal that the motivation for Personal Development is the best predictor of subjective happiness, for people in both countries (R=.42,F=18.95, p<.05). Interestingly, time spent volunteering was not correlated with Happiness; however, the number of community activities and engagement in them did correlate with Happiness. The hypothesis that Community Involvement would be a stronger predictor of Happiness in a collectivistic culture was not supported.

Analysis

This study is important because while previous research has suggested that community involvement predicts happiness (Putnam, 2000), research has not examined what motivations for community involvement actually improve happiness, or whether these relationships are consistent across cultures. Community Involvement and Volunteering were not the best predictors of happiness. Rather, results revealed that Community Involvement was not as important to overall happiness as the motivation for why the individual chose to be involved with their respective community. This is consistent with the Uses and Gratifications theory which states that people who do something for different reasons realize different gratifications (Katz, Blumer & Gurevitch, 1974). Therefore, people who get involved in their community for personal development see a greater increase in happiness than individuals whose involvement was motivated by other things.

Personal Development

Community Enmeshment

Relationship Development

Community Involvement

Volunteering

Who's happiest??
Motivations for Community Involvement

Variables from left to right
1 - r=.41, p<.05
2 - r=.34, p<.05
3 - r=.23, p<.05
4 - r=.23, p<.05
5 - r=.22, p<.05

Conclusion:

This fact that Community Involvement and Volunteering were not the best predictors of Happiness, raises new questions regarding previous research that identifies giving and relationships as predictors of happiness. The finding that Community Involvement was not a stronger predictor of happiness in a Lebanon than in the USA, is consistent with Dirani's (2008) research suggesting that Lebanese people (and likely other cultures as well) may be distributed across horizontal and vertical dimensions of collectivism and individualism. Results clearly revealed that in both countries Community Involvement was not as important to overall Happiness as individuals motivations for being involved.