

# What Does “Happiness” Prompt in Your Mind? Culture, Word Choice, and Experienced Happiness

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**Abstract** What three words come to your mind in association with “happiness”? We analyzed the 1563 words reported by 521 Korean and American participants in this free association task. The most frequently endorsed word was “family” in Korea, whereas the most popular word among Americans was “smile.” The overall frequency of social words (e.g., relationships, social emotions) reported by Koreans was higher, and the most often mentioned relationship type differed between the two groups (family in Korea; friend in the US). Nonetheless, both in Korea and the US, individuals who mentioned more social words were significantly more satisfied with their lives. The amount of social support provision mediated the link between the number of reported social words and experienced happiness. Regardless of culture, a simple count of social words associated with happiness appears to offer a reasonably good clue for how happy the person actually is.

**Keywords** Happiness · Word choice · Culture · Free association task

## 1 Introduction

Although happiness is a universally desired state, thoughts and opinions about this elusive concept exist in various forms. Some believe happiness comes primarily from unique personal achievements, whereas others see it more as a communal experience attained through social relationships (Diener and Suh 2000). Also, in evaluating happiness, people focus on different aspects of their lives—some look at the best, but others focus on the

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worst (Diener et al. 2002). What is brought forth to the mind, when thinking of happiness, varies considerably across people and between cultures. In the present research, we aim to measure the lay beliefs about happiness among Koreans and Americans by adopting a classic method in psychology (free association), and examine how these word associations predict the person's actual happiness in each culture.

Beliefs about happiness matter because they tend to influence the person's actual level of happiness. In other words, how happy you are partly depends on the type of beliefs and assumptions you have about happiness. In one study (Koo and Suh 2007), for instance, people reported whether they thought the total amount of happiness in one's life is more or less fixed or infinite. This lay belief predicted a wide array of attitudes and behaviors relevant to happiness. The more the person believed that the total happiness in life was "fixed," the more often she engaged in social comparison, was less likely to capitalize on positive events, was less popular among peers, and most importantly, was less happy. In short, there appears to be an empirically meaningful link between the person's lay thoughts about happiness and how happy she actually is.

Although lay thoughts about happiness seem highly germane for furthering our understanding of happiness, thus far, theoretical advancement in this area has been somewhat limited. One reason might have to do with a commonly used study method—factor analysis of questionnaire reports. For instance, in one study, Furnham and Cheng (2000) asked English students to rate whether 38 statements (e.g., "having a brighter outlook on life") would be a cause of happiness. Factor analysis yielded 6 factors, such as *Personal Advantages*, *Social Support & Esteem* and *Optimism & Contentment*. The paper concludes that what people believe to be the cause of happiness corresponds highly with major research conclusions. Such convergence between the participants' ratings and literature findings, however, is not entirely surprising given that the initial questionnaire items were, as the authors note, "derived from the literature" (p. 231) on happiness.

As such, when researchers adopt a different theoretical perspective, the study often reaches different conclusions. For instance, when McMahan and Estes (2011) studied people's lay beliefs of happiness by using items from hedonic and eudaimonic theories of happiness, they found factors (e.g., *Contribution to Others*) that were quite different from those reported by Furnham and Cheng (2000). As these two studies illustrate, in questionnaire-based studies of lay beliefs, participants have relatively little latitude in expressing their unique thoughts about happiness. Rather, they are restricted to the option of either agreeing or disagreeing with items pre-selected by the researcher. In such designs, theory-confirming outcomes are more likely to emerge than new insights about people's happiness beliefs.

Another approach, used often in cross-cultural investigations, asks participants to write free-format sentences or essays about happiness, often without time or length restrictions (e.g., Hitokoto and Uchida 2015; Lu and Gilmour 2004; Pflug 2009; Uchida and Kitayama 2009). Compared to structured questionnaire studies, this approach, particularly when combining qualitative and quantitative data, has been successful in probing spontaneous beliefs of happiness across cultures (e.g., Delle Fave et al. 2011, 2016). Significant contributions have been made through this approach, but it also faces several challenges. Data collection is often time consuming and costly, and analyzing the free response data is highly laborious and susceptible to interpretive biases. Although the studies provide valuable insights about the rich content of happiness thoughts across people, less attention has been given to the question of whether holding a certain belief about happiness actually relates to the experiential level of happiness.

In this present study, we attempt to analyze lay thoughts of happiness by adopting a classic method in psychology that dates back to Wundt and Freud (see Szalay and Deese 1978)—a free association task (Nelson et al. 2000). A free association task requires participants to produce words that come to her mind that is related to a prompted cue (in our study, the word “happiness”). We analyzed the responses from two cultural groups (Koreans and Americans), with more attention to finding a link between happiness thought-experience than summarizing the contents of the happiness beliefs per se. We believe this method can complement existing measures in several ways—it gives more voice to participants in expressing their thoughts about happiness, and by generating a hypothesis based on existing findings, it allows an opportunity to examine how beliefs about happiness relate to actual experiences of happiness.

Despite its simplicity, researchers find that the free association procedure is a reliable and valid method for capturing stable aspects of one’s associative memory network (Nelson et al. 2000; Rozin et al. 2002). The specific responses given with different probabilities in the free association task reflect one’s personal experiences. For instance, in association with the word “alcohol,” heavy drinkers come up with more positive and arousing words than light drinkers, who tended to offer more negative and sedating responses (Reich and Goldman 2005). The free association method also captures the default thoughts of groups (e.g., gender, culture) on various topics. In response to the word “food,” for example, Americans offer more words related to “fat” and affective states than French respondents (Rozin et al. 2002). Thus, the free association method could offer a less obtrusive window to the spontaneous thoughts held by lay persons on happiness.

Recent developments in the study of word analysis add promise to the use of the free association task. A person’s simple choice of words reveals surprisingly many things about her. By analyzing one’s use of vocabulary, for instance, researchers have been able to predict the person’s personality (Fast and Funder 2008), demographic characteristics (Pennebaker and Stone 2003), level of sense of power (Wakslak et al. 2014), physical health (Pennebaker et al. 1997), and even her chance of longevity (Danner et al. 2001). Although fruitful results have been obtained through such word analyses, this approach has been rarely applied to the study of happiness. In one recent study that examined words (Oishi et al. 2013), the focus was on dictionary definitions of happiness across cultures rather than on personal patterns of word usage.

In this study, we analyzed, in total, 1563 words Koreans and Americans freely associated with the word “happiness” (3 words per participant). Rather than documenting every responded word, our analysis focused primarily on the frequency of social words that the participants associated with happiness. There is a strong consensus among researchers that positive social experience is one of the most important predictors of happiness (e.g., Caprariello and Reis 2013; Diener et al. 1999; Epley and Schroeder 2014; Myers and Diener 1995). In a classic paper contrasting very happy versus unhappy people, for instance, Diener and Seligman (2002) even concluded that social experience is the only other “necessary” condition of happiness besides the absence of psychopathology. The number of social words reported in association with happiness, we reasoned, could reflect the degree to which the person holds a “socially schematized” theory of happiness. Using the free association data as a proxy for the centrality of social experience in happiness, we focused on two questions.

First, are the happiness theories held by Koreans more socially tainted than those endorsed by Americans? One prominent difference between the two cultural regions is the extent to which the independent (US) versus the interdependent (Korea) aspects of the self are chronically thought of (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Such difference in self-construal

pattern shapes how happiness is conceptualized and experienced. For instance, compared to independent cultures, happiness in East Asian cultures is affected more by social appraisal than inner feelings (Suh et al. 1998), is linked more closely with socially-engaged than socially-disengaged affect (Kitayama and Markus 2000), and is built firmly on a sense of being understood by others (Oishi et al. 2008). As Kitayama and Markus aptly summarized, happiness is considered primarily as an inner, subjective state in Western cultures, whereas it is viewed as an intersubjective experience that crucially involves others in East Asian cultures.

Given the inevitable influence of culture on linguistic patterns and habits (Rommetveit 1968), happiness is more likely to be framed with social words in Korea than in the US. Although a strong possibility, whether this is actually true needs an empirical investigation. Free association data appears to be an excellent means for answering this question. We compared the frequency and salience (order of report) of social words associated with happiness in the two cultural groups, and also examined whether the content of social words differ in ways that are consistent with past research.

Second, at an individual difference level, we examined whether a meaningful link exists between the person's reported words and actual level of happiness. Given the universal significance of social needs (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Dunbar 1998), we expected that individuals who hold a more socially saturated theory of happiness would actually enjoy higher levels of happiness, regardless of one's cultural background. They may engage life in ways conducive for experiencing happiness, for instance, by investing more on social activities that are inherently important for experiencing happiness. Conversely, those who tie happiness with non-social sources, such as money, may act or make decisions that are distracting for happiness. In fact, simply thinking of money creates an asocial mindset (Gasiorowska et al. 2016; Vohs et al. 2006), which in turn distances the self from a key source of happiness—other people.

As one potential reason for why holding a socially rich theory of happiness is hedonically beneficial, we considered the possibility that people who stress the social aspects engage in behaviors that enrich their social network. This idea was inspired from findings that suggest that giving social support to others increases one's own happiness (Aknin et al. 2013; Dunn et al. 2008; Thoits and Hewitt 2001). Although social support is a reciprocal process (giving and receiving), giving support, as opposed to receiving, is more intentional and reflective of the actor's desire for social interaction. Hence, we examined whether those who report more social words indeed offer more support to others. We do not believe that this is the sole reason for why social words predict higher happiness (for instance, positive mood might also prime social words), yet it is a novel hypothesis that seemed worth examining with the free association data.

Finally, in order to use the free association report as an individual difference measure, it seemed informative to know about the person who tends to associate social words with happiness. If the choice of specific happiness-related words is merely an "on-spot" reaction constructed at the spur of the moment, it may not correlate meaningfully with dispositional characteristics. On the other hand, if the response pattern is partly grounded on stable social characteristics, it should show convergence with conceptually relevant factors. We included several well-established measures that reflect the person's level of interest, desire, and competence for establishing relationship with others (e.g., need for belongingness, Leary et al. 2012; inclusion of other scale, Aron et al. 1992; loneliness scale, Russell et al. 1980). We expected to find a significant relationship between these social dispositions and the number of social words reported. Measures of optimism and

self-efficacy were also included to ensure that the social word reporting tendency is distinct from a general positive view about the self or future.

In sum, the purpose of this study was to gain insights about a person’s view of happiness through a relatively novel, yet simple source—three words that the individual chose to associate with happiness. We expected to find meaningful individual and cultural differences in the lay belief of happiness by simply counting, out of three, the number of words that convey social meaning. It was hypothesized that: (a) Koreans, compared to Americans, will report more social words in this task, (b) regardless of culture, individuals who report more social words would experience greater happiness, and (c) those who mention more social words would provide more social support to others.

## 2 Methods

### 2.1 Participants

As part of a large international research project, 226 American undergraduates (female = 149,  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.74$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 5.00$ ) and 301 Korean undergraduates participated in this study. Six Korean participants were excluded because of missing data, leaving a total of 295 participants in the final analysis (female = 145,  $M_{\text{age}} = 18.77$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 0.90$ ). Students in both cultures were paid US \$10 for their participation. The ethnic make-up of the U.S. sample was 67.3% Caucasian, 30.5% Asian, and 2.2% others. Questionnaires originally written in English were translated into Korean by a bilingual speaker, which was back-translated by another bilingual person. Minor wording changes, when necessary, were resolved in a lab discussion session participated by multiple bilingual psychology graduate students.

### 2.2 Procedure

After providing informed consent, participants were instructed to freely write words associated with “happiness.” Following the procedure of previous studies (e.g., Rozin et al. 2002), the task was worded as: “Please write down three words that come to mind when you think of happiness.” All word responses were coded as either social or nonsocial by two research assistants who were unaware of the purpose of this study (Cohen’s  $\kappa = .97$ ). The majority of words coded as “social” referred to abstract values (e.g., love), a specific person (e.g., friend, family), or relationships (e.g., dating). Minor disagreements between the coders were resolved through discussion. Most relevant to our interest, out of the three words, the number of social words was counted (range 0–3). In total, 1563 responses (3 words per 521 participants) were included in the analysis.

### 2.3 Measures

After the free association task, participants completed a questionnaire that included measures of happiness, emotional support provision, and social and non-social dispositional characteristics. Because the current data were collected as part of a large cross-cultural research project, the full scale was not available for certain dispositional variables. After completing the questionnaire, participants were thanked and debriefed.

### 2.3.1 Happiness

Global happiness was measured using Cantril's Self-Anchoring Scale (Cantril 1965). It asked participants to evaluate their current life satisfaction on a ladder scale, which ranged from 0 (*worst possible life*) to 10 (*best possible life*). Although a single-item scale, the Cantril measure demonstrates strong psychometric properties (Veenhoven 2012), and is one of the most widely used tools in international surveys of happiness (e.g., Gallup Organization 2009; Tay and Diener 2011).

### 2.3.2 Emotional Support Provision

Participants were asked to indicate how much emotional care and comfort they typically provide to their family and friends during times of need, respectively. Responses for the two items were coded on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*none*) to 7 (*very much*) and combined to form a social support giving variable.

### 2.3.3 Need for Belonging

The need for belonging was measured by administering the even-numbered items (2, 4, 6, 8, and 10) from the original 10-item Need to Belong Scale (Leary et al. 2012). It included items such as "I do not like being alone," and "My feelings are easily hurt when I feel that others do not accept me." Items were reported on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The internal consistency of the scale (alpha) was .72.

### 2.3.4 Interpersonal Closeness

Interpersonal closeness was assessed through the Inclusion of Other in the Self scale (IOS; Aron et al. 1992). The IOS scale presents seven figures in which two circles, each representing the self and others, overlap to a different degree. Participants were asked to choose the figure that best indicates the extent to which they feel connected to others.

### 2.3.5 Loneliness

Loneliness was measured using 3 items (4, 5, and 16;  $\alpha = .72$ ) from the original 20-item revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al. 1980) that measures subjective feelings of being alone. Statements included items such as "There are people who really understand me (reversed)," "I feel part of a group of friends." Items were reported on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

### 2.3.6 Optimism

An item from the Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R; Scheier et al. 1994) that seemed to have high face validity ("I'm always optimistic about my future") was used to measure optimism. Participants answered on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

### 2.3.7 Self-efficacy

Participants' level of self-efficacy were assessed by a single item measure of self-efficacy (“I can do just about anything I really set my mind to”), adapted from Pearlin and Schooler (1978). Response was made on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

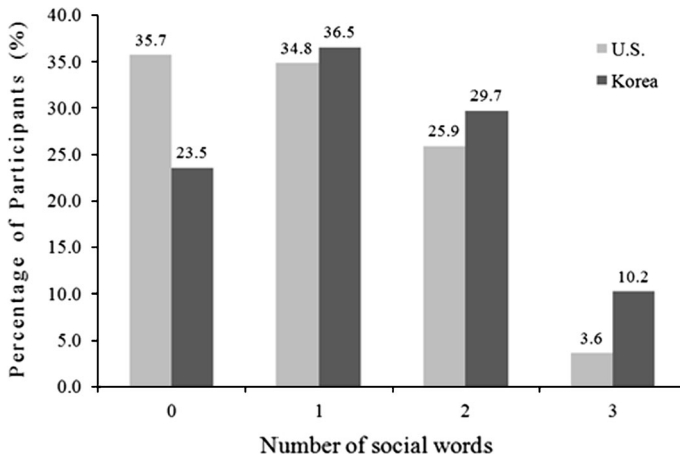
## 3 Results

Of the 1563 total words associated with happiness, 38 percent of them were categorized as social. When analyzed separately by cultural group, a number of interesting differences were found. First, the most commonly associated word with happiness in Korea was “family” (113 out of 885 total responses; 12.8%), whereas affective states or expressions (e.g., “smile,” “laugh”) topped the list (78 out of 678 total responses; 11.5%) in the response of Americans. Consistent with past research, happiness seemed to be strongly attached to a relational dimension among Koreans, whereas it reminds Americans foremost of a hedonic emotional state (Schimmack et al. 2002; Suh et al. 1998).

When the words categorized as social were probed in more detail, “family” (113 out of 373 social words; 30.3%) was the most popular response among Koreans, whereas in the US, “friend/friendship” was mentioned the most (69 out of 220 social words, 31.4%). The most central relationship associated with happiness seems different in the two cultures, which is in line with the general claim that ascribed, in-group (versus self-chosen) relationships play a more prominent role in the psychological experiences of Eastern than Western cultural members (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Quite interestingly, the current pattern is nearly an exact mirror image of a recent report on loneliness. Among European nations, the primary predictor of loneliness is the absence of family interactions in more collectivist societies, whereas the absence of confidant or friend is key in more individualistic societies (Lykes and Kimmelmeier 2014).

We also examined possible cultural differences at a quantitative level. Among the three possible responses, Koreans mentioned 1.26 words pertaining to social experiences, relationships, or relational values (e.g., love). Such social words were mentioned significantly less (0.97 times) by Americans,  $t(519) = 3.63, p < .001, d = 0.32$ . As shown in Fig. 1, the three blanks were filled entirely by social words among approximately 10% of the Koreans, whereas only 4% of Americans did so. On the flipside, 24% of Koreans and 36% of the Americans did not mention a single social word. Additionally, as suggested by Nelson and colleagues (2000), we compared the first word the two groups wrote in this free association task to examine the relative salience of the social dimension. Roughly half of the Korean respondents (51.5%) chose a social word as a first response, whereas only 35.8% of Americans did so,  $\chi^2(1, n = 521) = 12.73, p < .001$ . As a whole, inferring from these word analyses, lay beliefs of happiness seem to contain more social notions in Korea than in the US.

Between individuals, what type of persons write more or less social words in this task? To find out, we examined whether the number of social word associated with happiness correlates with stable social characteristics. Both in Korea and in the US, individuals who reported more social words felt a stronger sense of psychological overlap between the self and others ( $r$  with IOS: Korea, .22,  $p < .001$ ; US, .14,  $p < .05$ ), and reported less loneliness ( $r$  with loneliness: Korea,  $-.19, p < .01$ ; US,  $-.19, p < .01$ ). Although the direction was similar, the



**Fig. 1** Frequency of social words as a function of culture

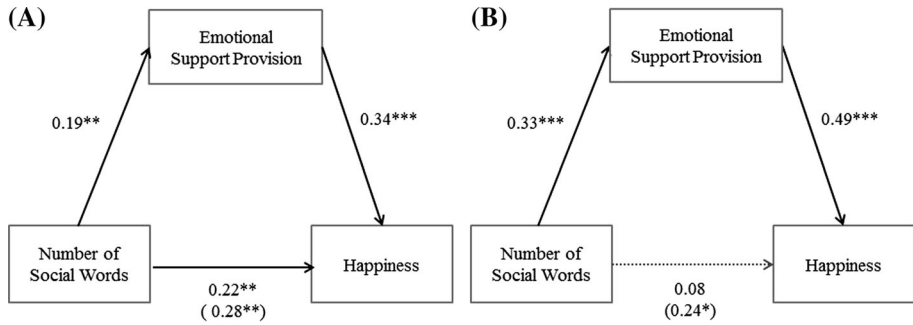
correlation between social word frequency and need to belong was significant only in Korea (Korea,  $r = .15$ ,  $p < .05$ ; US,  $r = .09$ ,  $ns$ ). On the other hand, in both cultures, positive attitudes about life in general (optimism) and self-efficacy did not predict how many social words the person reported. The overall pattern suggests that the frequency of social words reported in this task may not be due to a random response nor a general positive bias, but rather, reflect how much the person prioritizes the social aspects in her overall life.

The most central question of this research was whether the number of social terms reported in this task predicts the person's actual happiness level. In both cultures, those who mentioned more social words enjoyed significantly higher life satisfaction (Korea,  $b = .28$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $t(293) = 3.35$ ,  $p = .001$ ; US,  $b = .24$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $t(224) = 2.23$ ,  $p = .027$ ). Is this pattern more pronounced in one culture than another? No significant culture  $\times$  social word interaction on well-being was found,  $b = -.03$ ,  $t(517) = -0.25$ ,  $p = .80$ , suggesting that defining happiness in social terms is beneficial to happiness in both cultures. We find it quite remarkable that one's level of happiness is captured by three (social) words a person chooses to associate with happiness. The current finding affirms in a novel way that social experience is indeed a core block of happiness.

There may be various reasons for why having a highly social theory of happiness translates into greater well-being. Within the constraints of our correlational data, we considered one possibility. Those who endorse a social theory of happiness might engage more often in behaviors that enrich social ties, such as giving social support to others. To examine this possibility, the PROCESS method (Model 58; Preacher and Hayes 2008) was conducted. Social support was entered as a mediator between number of social words and life satisfaction, where mediation was assessed on a point estimate and bootstrapped 95% confidence interval (CI; 5000 bootstrap iterations). As shown in Fig. 2, in both cultural groups, emotional support provision significantly mediated the link between the number of social words and life satisfaction: The indirect effect was .07 among Koreans,  $SE = .03$ , 95% CI = [0.02, 0.14], and .16 among Americans,  $SE = .05$ , 95% CI = [0.07, 0.28].

Although the mediation effect of social support on happiness was not moderated by culture,  $b = .09$ ,  $SE = .06$ , 95% CI = [-0.02, 0.21], one difference was observed. When emotional support provision was included as a mediator, the direct effect from the frequency of social words to life satisfaction remained significant among Koreans,  $b = .22$ ,





**Fig. 2** Emotional support provision as a mediator of life satisfaction for Korean (A) and American participants (B). Regression coefficients are unstandardized, and the total effect of the number of social words is inside parentheses. *Dotted path* is not significant, and *bold paths* are statistically significant (\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ )

$SE = .08, t(292) = 2.62, p = .008$ , whereas it became non-significant among Americans,  $b = .08, SE = .10, t(223) = .98, p = .455$ , indicating full mediation. The pattern is conceptually consistent with the recent finding that provision of emotion-focused social support is more common among European Americans than those with an Asian cultural background (Chen et al. 2015). Also in our data, emotional support provision was more prevalent among Americans ( $M = 5.51, SD = 1.20$ ) than among Koreans ( $M = 4.63, SD = 1.07$ ),  $t(519) = 8.77, p < .001$ . Thus, based on Chen et al.’s finding and the current outcome, we speculate that our current measure of emotion-focused social support is more modal of American’s way of giving help, whereas Koreans may employ more diverse routes (e.g., practical assistance) when they help out others. More research is warranted to clarify this issue. Nonetheless, both in Korea and in the US, social support provision seems to be one bridge that links the socially rich theory of happiness with higher life satisfaction.

### 4 General Discussion

Sometimes we deliberately analyze and try to make sense of our conscious thoughts. But more often, our mind simply wanders around. We find ourselves thinking about A because of B, which in turn was brought to attention by C, and so forth (Killingsworth and Gilbert 2010). Interestingly, people believe that these loose, free associative mental states are sometimes more revealing about a person than her explicit and deliberate thoughts (Christoff et al. 2011; Morewedge et al. 2014). Yet, such spontaneously flowing thoughts have seldom been the target of traditional happiness research that relies heavily on structured questionnaires.

In this research, we allowed participants to express their beliefs about happiness more freely through a word association method. They provided little in an absolute sense—just 3 words prompted by the word happiness. Still, we were able to uncover a number of interesting patterns from this simple report that not only confirms many past findings, but also lends further insights about individual and cultural differences in happiness.

As expected, the “default” happiness schema held by a person seems to be substantially influenced by one’s cultural worldview (Rommetsveit 1968). Words related to social experience and/or relationships were reported significantly more by Koreans (than Americans) who are chronically reminded of the inherent connectedness of self with others

(Markus and Kitayama 1991). Much of current findings, obtained via a drastically different format, coincide with past conclusions derived from survey or experimental methods. Conceptually similar to past research (e.g., Suh et al. 1998), in-group relationship was most commonly mentioned by Koreans (“family”), whereas the first word that occurred to Americans was an emotional state (“smile”). Also, Koreans mentioned more ascribed relationships, whereas Americans more often nominated self-chosen relationships.

When the data was analyzed at the individual difference level, those who wrote more social words in response to happiness were distinct from others in a number of ways. They didn’t necessarily view life in a more positive manner (no difference in optimism), but seemed to prioritize the social dimensions of life more than others. They believed that their selves overlapped more with others, desired more social belongingness, and presumably as a consequence, were less lonely. Although significant, the correlations between social word frequency and the social disposition measures were relatively low (mostly less than .20). It suggests that the free association outcome is related to, but not completely redundant with the dispositional information. This suggests that the free association procedure may provide interesting supplementary information in future individual difference studies on happiness.

Perhaps the most intriguing finding was that the *content* of happiness provided by the person was linked with her *level* of happiness; those who associated more social words with happiness were happier. The interaction effect between number of social words and culture was not significant, indicating that holding a socially rich theory of happiness is beneficial to the mental health of both Americans and Koreans. Although various culture-specific predictors of happiness have been documented in the past (e.g., Hitokoto and Uchida 2015; Kwan et al. 1997; Suh 2002), the fulfillment of social need seems to be a universally important condition of happiness.

More research is needed to clarify why associating happiness with social words relates positively with a person’s happiness level. We found at least one possibility that seems worthy of more research. Those who reported more social words engaged more in an activity that builds an important reservoir of happiness—social relationships. They gave more social support to others, which in itself is known to generate positive affect (Moynihan et al. 2015; Thoits and Hewitt 2001). We believe that our finding, rather than being a conclusive statement, should serve as a trigger for further research on the various happiness-promoting behaviors that people with socially imbued happiness beliefs may display (e.g., Bojanowska and Zalewska 2016). For instance, do they engage more in social capitalization (Langston 1994) or prefer experiential over materialistic purchases that are easier to savor with others (Caprariello and Reis 2013)?

Given the correlational nature of our data, firm causal conclusions await future research. Although this article focused on the possibility that socially rich beliefs of happiness trigger happiness promoting actions (e.g., helping others), we believe that the opposite process can also occur. That is, the rich social theory of happiness could be partly a product of the person’s chronic happiness level. Indeed, research finds that happy people engage in more altruistic behaviors (Diener et al. 2015), and such episodes may consolidate and become more accessible in their memory (e.g., Srull and Wyer 1983).

The most realistic picture, in our view, is that the link between the person’s social theory of happiness and actual happiness level is formed through a positive feedback loop. Happy people may act and think more socially, but such social beliefs might also play a role in sustaining and increasing opportunities for happiness. This latter scenario was highlighted in the current article, because it seems to be the less researched among the two possibilities. In addition to the experimental data that we have started to collect (Shin and

Scollon 2016), longitudinal data will shed more light on the causal issues. In addition to the future need of collecting more diverse data, our current study calls for a future replication with diverse samples (Fairclough 2007). Given that college student samples are selected groups in terms of age, education, and resources, they may not be representative of the typical person.

Finally, one finding in this research might appear somewhat paradoxical, and warrants some comment. At the individual difference level, we found that individuals who report more social words in link to happiness are more satisfied with their lives than others. Between groups, Koreans overall reported more social words than the Americans, but many past studies have reported that life satisfaction is lower in Korea than in the US (Diener et al. 1995; Suh 2002). Although somewhat counterintuitive on the surface, such discrepant findings across level of analysis (cf., individual versus national/cultural level) are not uncommon in the happiness literature. For instance, income is a potent predictor of happiness across nations, but within an affluent nation, it often becomes considerably weaker in predicting individual differences in happiness (Diener and Oishi 2000; Howell and Howell 2008; Schyns 2002).

Such inconsistency between analysis levels can occur because the factors that influence the happiness of individuals (e.g., temperament, personality) are often different from those that effect national or cultural differences (e.g., political turmoil, GDP). Also, the influence of certain factors (e.g., natural disaster) that could predict national differences might “disappear” when individuals within a group are compared (because all members of the group experienced the hardship). Our study has found another instance where the individual difference level finding does not go in the same direction as the group level pattern. Within a culture, individuals who hold a highly social theory of happiness have a higher chance of being satisfied with her life. It appears, however, that this formula may not be applicable for explaining the happiness level of different cultures/nations. Various group-level characteristics, such as degree of freedom in the society (Suh 2007; Veenhoven 2000), interpersonal trust (Diener et al. 2010), income inequality (Oishi and Kesebir 2015) or ecological characteristics (Koh et al. 2016) may override the effects of personal characteristics when group differences are compared. In short, how much one thinks of happiness in social terms might be a reasonably good predictor for knowing how happy the person is within a culture, but additional information seems to be required to predict happiness differences between cultures.

The field of subjective well-being played a critical role in launching the scientific investigation of happiness. As the term suggests, one key idea endorsed in the field is that considering the “subjective” viewpoint of the person is pivotal in the study of happiness (Diener et al. 1998). The vast majority of happiness research asks people to indicate, most often on a Likert scale, the degree to which they are cognitively and affectively pleased with their lives. Unfortunately, participants are seldom asked, from their own perspective, what happiness personally means and reminds them of. When this was done in this present study, one notable pattern emerged amidst the array of responses. Whether living in a highly collectivist or an individualist culture, those who associated happiness with the foremost important human need (social relationship) reported higher happiness.

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#### **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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