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## A BRIEF CONVERSATION ON THE TOPIC OF CULTURE, HAPPINESS AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

*An Interview with Professor Geert Hofstede by Pernilla Rorso*

### **Introduction:**

Professor Geert Hofstede was contacted for a brief conversation on the topic of culture, happiness and subjective well-being.

Interviewee: Geert Hofstede, Professor Emeritus of Organizational Anthropology and International Management at Maastricht University in the Netherlands (GH)

Interviewer: Pernilla Rorso, Ph.D. Fellow, Associate Partner, Hofstede Insights in Denmark (PR), E-mail: [pernilla.rorso@hofstede-insights.com](mailto:pernilla.rorso@hofstede-insights.com)

The interview took place in the Netherlands, August 14, 2018.

PR: Thank you Professor Geert Hofstede for allowing me to conduct this brief interview with you on the topic of culture, happiness and subjective well-being.

PR: According to Ed Diener (one of the most influential researchers when it comes to ‘happiness research’), subjective well-being is an umbrella concept, which includes such aspects as life satisfaction, domain satisfaction as well as positive and negative emotions. In the literature, however, subjective well-being is commonly understood to be made up by three aspects, i.e. life satisfaction (cognitive evaluation), positive affect and absence of negative effect (emotional evaluations). Positive and negative affect are also commonly referred to as ‘happiness’ and ‘unhappiness’, respectively. How would you define life satisfaction, happiness and unhappiness?

GH: I am interested in what is the difference in perception in different countries. I tried to find out how different people define life satisfaction and I discovered that it depends very much on what country people were brought up in. Life satisfaction in France, for instance, is very different from life satisfaction in Germany and it is very different from life satisfaction in the United States or Britain. When it comes to happiness, a general definition is not possible. To me happiness is feeling cheerful, and unhappiness is when life confronts me with things that I do not like.

PR: Culture, [i.e., “the mental programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 6)], represents one of the levels of the mental programming, which characterizes all human beings. Can you provide an example of how it is related to happiness and/or life satisfaction?

GH: It depends very much on where you come from. I can give you an example of a group of people, who was asked which the happiest country in the world was. One lady stood up and said that the happiest country she knew was Nigeria. The other people in the group looked quite puzzled and asked her how she could say that. Her answer was: “I have lived there”.

GH: I also have a personal experience; a comparison between Turkey and Mexico. My wife and I used to travel a lot. In Turkey, we saw some children going home from Koran School after school was over. They were relatively happy children. Some of the girls took off their hijabs and well, they went home. Then we were in a village in Mexico. There had been a religious class in the church and after the class ended, the children were awaited by music

and started singing “‘bum’, ‘bum’, ‘bum’, ‘bum’...” There was a cheerfulness, which we did not expect at all.

PR: Another level of mental programming is personality, [i.e., “*the unique personal set of mental programs that needn’t be shared with any other human being. It is based on traits that are partly inherited within the individual’s unique set of genes and partly learned*” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 7)]. Through times, personality has been put forward as one of the strongest predictors of happiness? How is this related to the topic and how does culture play a role in the equation?

GH: In every society, you have happier and unhappier people, but other things they have in common. An example of an unhappy country is Russia. The situation there is almost incredible for people from Denmark or from Holland. National culture is very difficult to understand and an obvious example is Americans coming to Russia after the Gorbachev revolution. The Americans thought that Russians would become like them, but they did not.

PR: How are the cultural dimensions related to happiness and/or life satisfaction?

GH: First, dimensions do not exist. Dimensions are just ways of structuring. They are paradigms, ways of thinking and looking at things. Different people will find different dimensions. As an example, take the book by the Mexican Basáñez (2016) in which he distinguishes three cultures, i.e. ‘Honor’, ‘Achievement’ and ‘Joy’. Well, imagine somebody coming from another country. What would someone else think of this?

GH: I have to refer to chapter 8 in my book (Hofstede et al., 2010) because first of all, it came rather late in my own research. Indulgence vs. Restraint was the last dimension to be added and it was added because it was clearly missing. We felt that there was something, which had been missing and while other people had been working on it, they had never found any link with our work. Here was the connection, through the World Values Survey, and this is why Michael Minkov was added to the existing names on my book. Indulgence vs. Restraint is related to happiness and life satisfaction.

GH: The only other link I could make between my dimensions and happiness was with respect to the relation between Uncertainty Avoidance and UN-happiness. Uncertainty Avoidance was the only dimension I felt was related to happiness before I knew about the new dimension.

PR: Free choice and control over one’s own life continuously has been found to be associated with life satisfaction and happiness. Are there any other cultural dimensions [besides Indulgence vs. Restraint], which play a role in this?

GH: It would probably be related to Power Distance and Individualism vs. Collectivism. If you have high Power Distance, you would accept that control was in other people’s hands, not your own. In a Collectivistic society, the control is in your group.

GH: Furthermore, whether there are effects of culture is a question, of course. There are correlates, but in this kind of research, the direction of causality is always questionable. You cannot conclude about causality. You have to be very careful with judgements.

PR: Income has also been found to be related to life satisfaction and happiness, especially to life satisfaction. At lower levels of income, it is a very strong predictor of life satisfaction. After that, other things become more important. Can you elaborate on the relationships?

GH: It depends on the average level of income of the society you are in and then of course culture plays a role as well. There are no universal values that are related to happiness and life satisfaction. You have very materialistic societies, which I might call Masculine societies. I do not know whether I ever related Masculinity to materialism, but I have a strong feeling that it is related. For instance, in a country like France, [which is a Feminine society], other things than money are important.

PR: Can you explain the paradox that some countries are poor, but still people are very happy, while when it comes to certain richer countries, people are not very happy? Why is it that in some countries, while people do not have a lot of money, they are still happy, i.e., smiling, laughing and enjoying themselves?

GH: It is due to culture; Indulgence vs. Restraint [some Latin American and African countries score Indulgent (and thus happy)]. This adds to the whole discussion. Something people have not really understood before. Nevertheless, there are also still poor countries where people are unhappy. For instance, Bulgaria and it is interesting that the colleague [Michael Minkov], who discovered this dimension is Bulgarian.

PR: Year after year, the same countries consistently tend to rank high on happiness and life satisfaction indexes, for instance the Nordic countries. Are the levels of happiness and life satisfaction stable or do they change?

GH: In general, they are very stable. They have very old roots and they last for a very long time. I do not think that that you will ever see Russians becoming like Americans, being cheerful. As a side remark, the reason you are interested in the subject is probably partly that you are Danish, i.e., being interested in the topic has a cultural aspect to it.

PR: When you discussed cross-cultural research, you once mentioned “seven deadly sins” and one of the sins is related to the issue of ‘level of analysis’. Can you elaborate on this with respect to life satisfaction and happiness of individuals versus societies?

GH: It is something different. It is quite different and you have to explain what level you are operating at. You have to be careful not to confuse the societal level and the individual level.

PR: In your own personal opinion what would be interesting to investigate further when it comes to life satisfaction and happiness?

GH: Education and the kind of education because that is one of the things humans can influence. It is one of the keys you have to open this box.

PR: What advice would you give someone studying the relationship between culture and happiness and life satisfaction, respectively?

GH: I would not presume that I could advise that. This is precisely the task of the person undertaking the research.

PR: Is there anything you would like to add when it comes to culture, happiness, unhappiness and life satisfaction?

GH: Conclusions depend very much on the culture of the person, who does this research, and of course on her/his personality. I think that personality has an influence to a lesser extent than people think and that culture has a larger influence. I think that Americans tend to overestimate the effect of personality and to underestimate the effect of culture.

PR: Thank You Professor Geert Hofstede

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