Further Reflections

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Gender Inequality and Well-Being: Concepts and Their Measures Are Cultural Products—A Reflection on Li et al. (2021)

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This Further Reflections piece was invited by the Editors of the journal to provide additional consideration of some of the significant issues under study in "Culture Moderates the Relation Between Gender Inequality and Well-Being" (Li et al., 2021) available online at https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797620972492 and on pages 823 to 835 of this issue. Further Reflections are not commentaries on a particular article, though they are inspired by one. Rather, they provide broader perspectives on issues considered in Research Articles, beyond those that authors are able to provide in the Introduction and Discussion sections of their articles. The Editors' objective with Further Reflections is that they will raise the level of conversation around psychological issues of societal importance. Further Reflections are by invitation only.

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Li et al. (2021) make the latest contribution to the persuasive empirical case built by Ed Diener and many of his colleagues for the importance of subjective well-being (SWB) in understanding human behavior and for the need to assess SWB in samples across the globe (Diener et al., 2018). Investigating the interplay between the form and function of psychological tendencies and features of our sociocultural contexts, including the historical, economic, and political, is now more possible than ever. Easily accessible and comprehensive data sets in which nations are scored on their values, attitudes, and norms, as well as on their levels of inequality, poverty, democracy, rule of law, religiosity, segregation, historical patterns of slavery, immigration, et cetera, enable the test of many new hypotheses and will be the source of new theorizing. Li et al. focused on the link between SWB and gender inequality. They found that the level of liberalism–conservatism, which they propose as a measure of culture, moderates this relationship; specifically, gender inequality negatively affects well-being in liberal countries but not in conservative countries.

My first reflection is positive. Li et al.'s article addresses the reality and significance of culture in shaping people's psyches and supports the claim that with respect to the psychological, the individual level often cannot be separated from the sociocultural level. Specifically, Li et al. examine the general hypothesis that well-being is not just a private project; it is also responsive to measurable features of the sociocultural environment—in this case, gender equality.

My second reflection makes me worry. The worry extends beyond this particular article to the broader question of what will be made of findings of sociocultural influences by researchers who do not yet habitually view findings as Li et al. suggest "through the prism of the cultural context" (p. 824). As social scientists link characteristics of sociocultural contexts to the psyches of the individuals who animate them, we should reflect carefully on the concepts and measures we use and the assumptions they carry. The gender-equality index used by Li et al. that is built by the World Economic Forum is a good example. It reflects the rates of participation of women relative to men with respect to earned income and to achievement in education as well as in technical and professional positions. Summing up the relevance of their findings, Li et al. write "In conservative cultures, which justify hierarchical

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social structures and value traditional roles, greater gender equality may not benefit, and may even do damage to, people's SWB" (p. 824). The reason for worry is that this statement can be read as saying that in conservative cultures, women do not need or want equality and it may be best that they do not have it. I am not suggesting that Li et al. endorse this interpretation. Yet without further analysis of what it means to be a person and to be a woman in the cultures categorized here as conservative, findings such as these can contribute to a common tendency to paint many of the world's cultures outside the "liberal" West as backward and in need of further "development" (Shweder, 2020). This view wraps hierarchical social organization, "traditional" values, and an elaboration of concerns and values other than individual freedom, choice, and equality into one big bad bundle.

At the high liberal end of the liberal–conservative continuum, according to Li et al.'s analysis, gender equality and well-being are positively correlated. Liberalism or conservatism is assessed with power distance and individualism in one study and, in another, with individual attitudes toward abortion, homosexuality, and divorce. For some readers steeped in a liberal culture, this relationship may seem obvious; little interpretation is necessary. How could it be otherwise? Yet research in cultural psychology (e.g., Cohen & Kitayama, 2019) unpacking this relationship reveals a particular cultural logic, not a universal one, and one that is the product of a dynamic constellation of often unseen and underanalyzed factors. In liberal nations, the default model of how to be a person is to be independent, free from social constraint, equal to others and powered by one's personal preferences, attitudes, and choices. These concerns are mainstays of Western foundational documents, reflected in national institutional policies, as well as in everyday practices of parenting, schooling, and employment. This confluence of sociocultural factors promotes and justifies the formation and expression of personal preferences, rights, and goals regardless of one's role or social positioning (Markus & Hamedani, 2019; Markus & Kitayama, 1994). People participating in these liberal and neoliberal worlds develop schemas that draw their attention to their personal preferences, foster a need to express them, and categorize situations in terms of whether they present an opportunity for or a threat to individual choice, freedom, and equality (Adams et al., 2019).

It is at the conservative end of the liberal–conservative continuum that the cultural logic for interpreting behavior has yet to be unpacked and where negative generalizations about unfamiliar contexts are easy to draw. From the perspective of an ideological and aspirational world in which individuals of all genders can be president, the potential virtues and significance of hierarchy and of knowing and observing one's place or role can be hard to fathom. What is happening in worlds in which people are less liberal, where they score high on power distance and low on individualism? Here, inequality according to the Li et al. analysis does not seem to matter or may even be good for well-being. Why? The potential explanations are numerous. To begin with, in many countries categorized as conservative, cultural ideas and practices do not promote and justify a model of individuals as independent, free from social constraint, and equal to others as they do in liberal countries. Instead, the prevalent understanding is that the person is an interdependent part of a larger, encompassing social whole, not a free agent but a committed one, which leads to an emphasis on fulfilling obligations and expectations. Behavior is powered less by an expression of personal preferences and more through fulfilling roles and maintaining relationships, both up and down the hierarchy. Given this conception of the social world, hierarchy can be a necessary and appreciated mechanism for social organization and integration (Markus & Conner, 2013; Rai & Fiske, 2011).

Moreover, in some of these conservative worlds, men and women often live in separate spheres, each with its own set of clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and expectations. Gender equality does not make the same kind of sense that it does in liberal worlds. Women may be unlikely to consider men as relevant comparison others and compare themselves instead with other women (Guimond et al., 2006). Instead of schemas for the free expression of personal preference for equality among individuals, the schemas people develop to understand themselves and their worlds and that guide attention are attuned to the solidity and security of relationships and networks and to collective consequences of behavior as well as to individual ones (Yalcinkaya & Adams, 2020). What then does gender inequality mean to women and men in conservative countries? Does the concept have cultural resonance? What is the relevant gender ideology in a given context (Grunow et al., 2018)? Does gender equality not benefit women, or is it bad for their well-being? Or is it the case that in some of these countries, gender egalitarianism is indeed relevant, but current measures forged with particular liberal assumptions fail to reflect and assess the relevant forms of egalitarianism? My point with these many questions is that explaining the actions of other people with mismatched concepts and measures—ones that are not normative in a given settings—is a barrier to understanding the role of the sociocultural in psychological functioning and can simultaneously promote stereotypes and attributions of irrationality or even immorality,

Similar issues arise with respect to the measurement of well-being. For example, Li et al. measured well-being with individual life satisfaction or happiness. Yet

well-*being* depends on the way of "being." As being or agency takes more than one form, so will well-being. Where being takes a more interdependent form and involves embeddedness in a group, so will life satisfaction and happiness (Rappleye et al., 2020). With an interdependent schema, an emphasis on individual happiness can be detrimental to social attunement or harmony and balance with other people. A weak relationship in conservative countries between gender inequality and well-being could well reflect a concept and measure of well-being that does not sufficiently reflect the importance of others in assessing one's own well-being. Japan, for example, typically posts low scores on SWB. The Interdependent Scale of Happiness developed by Hitokoto and Uchida (2015) suggests that items such as "I feel that I and those around me are happy" and "I can do what I want without bothering other people" are aspects of happiness in East Asian cultural contexts that go untapped by SWB but index important elements of happiness and well-being Japanese style.

Multinational studies such as Li et al.'s are very valuable for what they suggest about the interlocking forces that comprise our cultural matrices and that can shape our psychologies. At the same time, they shine a bright light on the need for more culturally informed, in-depth, multimethod studies in particular contexts. Ideally, such research would examine the local meanings and cultural models for concepts such as "individual," "gender," "equality," and "well-being" (Brady et al., 2018; Shweder & LeVine, 1984). With only Western or liberal schemas to guide interpretation, the meanings of these concepts can be easily taken as universally relevant and built into "standard" measures and metrics. Next, such research would assess whether these concepts have cultural resonance. If not, it would identify alternate key concepts (i.e., values, concerns, norms) and provide evidence for how they are reflected in psychological functioning and fostered in the relevant cultural systems. The goal is a comprehensive understanding of multiple diverse psychologies, of their sources and consequences, and the development of concepts and measures that illuminate them.

Transparency

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