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Melikşah Demir a, Jas Jaafar b, Nicholas Bilyk a & Mohammad Raduan Mohd Ariff b

a Northern Arizona University
b University of Malaya


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CROSS-CULTURAL NOTES

Social Skills, Friendship and Happiness: A Cross-Cultural Investigation

MELIKŞAH DEMİR
Northern Arizona University

JAS JAAFAR
University of Malaya

NICHOLAS BILYK
Northern Arizona University

MOHAMMAD RADUAN MOHD ARIFF
University of Malaya

ABSTRACT. The present study investigated the associations between social skills, friendship quality, and happiness, and tested a mediational model positing that friendship quality would mediate the relationship between social skills and happiness among American and Malaysian college students. Although American students reported significantly higher levels of psychosocial well-being than Malaysian students, the study variables were positively associated with each other in both cultures. More importantly, findings supported the proposed model in both groups. Results suggest that part of the reason why social skills are associated with positive psychological well-being is because of friendship experiences. Overall, the findings of the present study reinforce, extend and cross-culturally generalize the presumed benefits of social skills in positive well-being elaborated by Segrin and Taylor (2007). The authors also provided suggestions for future research.

Keywords: cross-cultural studies, friendship, happiness, Malaysia, social skills, well-being

DECADES OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH leave no doubt that social skills are essential correlates of psychosocial well-being in different cultures (Aikawa,
This is because, according to theory, individuals with good social skills express their varied feelings and are better at reading significant other’s emotional states in their relationships, and successfully manage relationship problems by taking the perspective of other’s into account (Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reis, 1988; Hersen & Bellack, 1977). Yet Segrin and Taylor (2007) highlighted two limitations of the current literature. First, with the exception of a few studies (e.g., Buhrmester et al., 1988), empirical research mainly focused on the correlates of social skills deficits in negative psychological well-being (hereafter PWB) (e.g., depression). Second, less is known about how social skills (hereafter SS) might promote positive PWB. In an attempt to address these limitations, we investigated the relationships between SS and happiness and proposed that friendship quality (hereafter FQ) would mediate the associations between these two concepts among college students in Malaysia and the USA, cultures considered collectivistic and individualistic, respectively (Hofstede, 2001).

Research has shown that American college students report higher levels of psychosocial well-being when compared to their peers in collectivistic cultures (French, Bae, Pidada, & Lee, 2006; Kuppens, Realo, & Diener, 2008). Despite these differences, we expected to find support for the proposed model in both samples because empirical evidence in various cultures supports the theoretical arguments regarding the role of SS in the psychosocial well-being of the individuals (e.g., Aikawa et al., 2007; Segrin, 2000).

The Malaysian sample consisted of 154 students enrolled at the University of Malaya and had a mean age of 22.10 (SD = 2.48). The American sample consisted of 211 students from a Southwestern university in the U.S. with a mean age of 21.95 (SD = 3.27). Participants in both cultures signed an informed consent before completing the survey. A back-translation method was used when adapting two of the measures into Malay.

Social skills were measured with the Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (ICQ, Buhrmester et al., 1988). The internal consistency of the overall scale was .92 in the Malaysian sample and .91 in the American sample. The quality of same-sex best friendships was assessed with the McGill Friendship Questionnaire-Friend’s Functions (MFQ-FF, Mendelson & Aboud, 1999). The Cronbach alphas of the overall scale were .92 and .90 in the Malaysian and American samples, respectively. Results of the confirmatory factor analyses in the Malaysian sample supported the factor structure of the ICQ and MFQ-FF. Finally, happiness was measured with the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), which has been validated in Malay-speaking populations (Swami, 2008). The reliabilities of the scale in the Malaysian and American samples were .71 and .87, respectively.

Comparisons between the two cultures revealed that American students reported higher levels of SS (t (364) = 8.030, p < .001; MUSA = 3.49, SD = .44, Range = 2.31; MMalaysia = 3.06, SD = .56, Range = 2.62;
$d = .85$), FQ ($t (364) = 9.994, p < .001$; $M_{USA} = 6.71$, $SD = 1.12$, Range = 6.23; $M_{Malaysia} = 5.45$, $SD = 1.26$, Range = 5.63; $d = 1.06$) and happiness ($t (364) = 3.612, p < .001$; $M_{USA} = 5.12$, $SD = 1.10$, Range = 6.00; $M_{Malaysia} = 4.73$, $SD = .96$, Range = 5.25; $d = .38$) than Malaysian students. These findings are consistent with recent research (French et al., 2006; Kuppens et al., 2008). To test for mediation, we followed the guidelines provided by Baron & Kenny (1986) and conducted four regressions in both cultures. In the first step, happiness was regressed on SS, showing a significant linear relationship in both samples (American: $\beta = .21$, $t = 3.557, p < .01$; Malaysian: $\beta = .21$, $t = 2.610, p < .05$). In the second step, regressing FQ on SS revealed a significant association in both samples (American: $\beta = .24$, $t = 3.331, p < .01$; Malaysian: $\beta = .20$, $t = 2.468, p < .05$). The third regression revealed that FQ was positively associated with happiness not only among Americans ($\beta = .33$, $t = 5.080, p < .01$) but also among Malaysians ($\beta = .38$, $t = 4.780, p < .01$). Last, to show mediation, happiness was regressed on SS while taking FQ into account. Controlling for FQ, the SS-happiness link was no longer significant in the American ($\beta = .11$, $t = 1.596, p = .136$) and Malaysian samples ($\beta = .15$, $t = 1.711, p = .160$). The Sobel tests (Sobel, 1982) indicated that the drops in the beta coefficients for this effect (from .21 to .11 and .21 to .15) were significant in both samples (American: $z = 2.04, p < .01$; Malaysian: $z = 2.14, p < .01$). Findings suggest that FQ fully mediates the association of SS with happiness in both groups.

Findings showed that Americans had higher levels of psychosocial well-being when compared to Malaysians. As for happiness, this is a well-established finding in the literature (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995; see Tov & Diener, 2007 for a discussion of different theoretical arguments to account for this trend). As for SS, it has been argued that individuals in individualistic cultures (U.S.A.) are likely to have greater SS (e.g., due to socialization goals of parents) compared to those in collectivistic cultures (e.g., Chen & French, 2008; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). Even though some studies provided evidence supporting this view (e.g., Chen et al., 2004), others did not find any difference (e.g., Mortenson, 2009). As for friendship, theory suggests that friendships are more intimate and closer in collectivistic when compared to individualistic cultures (e.g., Triandis et al., 1988). Even though past research supported this popular argument (e.g., Searle-White, 1996), recent empirical studies challenged this perspective by showing that the friendships in individualistic cultures are as intimate as or more intimate and closer than the friendships in collectivistic cultures (e.g., Rybak & McAndrew, 2006). All in all, the findings of the present study are consistent with the general and recent trends observed in the literature.

On the other hand, it is essential to highlight the possibility that Malaysians might have interpreted the meaning of the items in the adopted scales (e.g., friendship quality) differently since professional translators were not used in the adoption of the scales. Also, empirical research suggests that participants in
different cultures might respond to the items in the questionnaires in different ways (e.g., acquiescence bias; Matsumoto & Juang, 2008). However, the factor analyses of the adopted scales were supported and their internal consistencies were similar to those obtained in the American sample. Nevertheless, additional research is needed to establish further confidence in the findings reported.

Results revealed that SS were positively associated with happiness and the proposed model suggesting that FQ would explain how SS is related to happiness was supported in both cultures. These findings are consistent with the presumed benefits of SS in the well-being of individuals and recent research (e.g., Segrin & Taylor, 2007). Finding support for the model in both cultures is notable considering the fact that the psychosocial experiences of college students in the two groups varied considerably. Accordingly, it is reasonable to argue that individuals who are good problem solvers and effectively communicate their feelings and ideas in their friendships are likely to experience higher levels of closeness in their relationships, which in turn predict happiness.

Although the proposed model was supported in two different cultures, relying on instruments originally developed in the U.S.A. to assess the constructs of the investigation in Malaysia inevitably raises concerns about imposed etic research (Berry, 1989). As noted earlier, the happiness scale was successfully adopted for use in Malay-speaking populations (Swami, 2008). Furthermore, cross-cultural studies on social skills and friendship quality suggest that competencies (e.g., self-disclosure of personal information) and friendship features (e.g., support) assessed across cultures represent culture-general factors (bin Yaacob, Newman, Yaakob, & Goddard, 2009; LaFreniere et al., 2002). Yet, some studies suggest that certain friendship behaviors (e.g., Argyle, Henderson, Bond, Iizuka, & Contarello, 1986) and social skills (e.g., interaction management; Matsudaira, Fukuhara, & Kitamura, 2008) may be more important and effective in defining these constructs and understanding their implications for well-being among individuals in Asian cultures. Accordingly, it is crucial to pay attention to these indigenous cultural factors when assessing psychosocial well-being in different cultures. It remains to be seen whether the findings of the present study could be replicated with instruments developed and/or modified to include the culture-specific meanings of these constructs (e.g., Matsudaira et al., 2008).

We believe that the present study contributed to the field by addressing some of the limitations of the current literature on SS (Segrin & Taylor, 2007) by providing empirical support to a model explaining how SS promote happiness in two different cultures. Nevertheless, additional research in different collectivistic cultures is needed to establish confidence in the findings reported. Also, it is essential to highlight that there are potentially several mechanisms that could explain how SS are associated with PWB. Basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness; Deci & Ryan, 2000), which are presumed to be universal and associated with relationship and individual happiness when satisfied in the friendship (Downie, Mageau, & Koestner, 2008), could be another variable that could
explain how SS promotes happiness. For instance, it could be that individuals possessing strong SS satisfy their basic psychological needs in the relationship, which in turn promote their PWB. Of the three needs, however, we predict the satisfaction of the relatedness need in the friendship to be the main avenue through which this effect is observed. It is the task of future research to test this and other potential mechanisms in different cultures to ensure the generalizability of the findings.

AUTHOR NOTES

Melikşah Demir is an Assistant Professor of psychology at Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ. His current research interests include close friendships, well-being, and happiness interventions. Jas Jaafar is an Associate Professor of psychology in the Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling, University of Malaya. Her research interests include child and adolescent psychology, adult and adolescent well-being, happiness indicators of the Eastern people, and the cultural differences in subjective well-being. Nicholas Bilyk is a Graduate Research Assistant in the School of Psychology at Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ. Past research has focused on friendship quality, well-being, and empathy, while current research interests include the neurological processes involved in empathy and the development of assessment tools for individuals with intellectual and emotional disorders. Mohammad Raduan Mohd Ariff is a Professor in the Department of South East Asian Studies, University of Malaya. His research interests include cultural diversity of South East Asian communities, and marine industry in the region.

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