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Cultural Values and Happiness

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Cultural Values and Causality in Explanations of Happiness

Csikszentmihalyi (1999) has reminded us that social scientists cannot shrink from challenging the validity of our most cherished values, including the fundamental nature of happiness. He cites research affirming that material wealth does not correlate with happiness and then presents data correlating happiness with the experience of flow. However, in making this leap Csikszentmihalyi confuses correlation with causation. Because losing oneself in a project, relationship, or dream is followed by a very positive condition does not mean that the experience itself caused happiness. It is equally likely that *losing oneself* is the causative factor. In looking at his data through the common Western values of individualism, rationalism, and the Protestant work ethic, Csikszentmihalyi may be overlooking the substance of happiness that has been frequently described in other cultures as the absence of the "self" via "being" in a state of intimate connectivity with others. From this perspective, the lack of relationship between materialism and happiness is explained without invoking the construct of flow: Any value that emphasizes the self obviates connectivity with others.

Research supports the tenet that the less we focus on ourselves, the happier we are (e.g., Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 1999). Moreover, the quality of our connection with others is often the best predictor of therapy outcome and mental health (Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999). With so much evidence supporting the importance of connectivity and de-emphasis of self, the fact that so much research in psychology emphasizes intrapsychic variables seems evidence that the individualistic bias present in Csikszentmihalyi's article pervades the entire field (e.g., Sue & Sue, 1999).

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