



Views on Wellbeing Research, Policy and Practice:

An Interview with Dr. Mohsen Joshanloo

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Abstract: In this volume of the Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology, we explore the views, hopes, and current research agendas of those working to advance knowledge in the field of positive psychology within the MENA region, or who research aspects of culture and religion relevant to it. We uncover their thoughts on the current status of knowledge as well as what opportunities and pitfalls exist. Here, we discuss with Dr. Mohsen Joshanloo, his thoughts on where the field is heading, how it has matured over time, his work on Islamic culture and wellbeing, as well as what still needs uncovering in terms of regional research on these topics.

ملخص: في هذا المجلد من مجلة الشرق الأوسط لعلم النفس الإيجابي، نستكشف وجهات النظر والأمال، والأجندات البحثية الحالية لأولئك الذين يعملون على النهوض بالمعرفة في مجال علم النفس الإيجابي في منطقة الشرق الأوسط، أو الذين يبحثون جوانب الثقافة والدين ذات الصلة به. نكتشف أفكارهم حو الوضع الحالي للمعرفة وكذلك عن الفرص والصعوبات الموجودة. وناقش هنا مع الدكتور محسن جوشانلو، أفكاره حول التوجهات الحالية للمجال، وكيف نضجت مع مرور الوقت، و عن عمله في الثقافة والرفاهية الإسلامية، فضلا عن ما يحتاج إلى المزيد من البحث من حيث البحوث الإقليمية في هذه المواضيع.

Keywords: wellbeing; culture; fear of happiness; fragility of happiness; beliefs about happiness

About the Author: Dr. Mohsen Joshanloo is an assistant professor of psychology at Keimyung University, South Korea. He has completed his PhD in 2013 at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. His research is focused on mental well-being, culture, and personality. He has studied various aspects of mental well-being across a wide range of cultures. A list of his publications is available on his personal website: <http://mohsenjoshanloo.weebly.com>

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MEJPP: You've taken a big interest in cultural and religious views of happiness, which you can tell us about later. But first, where and when did this interest begin? What prompted your curiosity into these areas?

MJ: Around 2004, I accidentally saw the first edition of the handbook of positive psychology and read some chapters. I was fascinated by the chapters written by Professor Corey Keyes and Professor Carol Ryff in that book. The impact turned out to be long-lasting. Since then, a large part of my scientific career has been devoted to the study of mental well-being. A bit later, I



also got interested in cross-cultural psychology and did a lot of reading in that area. I needed to be familiar with cross-cultural psychology to be able to understand much of my initial findings in Iran.

I got the impression that cross-cultural research on mental well-being was predominantly focused on comparing the levels of well-being across cultures, and started to believe that my main contribution could be to empirically investigate various conceptions of well-being across cultures. This is still an important goal for me. My colleagues have helped me to introduce some related concepts and develop scales to measure them. These include: fear of happiness (the idea that happiness has bad consequences), fragility of happiness (the idea that happiness is short-lived and fleeting), transformative suffering (the idea that dealing with unhappiness properly can contribute to one's happiness), and the externality of happiness (the idea that happiness is dependent on external factors such as chance, fate, and situation). I am currently developing more scales concerning people's beliefs about happiness.

MEJPP: You are best known for your pioneering work in uncovering two very important concepts in positive psychology; that of the fear of happiness, as well as the fragility of happiness. What are these about and how are these beliefs differ from what exists in other parts of the world?

MJ: Like I said, well-being research has largely focused on measuring the levels of well-being across individuals and groups. This line of research is undeniably crucial. However, I believe that a largely underappreciated area is how well-being is defined by individuals and cultures. I consider this a wide gap in our knowledge. Until we are clear on what happiness means to various individuals and cultures, we won't be able to make sense of part of the existing findings in the field. Fear of happiness and fragility of happiness are among the many beliefs that people have surrounding well-being. My colleagues and I, as well as other research teams, have studied these concepts across a wide range of cultures.

It turns out that there are interesting and interpretable individual and cultural differences on these variables. For example, Pakistan and Hong Kong score higher on these variables than does New Zealand and the USA. This might mean for example that an individual from Pakistan might be more likely to adopt the stance that some versions of happiness are harmful or not necessary while someone from New Zealand instead might believe that not being emotionally happy is a cause for concern. In western individualistic cultures, happiness is passionately pursued, whereas in some collectivistic cultures, there are many cultural reasons to justify a hesitation towards happiness and/or its expression, such as the beliefs that happiness may be sinful, immoral, superficial, or at least unnecessary. Further, in western individualistic cultures, happiness is perceived to be less fragile and more under one's control, whereas in less wealthy nations, happiness is more likely to be seen as transient. In some contexts, fear of happiness can be considered a prevalent cultural belief, rather than a sign of mental disorder. Research in this area is in its infancy though. We need more theoretical and empirical work on the concepts of well-being to be able to develop a rich understanding people's notions of well-being.

MEJPP: You've published a tremendous amount in the past few years. What topics get you excited and if you could conduct the 'study of the century' and resources were no object, what would you be keen to investigate, why, and with whom?



MJ: Broadly speaking, I would keep focusing on “conceptions of well-being across cultures”. We have developed some scales to measure various beliefs about happiness. I am working on a few more related concepts. Hopefully, when all these concepts are introduced and their scales are developed, time will be ripe for another large-scale cross-cultural project on the concepts of well-being. The main goal will be to look at these variables collectively and systematically, and to investigate their individual- and cultural-level correlates. In my published research, I have had about 45 coauthors from various countries so far, and my network is growing fast. So, I am lucky enough to have such a vast network of supportive colleagues to make multi-national studies possible. But, I would not look at it as the “study of the century”. Rather, I regard it as an overdue attempt to fill a gap in the literature. I am also planning to conduct more studies on the measurement of well-being variables in the near future using various statistical methods.

MEJPP: You’ve seen many developments in the field; what do you see as a growing trend? Equally important, where are we underperforming as researchers? Are there areas to which we pay too much attention and some that we overlook altogether? What is the result of doing so?

MJ: Let’s focus on outstanding recent developments in comparison to the formative period of positive psychology. Among the good trends, in my opinion, are more attention to the study of conceptions of well-being, more cross-cultural studies (in particular, more data are collected from understudied cultures like those in the MENA region), and more interdisciplinary work (for example, in many recent handbooks related to well-being, philosophers now have chapters). I think positive psychologists have successfully acquired necessary skills to analyze large and multi-level data sets. In the past, many of this sort of research on well-being was done by researchers from other fields (such as sociology and economics), which failed to address subtle psychological complexities. Many large-scale data sets have been recently collected with items or variables related to mental well-being, indicating that well-being researchers have been successful in convincing the general public, governments, international organizations, and the media that well-being research is of value. For a person, like me, who spends much of his day time analysing such data sets, this diversity and abundance is indeed refreshing.

With the increasing cultural awareness, multidisciplinary work, and familiarity with more advanced and updated methodologies, positive psychology has become more discreet in my view. When positive psychology was first launched, you could say it took on what some might have considered evangelical, overly promotional, or even boastful approaches in that some of its adherents were saying that positive psychology was the biggest and most important paradigm shift ever. This even involved ignoring and disparaging contributions of clinical and humanistic psychology to understanding human well-being and flourishing. But after two decades, positive psychology has matured into a less self-conscious, defensive science to become calmer, more modest, and less attention seeking to where it is now just doing research like all other domains of psychology. Researchers in the field have developed a more solid empirical knowledge base, and there are many researchers, journal reviewers, and readers of various backgrounds and skill sets who critically assess new research outcomes, all to the benefit of the field.



Selected Publications of Interest

- Joshanloo, M. (2013). A comparison of western and Islamic conceptions of happiness. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 14*, 185.
- Joshanloo, M. (2014). Eastern conceptualizations of happiness: Fundamental differences with western views. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 15*, 475-493.
- Joshanloo, M. (2016). Factor structure of subjective well-being in Iran. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 98*(4), 435-443.
- Joshanloo, M. (2017). Mediators of the relationship between externality of happiness and subjective well-being. *Personality and Individual Differences, 119*, 147-151.
- Joshanloo, M. (2017). Islamic conceptions of well-being. In R. Estes & J. Sirgy (Eds.), *The pursuit of human well-Being: The untold global history* (pp. 109-131). Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.
- Joshanloo, M. (in press). Structural and discriminant validity of the tripartite model of mental well-being: Differential relationships with the Big Five traits. *Journal of Mental Health*.
- Joshanloo, M. (in press). Factor structure and measurement invariance of the MHC-SF in United States. *European Journal of Psychological Assessment*.
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