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To cite this article: Jeremy Rappleye, Hikaru Komatsu, Yukiko Uchida, Kuba Krys & Hazel Markus (2020) 'Better policies for better lives'?: constructive critique of the OECD's (mis)measure of student well-being, *Journal of Education Policy*, 35:2, 258-282, DOI: [10.1080/02680939.2019.1576923](https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2019.1576923)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2019.1576923>



Published online: 18 Feb 2019.



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'Better policies for better lives'?: constructive critique of the OECD's (mis)measure of student well-being

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ABSTRACT

Facing increasing critique that PISA focuses too narrowly on cognitive achievement and human/knowledge capital, the OECD has recently shifted some of its focus to student happiness. The 2017 Students' Well-Being report distinguishes between 'happy schools' and 'unhappy schools', showing that among students who combined high performance and life satisfaction, northern European countries topped the charts. Meanwhile, students in East Asian countries including Japan, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Korea registered the lowest 'life satisfaction' scores among all participating countries. This piece points out some of the problems inherent in the OECD's recent turn to happiness, problematizing the OECD yardstick of life satisfaction. Attempting to keep the critique constructive, we suggest that the OECD may want to consider using alternative metrics, then briefly highlight one developed in East Asia from different first assumptions: the Interdependent Happiness Scale. In conclusion we flag, but cannot answer, some related educational questions concerning policy, pedagogy, and priorities for the future.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 June 2018

Accepted 28 January 2019

KEYWORDS

Subjective well-being; PISA; self; interdependent happiness; East Asia

Introduction: the OECD shift to student happiness and well-being

The past several years have witnessed a growing critique of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) flagship education and skills work: the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). For example, in an open letter to Andreas Schleicher, director of PISA, published in *The Guardian* in May 2014 scholars and practitioners from around the world argued that PISA was producing a host of negative consequences for education: the overreliance on quantitative measures, a focus on short-term fixes, a narrowing of the goals of education to economic growth, distorted comparisons, and sub-contracting to for-profit vendors and their hired experts. The letter ended: 'We are deeply concerned that measuring a great diversity of educational traditions and

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cultures using a single, narrow, biased yardstick could, in the end, do irreparable harm to our schools and our students' (Meyer et al. 2014; see the response by Schleicher 2015)

In the context of such critiques, the OECD has recently shifted to discuss student well-being and happiness. In April 2017, the first OECD PISA report on Students' Well-Being (OECD 2017a) was launched with great fanfare in London. Sponsored by the management-consulting group McKinsey and led by Andreas Schleicher, the one-day event showcased how PISA data could be utilized to better understand student well-being. Henceforth, the OECD's education and skills work would be more actively pursuing the organization's explicit commitment to formulate 'better policies for better [not richer] lives'. This is confirmed in the new *OECD Learning Framework 2030*, publically launched in May 2018. It sets 'Well-Being 2030: Individual and Societal' (OECD 2018, 3) as the overarching goal for all OECD education work over the coming decade. We note this is not an insignificant shift for an organization that had in the past referred more frequently to 'economies' than countries, 'skills and competencies' than curricular knowledge, and 'future workers' rather than students.

The 2017 Students' Well-Being Report asked: 'Are students happy in school? Do they have good relations with their peers, teachers, and parents? Is there any link between the quality of students' relationship in and outside school and their academic performance?' (OECD 2017a). Framed as 'new insights from PISA', the report found that on average most 15-year-olds were 'happy' with their lives, as reflected in self-reported scores on a scale of life satisfaction (0–10, average 7.3). Yet, there were 'large variations across countries', with the official press release explicitly contrasting the mostly happy students of the Netherlands with their unhappy peers in South Korea (OECD 2017b).

In this article, we seek to critically examine the recent OECD shift to student well-being and happiness. Our argument is that rather than signalling a move away from the parochialism of the regular PISA cognitive-economic assessment, the turn risks replicating the same conceptual and methodological problems, whilst advancing them into the non-cognitive realms of education. We show that the definitions of, among other key concepts, happiness and self that anchor the OECD's survey design is inherently biased in their first assumptions, making it even more difficult to see the 'great diversity' of modes of well-being present in different cultural contexts. Our empirical entry point is the OECD's representation of life-satisfaction (Figure 1) and its correlation with student performance (Figure 2), which purports to show that East Asian countries, although they perform highly on PISA, are home to the world's least happy students. We focus on East Asia because a wealth of previous research has shown how standard yardsticks of happiness developed in the West are not applicable there (e.g. Uchida, Norasakkunkit, and Kitayama 2004), and because we hope readers might become more familiar with the resources for thinking and being otherwise found there (e.g. Komatsu and Rapple 2017a).

Our research is driven by a deeper concern that left uninterrogated the move to prescribe 'Happy School' policies based on these yardsticks may render invisible other avenues to happiness and well-being, alternatives that we surmise will be increasingly important in coming decades, as discussed in conclusion. We also note with considerable concern that these portrayals only reinforce long-standing images of East Asian students as deficient and East Asian philosophies and practical approaches as unworthy of serious consideration. This inevitably re-inscribes Western (repackaged as 'universal') pedagogies and practices as those to emulate (see Takayama 2011; Komatsu and Rapple 2017a; Rapple and

Komatsu 2018). We can already see this trend materializing in, for example, a recent high-profile UNESCO publication linked to SDG 4 that uncritically uses the OECD 2017 Student Well-Being data to argue for East Asian deficiency (UNESCO 2017, 101–104). In resistance to this rendering, we hope to present an alternative vision utilizing the Interdependent Happiness Scale (IHS) and contemplating the deeper questions about pedagogy and self that emerge. By keeping the critique constructive (see also Gorur 2017), we seek to again underscore that there are a world of options beyond being ‘for’ or ‘against’ global learning metrics, and work to highlight possibilities for pragmatic reconstruction and potential ways of thinking and being differently.

The OECD’s measuring stick: are East Asian students really not happy?

Figure 1 shows life-satisfaction among 15-year-olds, based on a self-reported scale 1–10 (OECD 2017a, 71). The major East Asian countries are located at the bottom of the scale: Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Macao, and Hong Kong, with China (four provinces) not far behind. At the top of the scale are countries of Latin America and the Caribbean: Dominican Republic, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Columbia. Clustered around the OECD average are many countries in Western Europe: France, Luxembourg, Germany, Spain, and Belgium, with the United States also located here. Above average, but still below the leading Latin American countries are the countries of Finland, Russia, Lithuania, Iceland, and the Netherlands.

Given the OECD’s continued focus on student achievement as a prerequisite for economic growth (Komatsu and Rappleye 2017b), OECD analysts take the next step of correlating life satisfaction and student performance (i.e., PISA 2015 science scores), as shown in Figure 2. Here what appears to be regional or cultural groupings of countries arguably becomes more apparent: Latin American countries clustered in the ‘High Satisfaction, Low Performance’ quadrant, countries of the Mediterranean in the ‘Low Satisfaction, Low Performance’ quadrant, countries of northern Europe in the ‘High Satisfaction, High Performance’ quadrant, and countries of East Asia in the ‘Low Satisfaction, High Performance’ domain. The United Kingdom does not fit the general pattern, while countries Australia, Canada, and New Zealand are absent (for reasons given on OECD 2017a, 21). Absent too are Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, all of which usually record high-levels of life satisfaction.¹

The accompanying analysis points out that these results show a ‘lack of correlation between per capita GDP and students’ life satisfaction’ (71). This appears to be perceived as somewhat of an anomaly for OECD analysts, despite empirical research dating to the 1970s that showed that a rise in income had no effect on happiness after a certain point (i.e. the Easterlin Paradox, see also Diener and Biswas-Diener 2002; Diener et al. 2009). They argue that this lack of correlation might be ‘partly explained by the fact that PISA includes only 15-year-olds who are enrolled in school, thereby excluding large numbers of adolescents in low-income countries who are not enrolled and tend to live in poverty’ (71). There is however a brief, but quite significant, mention of the fact that ‘variations in students’ reports of life satisfaction or happiness across countries might be influenced by cultural interpretations of what defines a happy life’ (71). It elaborates the possibility in one paragraph, which we quote here in full given its centrality for our larger argument:

Overall life satisfaction summarises students’ satisfaction with different aspects of their life, such as their autonomy, feelings and use of time (the “self”), peer relationships, and quality

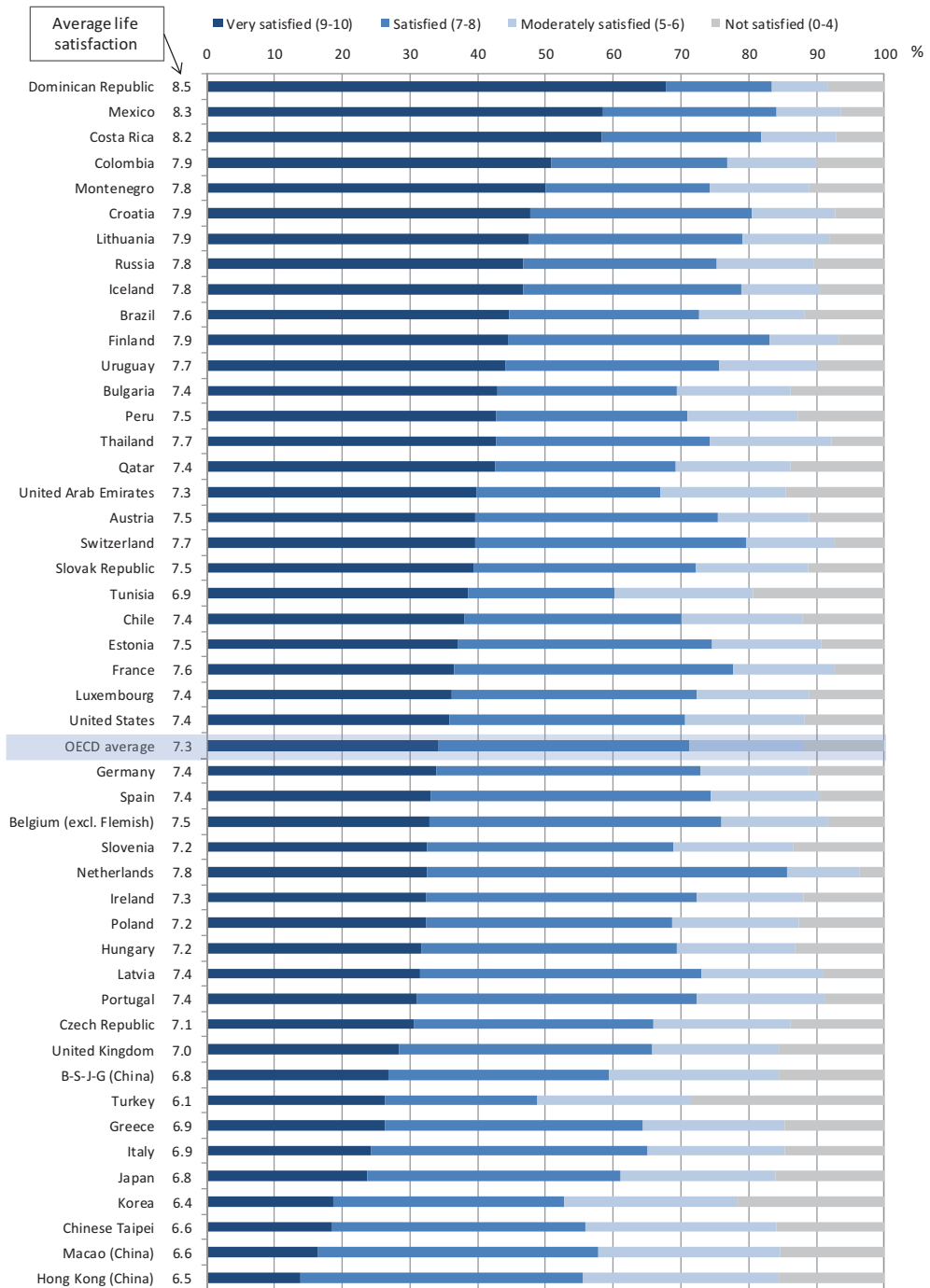


Figure 1. Life satisfaction among 15-year-old students (OECD 2017a, 71).

of family and community life. The relative importance of all these aspects in students' overall life satisfaction can differ across cultures. Research has found that for adolescents from Western cultures, such as that in the United States, where independent, personal

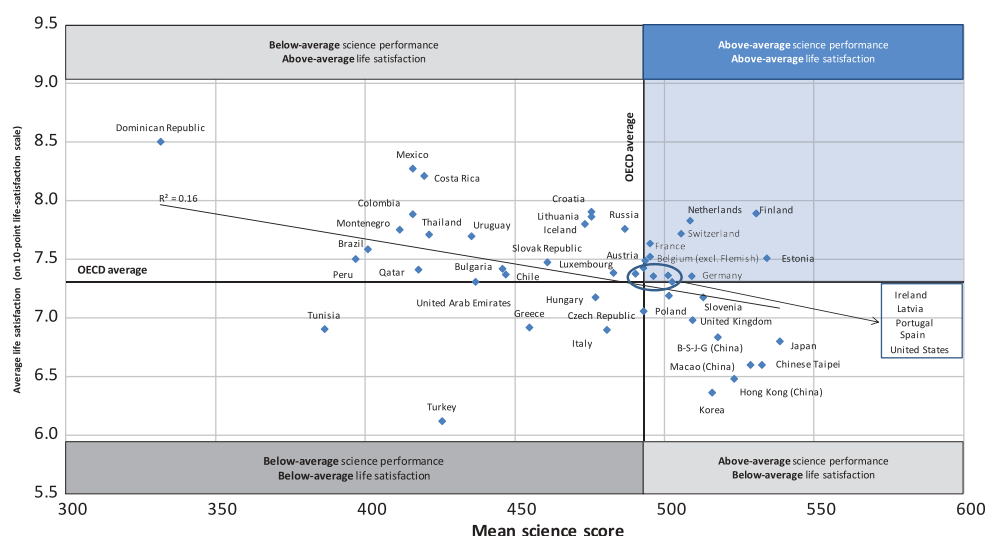


Figure 2. Life satisfaction and student performance (OECD 2017a, 74).

feelings and interests are highly valued, self-related aspects are more important for overall judgments of life satisfaction. On the other hand, in Asian cultures, such as that in Korea, where social obligations and education are highly valued, meeting these social norms and expectations are the primary sources of life satisfaction for students (OECD 2017a, 72).

Despite flagging such concerns, the report quickly goes on to argue ‘notwithstanding the possible effects of cultural differences on the country averages, the measure of life satisfaction in PISA can be useful for identifying personal, school, and other factors that might influence’ (Ibid.) variations in student well-being. It then goes on to focus primarily on the relationship with life satisfaction and the factors of gender, disadvantage, schoolwork-related anxiety, bullying, and relationship with teachers (Ibid., 72–79). Tellingly, by explicitly ranking the countries, the OECD reveals its assumption that a single-scale applies universally, and that ‘leading countries’ can be identified.

Auld and Morris (2016) have shown how the OECD is adept at ‘restricting the analytical focus’ and that rather than ‘investigate complex casual interactions’ the OECD often turns to ‘privilege factors that are amenable to control’ (207). Here too the complexity of cultural differences is quickly replaced with a focus on factors that lend themselves to policy interventions, i.e. gender, disadvantage, schoolwork-related anxiety, bullying, and relationship with teachers. This dismissal of the ‘effects of cultural differences’ suggests readers should understand these as minor variations within the data, rather than a leading *cause* of the wider distribution. In effect, the yardstick itself is viewed as objective.

Challenging the OECD measuring stick

It is tempting to equate low levels of life satisfaction among students in East Asia or elsewhere to long study hours, but the data show no relationship between the time students spent studying, whether inside or outside of school, and their satisfaction with life.

In searching for the reasons for East Asian students' low life-satisfaction, the OECD comes up empty-handed in the report: the factors it focuses upon correlate poorly. The instrument itself may be to blame.

PISA operationalized the wider 'OECD Better Life Initiative', which was launched in 2011, as the starting point for its analysis. The Better Life Initiative was based on research into 11 aspects of life qualities that would purportedly contribute to people's well-being and happiness. We note that this initiative has been generally well cited and positively evaluated since it does not only exclusively focus on economic indices such as GDP per capita but rather on holistic well-being across multiple life domains. In the PISA 2015 related materials, the OECD defines well-being broadly as the 'psychological, cognitive, social and physical functioning and capabilities that students need to live a happy and fulfilling life' (OECD 2017a, 35–40). This definition of well-being was initially not limited to school life, but rather seeks to include overall quality of life as a whole. Based on the OECD's definition, quality of life is constructed out of the 'balance' of several aspects (psychological, social, cognitive, and physical), including academic achievement in school, positive relationships with friends and good family relationships. The OECD initiative appears to have initially planned to take a more holistic approach towards well-being, i.e. that achieved by psychological (socio-emotional) dispositions (i.e. self-esteem, sympathy) and cognitive skills (i.e. thinking style). All of this is effective for pursuing positive emotional interaction with others and goal attainment, which the 2017 report repeatedly suggests that education can foster. This OECD intention to move away from a narrow economic-cognitive conceptualization towards holistic analyses is laudable. Yet, the problem becomes that both the conceptual model and the ensuing methodological approach the OECD subsequently operationalizes in PISA 2015 shows only modest steps in the more holistic direction originally gestured towards in 2011.

Figure 3 is the illustration of the conceptual model of student well-being adapted by OECD in the 2017 Report (OECD 2017a, 62). Here students' well-being refers to psychological, cognitive, social and physical functioning and capabilities that students need to live a happy and fulfilling life (61). But here the first and the most significant parts of student well-being are *individual* characteristics, with relations with others denoted as proximal, i.e. near to but not actually the centre. Significant here as well is the idea that 'cultural determinants' are merely 'contextual', i.e. surround individuals and others (e.g. teachers, peers) but are not constitutive of them. This conceptual preference for the individual as the centre becomes more evident in the survey methodology. That is, the specific question the OECD's PISA questionnaire asked of students to understand subjective well-being was for each to imagine the best possible life (evaluated as '10') and the worst possible life (evaluated as '0'), then estimate *their own life* from 0 to 10.

Although the voluminous 530-page 2017 Student Well-Being Report nowhere explicitly mentions where this scale came from, we surmise that it came directly out of the 2013 OECD Guidelines for Measuring Subjective Well-Being (OECD 2013a). In Annex A (249–252) of that report, the OECD highlights the 'Cantril Ladder of Life Satisfaction':

Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to ten at the top. Suppose we say that the top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you.

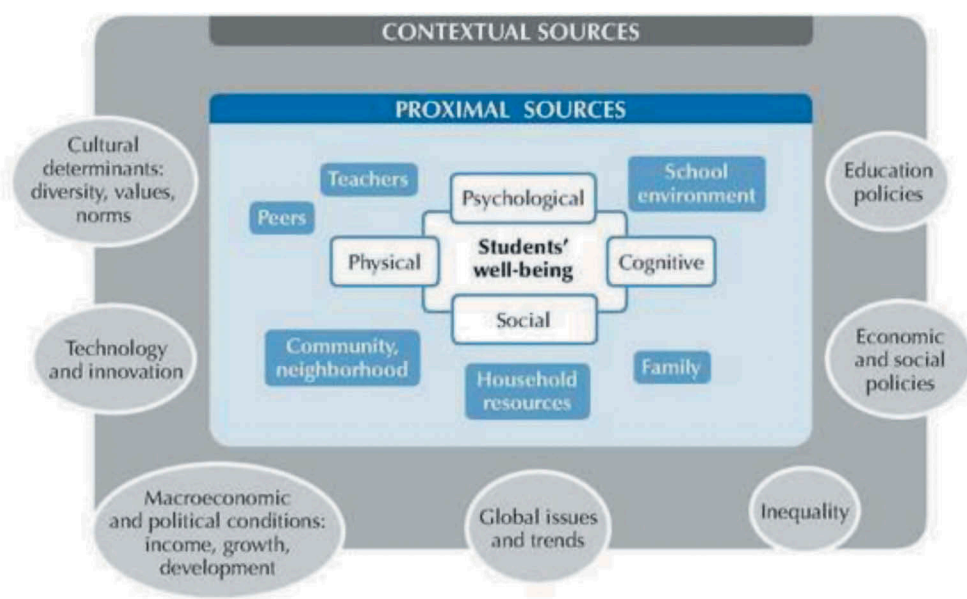


Figure 3. OECD's 'dimensions and sources of students' well-being' (OECD 2017a, 62).

If the top step is 10 and the bottom step is 0, on which step of the ladder do you feel you personally stand at the present time? (quoted in OECD 2013a, 249)

The 2013 Report goes on to explain that the Cantril Ladder has been extensively utilized by leading global organizations, including the Gallup World Poll, the World Values Survey, and the UK Office of National Statistics (see also Bjørnskov (2010)). In sum, despite the earlier conceptualization of well-being including relations with others and the expressed intent to employ a multi-dimensional approach (OECD 2017a, 64), the actual instrument and data generated by the OECD's methodology focuses wholly on self-conceptualized views of one's own *individual* life satisfaction – captured by a single question.

The problems surfaced: theoretical presumptions

Why is this problematic? Here we introduce the wider theoretical issues, then turn in the next section to exploring empirical ramifications. Over the last three decades, a rapidly developing sociocultural perspective in education, the social sciences, and psychology lends strong support to long theorized ideas that people and their socio-cultural contexts are not separate from one another. Instead, they require each other and complete one another (e.g. Fiske et al. 1998; Gelfand and Kashima 2016; Kashima 2000; Kitayama, Duffy, and Uchida 2007; Lebra 2004; Markus and Kitayama 2010; Shweder 1991, 2003; Uchida, Norasakkunkit, and Kitayama 2004; Diener and Suh 2000). The comparative method on which this approach is founded reveals that self or agency (i.e. acting in the world) takes particular culture-specific forms depending on the mix of sociocultural contexts that a being or agent inhabits. Different contexts, in this case, different nations in different regions of the world, are defined by different

histories, different institutions, different patterns of social interactions, norms, artefacts and – most importantly perhaps – different ontological and philosophical understandings of agency, including what an agent (or a self) is, what a good, moral agent should be doing, and what the ‘best life’ for this self would be.

A review of this now voluminous research is beyond the scope of the present article. Yet one well-supported conclusion is directly relevant to understanding variation in well-being, happiness and life satisfaction. Sociocultural contexts vary in what their foundational ideas about what ‘being’ is and therefore in what constitutes ‘well-being’. In other words, there is diversity in how being or agency is conceptualized and experienced. In the West, including North American and Western Europe, the individual is centred. In these contexts, a being is understood as an *independent* self – a separate, stable, autonomous, free entity. The internal attributes of this being (e.g. attitudes, emotions, motives, preferences) are assumed to guide behaviour. Outside the West, in East Asia, for example, the individual is not construed as centred and separate in this way. Instead, the individual is understood as *interdependent* – as a part of an encompassing social whole – a connected, flexible, committed entity, defined by relations to close others (family, peers, teachers). Agency stems from paying attention to and adjusting to close others. Well-being and life satisfaction are likely to include a focus on maintaining these relationships, on attuning harmoniously, and coordinating one’s own behaviour to accommodate the needs and perspectives of close others and to belong.

As we elaborate further below, an assessment of happiness for an independent self may involve a subjective assessment of how one is doing, surveying one’s own thoughts and feelings. The same assessment for an interdependent self may require knowledge and assessment of one’s close others and how they are feeling. Across many studies people in East Asian contexts, where they are often likely to construe themselves as relatively interdependent, happiness and well-being is more likely when people fit in rather than when they stand out, when they follow the right or expected way rather than choosing their own way, and to be accompanied by calm feelings rather than excited ones (Markus and Conner 2014). In one well-known comparative study, for example, researchers showed Japanese and American participants photographs of Olympic athletes who had just won gold medals (Uchida et al. 2009). In some photos, the winning athletes were alone; in other photos the athletes were shown with their teammates. Japanese participants who viewed the photos of the athletes alongside their teammates guessed that the medallists were feeling more happiness, pride, and joy than did the Japanese participants who viewed photos of the same athletes all by themselves. Yet the Americans showed the opposite pattern: they estimated that the solo athletes were the happiest. This gestures, at least in part, to ways that fundamentally different worldviews can influence basic construal of well-being. Further on in the piece we return to develop these issues, focusing specifically on self (e.g. culturally mediated self-construal).

The problems confirmed: empirical corroboration of bias in the OECD’s well-being measures

In light of these theoretical directions, it is not hard to imagine that using only individual life satisfaction as a summary measure of well-being leads to biased conclusions, particularly and most acutely when operationalized as the basis of cross-cultural

comparisons. We now turn to highlight three domains where bias emerges strongly, showing how the OECD's purportedly objective analysis largely creates the reality it purports to simply be measuring.

Bias towards individualism

Individual life satisfaction is the type of well-being overwhelmingly studied in the Western (Anglo-American and Northern European) tradition (e.g., Krys, Uchida, Oishi, & Diener, [forthcoming](#)). Yet, some studies have shown this reflects an unexamined bias towards individualism (Uchida and Oishi 2016; Krys et al. 2018). To test this empirically, we began by excluding the effects of GDP per capita from the analysis. The OECD utilized data for all participating countries to analyse the relationship between PISA scores and well-being, as shown in [Figure 2](#). Yet, this is unsatisfactory because the relationship may well be an artefact of the relationship between GDP per capita with PISA scores and with well-being scores. Indeed, we can detect a clear relationship between GDP per capita and PISA scores ([Figure 4\(a\)](#)) but, in contrast, no clear relationship between GDP per capita and happiness ([Figure 4\(b\)](#)), a result that seems to further support to the Easterlin Paradox. We thus suspect that the negative correlation between PISA scores and happiness reported by the OECD ([Figure 2](#)) was partly attributable to the fact that the OECD did not exclude the effect of GDP per capita on PISA scores.

Given that the relationship between GDP per capita and academic achievement was virtually absent above a threshold of USD\$30,000, we excluded countries below this line and observed a similarly negative correlation ([Figure 5\(a\)](#)). Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was -0.35 with the 95% bootstrapping confidence interval (CI) being $[-.68; .02]$. This negative correlation indicates that the relationship between PISA scores and well-being scores observed by the OECD is not a mere artefact.

However, we observed a strong ($r = 0.63$ with CI being $[.11; .88]$) relationship between individualism scores and well-being scores for these countries ([Figure 5\(b\)](#)). Individualism scores were derived from Hofstede's widely cited study (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010). This strong relationship suggests that the OECD's well-being scale, one centred on *individual* life satisfaction, may well implicitly reflect Western (read: individualistic) values. That is, life satisfaction as measured by the OECD seems to track the type of happiness that is more popular in individualistic societies than in, say, collectivistic societies (Krys et al., [Under review](#)), a point we elaborate in detail below. It is thus plausible that the negative correlation between PISA scores and well-being scores reported by OECD could disappear when employing different well-being scales.

Bias towards valuation of life satisfaction

An interesting secondary puzzle is why Latin American countries score so high in life satisfaction, despite lacking the individualist commitment of Northern Europe and Anglo-America. Here Diener et al. (2000) is important: they document that whereas valuation of life satisfaction is a shared feature of people across all cultures (i.e. in all cultures people prefer to be satisfied with their life rather than to be dissatisfied with

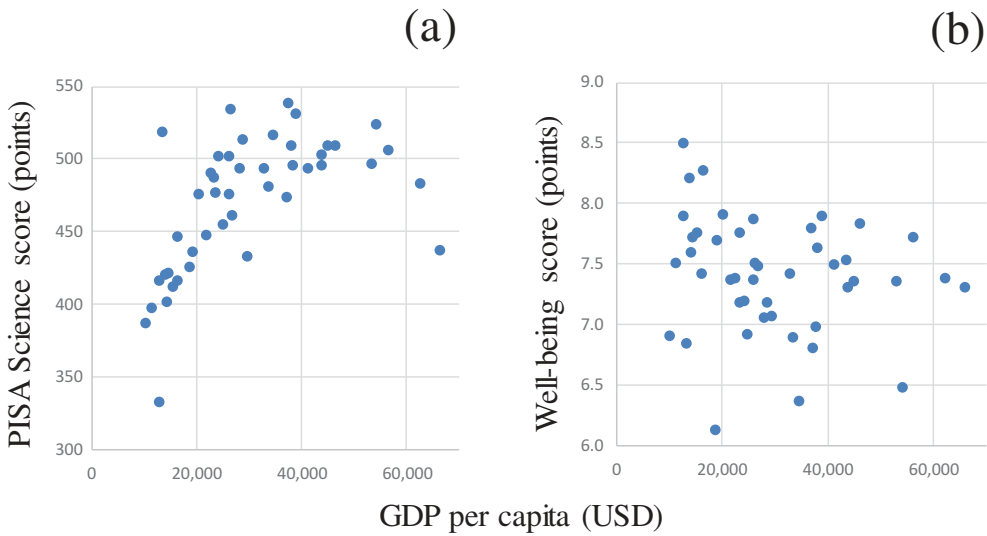


Figure 4. Relationships of GDP per capita with PISA science scores and with well-being scores.

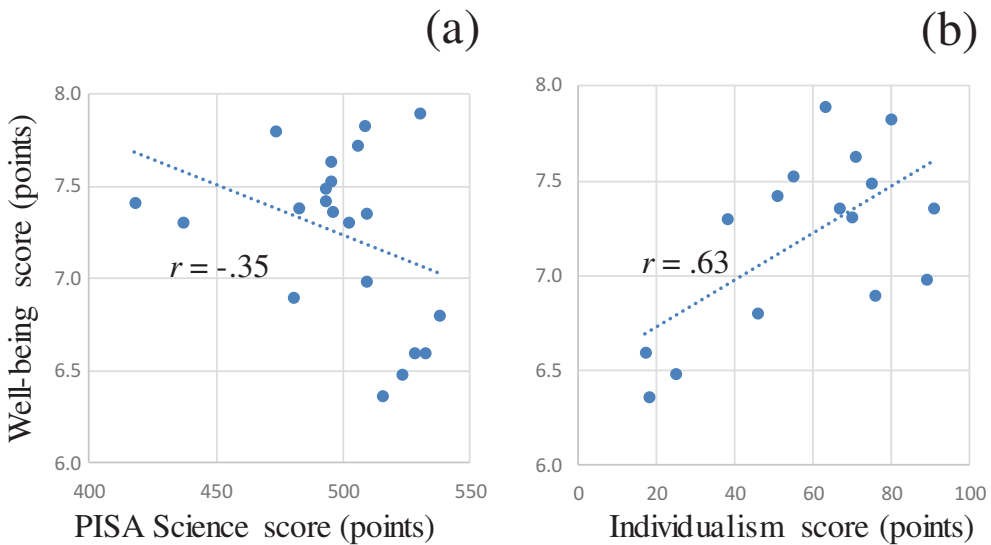


Figure 5. Relationships (a) between PISA science scores and well-being scores after excluding the effects of GDP per capita and (b) between individualism scores and well-being scores for countries having GDP per capita greater than USD\$30,000.

their life), the extent to which people value life satisfaction varies considerably. That is, the assumption that the purpose of 'life' is about being 'happy' varies in intensity across the world, with Diener et al. (2000) confirming a consistent spread that finds Latin American countries near the ceiling of the scale and some East Asian countries hovering around the neutral point of the scale (see also Hornsey et al. (2018)). And what of Anglo-America? Although perhaps not as highly valued as in Latin America,

one previous analysis comparing American and Japanese commitments to ‘life satisfaction’ insightfully points out: ‘in a society declaring in one of its founding documents the inalienable right to “the pursuit of happiness,” its members seem all but culturally required to pursue and proclaim happiness in order to be fully American...it seems plausible that North Americans are not “happier than East Asians,” but are simply more willing to proclaim their happiness on a survey form’ (Mathews 2012, 301).

As such, an alternative hypothesis that students are more satisfied in cultures where life satisfaction is valued more seems likely. It is all the more plausible given that the spread described by Diener et al. (2000) seems to mirror the life satisfaction scores reported in the 2015 OECD Report (Figure 1 above). We thus correlated the valuation of life satisfaction quantified by Diener et al. (2000) with the 2015 PISA country scores on life satisfaction. Here we found a significant association, $r(n = 21) = .44$, $CI = [.02; .73]$. This suggests that in the PISA questionnaire, students reporting higher life satisfaction were found in cultures that place relatively more value on ‘life satisfaction’.

Certainly, this interpretation of the above correlation needs to be done with caution, particularly given that the number of countries present in both surveys is small (22 countries). Yet, it helps underscore that this purportedly objective measure – all persons worldwide actively seek individual life satisfaction in equal measure – is not unproblematic, but instead most probably reflects cultural predilections.

Bias towards achievement motivation

Thus far we have focused on biases in-built in the OECD’s simple measure of individual life satisfaction. But we can gain further insights by focusing on the way the OECD operationalizes the individual four sub-domains of well-being – psychological, cognitive, social, and physical (61). To take one example, the psychological dimension of student’s well-being was initially conceptualized as covering a broad range of psychological phenomena: sense of purpose in life, self-awareness, affective states, emotional strength, resilience, self-efficacy, hope, optimism, all of which are supposed to be inversely correlated with low levels of anxiety, stress, depression and distorted views of self and others. However, this broad conceptualization becomes operationalized methodologically in the 2017 Report in greatly truncated terms, covering just two narrow aspects of students’ psychological well-being: motivation for achievement and school-related anxiety (62).

This focus assumes that motivation for achievement is equally valued across all cultures and linked to achievement. Yet, not all societies and cultures value and pursue motivation for achievement to an equally high extent. Nor is high intrinsic motivation viewed as the key to achievement. As discussed above, in some places the motivation for belonging, social attunement, and caring for others may play a relatively more important role. Moreover, these affiliative motivations may also foster states of psychological well-being (in particular, when not a single individual but the whole society is analysed) and – importantly for our conclusion – this belonging and attunement may be seen as the key to achievement.

The PISA 2015 questionnaire asked students whether they agreed with the following statements: *I want to be the best whatever I do*, and *I want to be one of the best students*

in my class (OECD 2017a, 95). The rationale behind these questions was offered explicitly: ‘the degree of internalization of achievement norms makes a difference for students’ outcomes. Students who make efforts because they consciously value a goal or regulation enjoy positive learning outcomes, greater well-being, and value what school has to offer.’

While this seems intuitively right, we can get a sense of the possibility of conceptual bias if we pause to think more about group relations: logically only a few students can actually be the best students in their class, thus, if every single student is motivated to be the best, it must lead to tensions and frustrations (e.g. hyper-competition). Research has shown that in, for example, a Japanese interdependent cultural context, standing out from a group might not be deemed the best situation (see Markus and Kitayama 1991). Situated within an *interdependent* set of norms, these sorts of questions would likely be conceptually relabelled as ‘motivation for competitiveness’ or ‘motivation for over-achievement’. Even this modest renaming immediately strikes a decidedly different tone than the OECD currently envisages. Here it is telling for us that the scores for the United States (93, 85) and England (90, 76) on these two questions stand in such stark contrast with Japan (55, 52) and Korea (39, 33). Clearly, the assumed links the OECD makes between intrinsic motivation and achievement are also suspect given the consistently high performance of Japan and Korea in TIMSS and PISA assessments (Komatsu and Rapple 2017a)

When enumerating the downsides of achievement motivation (p. 99) the OECD report, unfortunately, highlights only ‘maladaptive perfectionism’: pushing oneself too hard leading to discouragement, self-doubt and mental exhaustion. What is missing is an analysis of how individual over-achievement may influence others’ well-being (e.g. relations with classmates).

In order to empirically test whether our doubts may be justified, we used a proxy on negative states of mind – culture level averages on the frequency of negative emotions – reported in Kuppens, Realo, and Diener (2008). When correlating the country scores of index of achievement motivation from the OECD report (95) with the average frequency of negative emotions reported by different societies and described by Kuppens et al., we detected a significant and positive association between achievement motivation and frequency of negative emotions, $r(n = 28) = .41$, $CI = [.05; .77]$. This correlation suggests that countries ranked high on students’ motivation for achievement in the PISA study are also ranked high on the frequency of negative emotions. Although conclusions about causality need to be drawn with caution, the link does not at all seem implausible: Students living in a highly competitive social and educational environment report more frequent negative emotions, and this high competition derives from inflated achievement motivation.

To summarise, the OECD analysts argues in several places that ‘*achievement motivation is related to life satisfaction in a mutually reinforcing way. Students with high-life satisfaction tend to have greater resiliency and more tenacious in face of academic challenges. A positive view of the world and life circumstances builds self-efficacy and their motivation to achieve*’ (99). In contrast to this view of a highly driven individual, we would suggest the necessity of adopting a complementary perspective that focuses on relations; shifting from thinking about the group as merely an abstraction from several independent individuals to thinking about a group of interdependent beings

forming a common society, a milieu from which individuals then arise. From this group-level perspective, it becomes possible to conclude that overly competitive societies are paying a hefty price for their over-achievement orientation: it is not increasing life satisfaction, but, instead, increasing the frequency of students' negative emotional experiences.

Self and well-being: diverse approaches

The OECD's view

Further confirmation still of the assumptions underpinning the OECD's work can be found by returning to the OECD's notion of 'Key Competencies', specifically the notions of the self embedded therein. In 1997, the OECD convened the Defining and Selecting Competencies Program (hereafter DeSoCo). Comprised of about 20 scholars from North American and Europe, mostly statisticians, assessment specialists, and psychologists, the group sought to identify the normative assumptions about society and individuals that would underpin the OECD's key competencies, i.e. those it planned to evaluate in future extension of assessments into new competency domains (OECD 2005, 3). No representatives from East Asia or elsewhere were involved (see Rychen and Salganik 2000, 6). In 2003, DeSoCo published its final report, wherein it explicitly spelled out its consensus on what competencies would be needed (and thus evaluated) for a successful life for individuals and well-functioning society.

In 'Competency Category 3: Acting Autonomously', DeSeCo experts contend that independent individuals are a core ingredient of both individual happiness and well-functioning societies.² They write: Individuals 'need to develop independently an identity and to make choices rather than just follow the crowd.' (OECD 2005, 14). The reason is that:

Acting autonomously is particularly important in the modern world where each person's position is not as well-defined as was the case traditionally. Individuals need to create a personal identity in order to give their lives meaning, to define how they fit in...

In general, autonomy requires an orientation towards the future and an awareness of one's environment, of social dynamics and of the roles one plays and wants to play. It assumes the possession of a sound self-concept and the ability to translate needs and wants into acts of will: decision, choice, and action. (Ibid.)

The report further contends that Competency 3-B, the ability to formulate independent life plans and personal projects, is a crucial skill for success: 'This competency applies the concept of project management to individuals. It requires individuals to interpret life as an organized narrative and to give it meaning and purpose in a changing environment, where is often fragmented. This competency assumes an orientation toward the future, implying both optimism and potential, but also a firm grounding within the realm of the feasible' (Ibid.). The report goes on to describe how these Competencies form the foundation of PISA and ALL (now PIAAC), as well as spell out how the final report framework was developed. Noteworthy here was that in the stage of peer-review wherein the draft report was shared with OECD member countries there were no representatives from East Asia included (18).³

Here seems to be a clear indication that a particular cultural view of self underpins the OECD's work. The vision here is of independent individuals, equipped with future-oriented plans and an internal narrative that bestows 'meaning and purpose' (i.e. linear temporality deriving meaning in the present from a self-projected future). Elsewhere, this focus on individual 'decision, choice, and action' is drawn more explicitly: 'Key competencies assume a mental autonomy, which involves an active and reflective approach to life. They call not only for abstract thinking and self-reflection, but also for distancing oneself from the socializing process....this means being self-initiating, self-correcting, and self-evaluating rather than dependent on others to frame the problems, initiate adjustments, or determine whether things are going acceptably well.' (Rychen and Salganik 2000, 13).

An East Asian view?

This view of self and happiness contradicts views that dominate in East Asia. Here we come to back to deepen the earlier theoretical discussion, but focus specifically on this different self. As comparative philosophers have long pointed out, the reification of self implicit in the idea of 'mental autonomy' and 'distancing oneself' from one's surrounding runs counter to much of the tradition of East Asian thought wherein the focus is on the relational arising of self and processes of reintegration (e.g. Bin 1972; Hall and Ames 1998; see also Sevilla 2017). As touched on above, empirical studies in the fields of social psychology and anthropology alike confirm the notion of self in East Asia is consciously understood as embedded in a network of relationships; success understood more in terms of the group; and from this disposition flows a different view of happiness: one of connection and embodied interdependence (e.g. Rosenberger 1994; Lebra 2004). Rather than looking to the future accomplishment of individual goals to bestow meaning on the present, relationships in the present form the foundation of 'meaning and purpose'. We would not go so far as to say everyone in East Asia shares this view, but neither would we deny it is the major form of self-construal in East Asia.⁴

In a seminal paper in the field of social psychology, Markus and Kitayama (1991) underscored that people across cultures have distinct concepts of their selves. Individualism provides people with an understanding of their self as independent and conceptually distinct from others; the independent self is the primary agent of individualistic people's thoughts, actions, and motivations. Themes important for the independent self are personal achievement (Uchida, Norasakkunkit, and Kitayama 2004), free choice, emotional expression (Matsumoto, Yoo, and Fontaine 2008), and mutual confirmation of inner positive attributes (Kitayama and Markus 2000).

Less individualistic cultures, on the other hand, construe an interdependent self that is based on the fundamental relatedness of individuals to each other.⁵ Those societies emphasize attending to others, fitting in, and harmonious interdependence (Kwan, Bond, and Singelis 1997). When social attunement is valued, personal happiness can be perceived as detrimental to social relationships (Uchida, Norasakkunkit, and Kitayama 2004; Uchida and Ogihara 2012; Hitokoto and Uchida 2015). An easy to understand example is the notion of family: in some cultures, the interdependent well-being of one's family may act as a more powerful motivator than the individual's life satisfaction and people may 'trade-off' between seeking these two forms of well-being

Table 1. Well-being for independent and interdependent selves.

Well-being involves		
Independent self	1.	Acting autonomously
	2.	Creating a strong separate personal identity, self-focused
	3.	Achievement, striving to be better than others, unique
	4.	Orienting to the future
	5.	Being optimistic, expressing positive thoughts, feelings
	6.	Resisting influence from others
Interdependent self	1.	Acting to fit in, being part of the community
	2.	Attuning to relations with close others, other-focused
	3.	Recognizing similarity to others, a sense of common fate
	4.	Sensing the expectations of others, fulfilling responsibilities
	5.	Working to improve the self and meet standards
	6.	Managing personal thoughts and feelings, staying calm

(see Kryś et al. *forthcoming*). Table 1 presents a basic schematic outline of the key differences.

A study by Delle Fave et al. (2016) documents that East Asian conceptualizations of well-being – what they call harmony and balance – can often be more prevalent than individual life satisfaction. The study asked people in 12 countries to write down what happiness meant to them, and grouped their answers into two sets of categories: psychological (42%) and contextual (58%). The two most common psychological categories were ‘harmony/balance’ (covering 29% of psychological definitions, i.e. 12% of all answers) and ‘satisfaction’ (17% of psychological definitions, i.e. 7% of all answers).⁶ Here the fundamentals of interdependent happiness (Hitokoto and Uchida 2015) are found among conceptualizations of happiness at more than twice the rate of life satisfaction (as used in the PISA assessment). Intriguingly, Delle Fave et al. (2016) did not detect a cultural pattern in their study: harmony dominated over life satisfaction across both individualistic and collectivistic cultures. This means that people of any culture could understand and sympathize with the less individualistic East Asian conceptualizations of well-being, even if that was not a dominant way of being in their own culture.⁷

A fuller description of the large variety of well-being conceptualizations detected by previous empirical research extends far beyond the remit of the current paper. But we wish to point out – in the interest of catalysing future research – that major scholars interested in well-being already acknowledge the existence of myriad forms: relational flourishing (Fowers et al. 2016), hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (Ryan and Deci 2001; Huta and Waterman 2014), positive emotionality and infrequent negative emotionality (Diener and Tay 2015). If we were to refuse the simplicity of the OECD metric and instead use these diverse definitions, we would likely be confronted with a vastly different picture of students’ well-being than the current OECD league table, to say nothing of the educational policy agenda leading up to 2030.

In reviews of this piece, we were asked to briefly mention something of the powerful movement of positive psychology (PP), as it may have provided one, if unacknowledged, undercurrent of legitimation for the turn to well-being. What is striking here is how much the PP model parallels the OECD’s views: personal achievement becomes the focus, epistemological and philosophical starting points can be traced to Western (particularly American) worldviews, self appears to function outside of any identifiable

socio-cultural context, the approach disregards negativity as inevitable and potentially important within a given social milieu (see Yakushko and Blodgett 2018). It is little wonder then that PP has been significantly and systematically questioned, both theoretically and empirically, across a range of disciplines ranging from medicine to business, including in education for several decades (e.g. Schwarz and Bless 1991; Bless et al. 1996). Most recently, Vintimilla (2014) has argued that the logical ‘next step’ for PP is to create a ‘happiness curricula’ and ‘pedagogy of fun’, but this can socialize children from a young age to become individuals seeking individual subjective well-being rather than, say, collective justice. More pessimistically, Pérez-Álvarez (2013) demonstrated empirically that individuals who self-identified as ‘happy’ were also more likely to be ‘conceited’ and ‘selfish’. Although it was beyond the scope of our analysis to understand explicit points of intersection between the OECD’s views and the PP discourse, it is not hard to find striking overlap: the OECD’s Education 2030 Vision states that among the primary factors that ‘..help learners enable agency. The first is a personalised learning environment that supports and motivates each student to nurture his or her passions’ (OECD 2018, 4). Here passion is clearly positive, individualized (‘personalized’), and automatically assumed to lead to positive outcomes. The differences between the OECD’s views of well-being and self, PP, and even progressive pedagogy arguably appear rather small if we step back to view these as different manifestations of a single cultural predisposition.

Constructive critique: new measures, new teachings

The Interdependent Happiness Scale (IHS)

Given that the mismatch between Western cultural views of self and happiness, biased testing instruments, and empirical East Asia, it is perhaps not surprising to find that researchers in East Asia have been active in devising an alternative metric of happiness. The nine-item Interdependent Happiness Scale (IHS) developed by Japanese researchers Hidefumi Hitokoto and Yukiko Uchida (coauthor on this paper) make an attempt to bridge the gap. The IHS measures individual perceptions of the interpersonally harmonized, quiescent, and ordinary nuances of happiness. Different from other well-being scales that focus on individual subjective states, IHS captures happiness with other people. Sample items include ‘I believe that I and those around me are happy’, ‘I feel that I am being positively evaluated by others around me’, and ‘I can do what I want without causing problems for other people’. Hitokoto and Uchida (2015) standardized the scale using Japanese students but they took the further step of confirming the validity in other countries, including US, Germany, Korea, Thailand, Poland, Philippines (Hitokoto 2014; Datu, Valdez, and King 2016; Hitokoto and Uchida 2015; Hitokoto 2014), both for students and adults. This again underscores that happiness, even in other cultural contexts, can contain the meaning of ‘harmony with others’ – a dimension not captured by individual life-satisfaction measures now promoted by the OECD.

Figure 6 gives a cursory snapshot of the divergent results that can emerge when the IHS measures are applied to different contexts, in this case, the United States, Germany, Japan, and Korea (for further details see Hitokoto and Uchida 2015, 225–227). Their analysis shows that there is a trend towards a relatively larger effect of interdependent

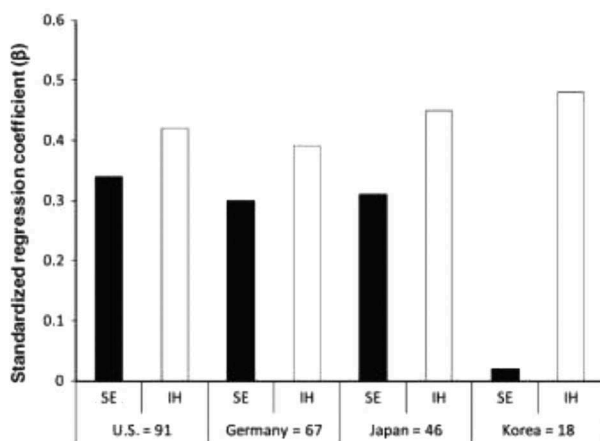


Figure 6. Divergent effects of self-esteem (SE) and interdependent happiness (IH) on subjective well-being among different cultures (Hitokoto and Uchida 2015), the numbers along the x-axis show the Hofstede individualism scores.

happiness on subjective well-being in non-individualistic countries, but most interestingly that *the difference in the effect of interdependent happiness between countries was not considerable*. Our main point in this piece is that the single-question individual life satisfaction measures utilized by the OECD do not adequately capture divergent views of well-being and happiness, but even if one still insisted on retaining those biased measures these results show that subsequent interventions seeking to raise subjective well-being might well be *more effective* if designed to boost interdependent happiness rather than self-esteem (i.e. confidence in the independent selves, as sketched by DeSoCo). This point leads into our discussion of pedagogy below, and underscores that formulating ‘better policies for better lives’ might require much deeper reflections on first assumptions than initially anticipated.

The constructive side of our critique is to suggest to the OECD that these culturally attuned measurements may capture elements of well-being that current modes of cross-cultural comparison cannot. Given that subjective evaluations of wellbeing are heavily influenced by cultural meanings and values across countries and regions, it becomes crucial for the OECD to avoid simplified comparisons such as ‘which country is happier than others’ and avoid drawing policy recommendations from those at the top of the league tables. What gets neglected when the discussion moves in directions that solidify a single measure is an attention to *difference* and the further elaboration of new models to capture those salient differences. So our appeal is to expand the range of measures, most of all by incorporating ‘indigenous’ (read: non-Western) scales. Practically, this expansion could take the form of adding questions to the PISA questionnaires from the IHS and other well-being scales.

Indeed, the OECD’s own data should have already signaled the complexities of capturing ‘happiness’. Figure 7 derived from the PISA 2012 student questionnaires shows that just as many students in East Asia reported they felt ‘happy’ at school, as compared with ‘leading’ European countries listed in Figure 2, a result that should have

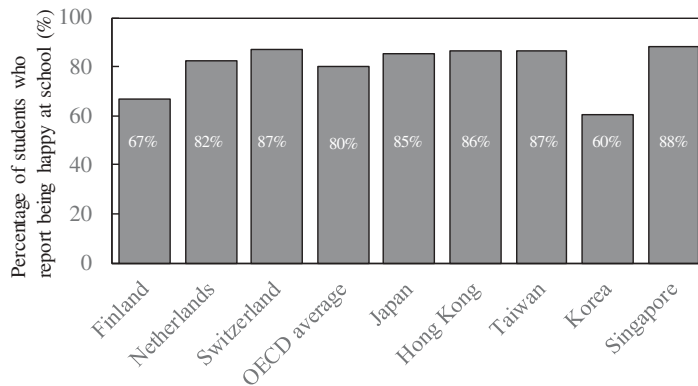


Figure 7. Percentage of students who ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ with the statement ‘I feel happy at school’. Original data were derived from the PISA 2012 survey (OECD 2013b, 32).

underscored the diversity of views of happiness long before the 2017 Report on Students’ Well-Being.

Pedagogies for interdependence

As noted at the outset, the OECD remains interested in the connection between student well-being and academic achievement (Figure 2). The problem, however, is that the countries which score highest on the PISA achievement assessments (predominantly East Asian countries) score lowest on the current OECD happiness and well-being measure. This paradox is partially resolved, however, in shifting a view of happiness captured by the IHS: it seems possible to be happy (interdependently) and attain high achievement. Indeed, evidence supports the idea that higher individualism scores are negatively ($r = -.57$ with the 95% bootstrapping confidence interval being $[-.80; -.23]$) negatively correlated with PISA scores (Figure 8). Still, this does not help us understand why East Asian students come to achieve at high levels and high levels of (interdependent) happiness. Is there a connection? Is it possible to combine both?

Our working hypothesis is that certain approaches to pedagogy found in some parts of East Asia foster both high achievement and a disposition toward interdependent happiness, as we have gestured towards in a series of recent papers. The strong focus on interdependence as a mode of learning is fostered at virtually every level of the Japanese school system (Tsuneyoshi 2001; Cave 2016; Rapple and Komatsu 2017). Examples that have generated the most interest in the Anglo-American world are practices such as school cleaning and school lunches, as well as Lesson Study, but there are many more. In Japan, the basis of thinking about pedagogy is undoubtedly not the liberal and/or romantic view of reified individuals (ala Locke and Rousseau) but more relational (e.g. Tobin, Hsueh, and Karasawa 2009). But does this link to achievement in any way?

We have argued elsewhere that an overemphasis on individualism as espoused strongly in Western progressive pedagogy may serve to inhibit effort and give the illusion that an end to learning exists, as students come to think of them-selves as the

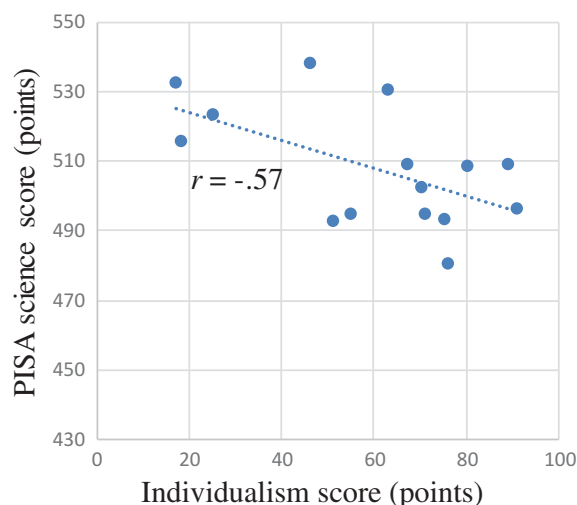


Figure 8. Relationship between individualism and PISA science scores for countries having GDP per capita greater than 30,000 USD. The sample for UAE was excluded from this figure. Our analysis using the normal probability plot suggested it was an outlier. This was perhaps because the sample was the only one from Arab countries.

authority on what can and cannot be learned; as the locus of sense-making (Komatsu and Rappleye 2017a; see also Bower 1987, 53–78).

The interesting question is whether the relational, non-individualistic approach to pedagogy simultaneously instils a different view of happiness and well-being as well, i.e. it makes students more inclined to seek happiness in relation with others. If future research can empirically corroborate this view, then we might tentatively suppose that East Asia has found a way to combine high achievement and high levels of (inter-dependent) happiness and well-being via their pedagogies of interdependence. Is this not precisely the combination that the OECD is seeking? But if we are to recognise and then learn from it, we would first need to change existing assumptions about happiness, then move on to reforming pedagogical practices and, over time, shift to a relational notion of self.

Conclusion: reconfiguring our-selves for a different future

At this early stage, it is unclear how far the OECD's recent shifted to discuss student well-being and happiness will result in concrete policy recommendations disseminated globally ('best practice'). Concerned that the focus on 'happy schools' announced in the OECD's 2017 Report and confirmed in Education 2030 (OECD 2018), will someday parallel PISA's impact on education achievement discussions, we sought to raise concerns here at the outset. Our contribution supports the 2014 appeal to the OECD cited in the introduction in which concerned scholars argued 'that measuring a great diversity of educational traditions and cultures using a single, narrow, biased yardstick could, in the end, to irreparable harm to our schools and our students.' We find it telling that

in the 2015 official OECD response, Andreas Schleicher mentioned nothing of ‘culture’ or ‘diversity’.

Without renewed attention to the ‘great diversity’ of cultural traditions, the risk is that the apparently objective numbers produced by the OECD will quietly render alternatives invisible at precisely the moment when we need them most. Many leading scholars have argued that current Western moment is increasingly defined by ontological individualism (Bellah et al. 1985; Taylor 1989) and social anomie (Putnam 1995), leading to the rise of narcissism (Twenge and Campbell 2009) and, at the same time, higher rates of loneliness and unhappiness (Cacioppo et al. 2016). If we understand all of this as the further entrenchment of a particular notion of self combined with the deepening global resource crunch, the recent dysfunctions associated with the ‘ideal’ Western self make sense: in a world of increasingly finite resources and increased competition, it is becoming difficult to maintain the ‘independent individual’, understood as one who looks optimistically towards the future, self projects,⁸ and successfully carries out predetermined plans. A view of happiness not predicated on infinite resources-turned-personal projects, but redefined as linked to collective well-being and less tied to individual success may be the way to maintain happiness in the acute austerity of coming decades, a new era for educational research that we have called the ‘Finite Future’ (Rapplee and Komatsu 2019).

One of our intended contributions in this piece was to suggest that, faced with the coming decades of turbulence, we do not necessarily need to sacrifice student learning, the great concern of the OECD and many education scholars alike, if we are instead willing to reconfigure our long-held views of happiness, self, and pedagogy. That is, reconfigure *interdependently*.

Notes

1. A reviewer pressed us to answer why the UK does not fit the general pattern for both life satisfaction and achievement levels despite the high-levels of individualism. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of our analysis to answer that question. As for the absence of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark (which has often topped the World Happiness Report), we are unclear why these were excluded despite participating in PISA 2015.
2. The report also lists ‘interacting with heterogeneous groups’ as Competency Category 2 but rather than focusing on fostering interdependent outlooks, the focus is still very much on what is ‘required for *individuals*’ (OECD 2005, 12).
3. That is, the countries included in the consultation did not include the entire OECD sample but only Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States.
4. We are well aware of the dangers inherent in drawing such a distinction and cognizant that it will provoke resistance among some. We are also aware of reviews such as Voronov and Singer (2002) who write: ‘When a whole culture or society is pigeonholed in dichotomous categories (e.g. masculine-feminine, active-passive, or loose-tight), subtle differences and qualitative nuances that are more characteristic of that social entity may be glossed over. Such descriptive labels evoke unduly fixed and caricature-like mental impressions of cultures or societies rather than representative pictures of their complexities.’ Nonetheless, we feel that such sentiments are founded on an implicit methodological nationalism, i.e. that our role as researchers should be to nuance the homogenizing category of, say, ‘national’ identity. But the rise of PISA and the OECD’s work now means that the homogenization is taking place at the global

level. To refuse to draw distinctions for fear of ‘pigeonholing’, differences that – we must remember – can be empirically substantiated in favour of a ‘diversity’ and ‘multiplicity’ argument is to give away the critical resources necessary to engage at the global level. It is also important to underscore that even Voronov and Singer admit that these distinctions do capture something important and therefore should not be discarded, but only further nuanced. Again, we recognize that not everyone in a given society shares these views but we believe that there are differences in means (relative distribution) and that highlighting those differences for pragmatic ends is important as this policy juncture. That said, one must be vigilant that these differences do not become reified (‘unduly fixed’) and function as easy substitutes for the effort of continuing to explore, engage, and elaborate these differences in worldview.

5. For those more inclined to think in terms of philosophy and history rather than psychology, Sakabe’s insights on self in Japan are representative and insightful: ‘The concept of an autonomous individual subject possessed of the kinds of fundamental and inalienable rights that took shape in the modern civil societies of the West under the influence of Stoicism and Christianity is likewise fundamentally different from what is found in traditional Japanese thought. This is because...[within] an ancient tradition of thought shaped by Daoist and Buddhist influences...the idea of the autonomous individual subject was never to any significant degree assimilated into Japanese society. It is also because in Japan, even since modern times, intersubjective or interpersonal relations are to some extent cast in the mold of the kind of “unitive sociality”...and these also tend to blur the boundaries that demarcate the self as subject from others as subject’ (Sakabe 1987, 981). For the story told from within the Western perspective, see Taylor’s (2007) discussion of the ‘great disembedding’ and the rise of ‘buffered selves’. See also Eric Voeglin’s concept of the ‘egophanic revolt’ (see Auld, [forthcoming](#)).
6. Among psychological definitions, people also frequently mentioned ‘positive emotions’, ‘optimism’, ‘meaning’, ‘awareness’ and ‘autonomy’.
7. One reviewer asked us whether this portrayal was still valid, i.e. whether or not the last 50 years have seen the breakdown of collectivism due to factors ranging from urbanization to online gaming. We do not feel that we are on the cusp of Western style individualism, particularly given that changing social conditions are still mediated by self-understandings of mutual interdependence. We find empirical confirmation in Minkov et al. (2017) who collected data from 2014–2016 that shows that East Asian countries are still not so individualistic, confirming what Hofstede found a half-century earlier.
8. It is worth noting here that exactly 100 years ago, Kilpatrick’s *The Project Method* (1918) proclaimed this self ‘pro-jection’ was to be the key to progressive pedagogy, a pedagogical model that came to dominate Western pedagogy (particularly in the United States) in the twentieth century, a time when social progress appeared infinite and tracked the ‘release’ of individuals from the embeddedness of tradition (see also Bower 1987).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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