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## **The Secret to Happiness: Feeling Good or Feeling Right?**

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# The Secret to Happiness: Feeling Good or Feeling Right?

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Which emotional experiences should people pursue to optimize happiness? According to traditional subjective well-being research, the more pleasant emotions we experience, the happier we are. According to Aristotle, the more we experience the emotions we want to experience, the happier we are. We tested both predictions in a cross-cultural sample of 2,324 participants from 8 countries around the world. We assessed experienced emotions, desired emotions, and indices of well-being and depressive symptoms. Across cultures, happier people were those who more often experienced emotions they wanted to experience, whether these were pleasant (e.g., love) or unpleasant (e.g., hatred). This pattern applied even to people who wanted to feel less pleasant or more unpleasant emotions than they actually felt. Controlling for differences in experienced and desired emotions left the pattern unchanged. These findings suggest that happiness involves experiencing emotions that feel right, whether they feel good or not.

*Keywords:* happiness, well-being, emotion, culture, motivation

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*Happiness* is often defined as “a state of well-being and contentment” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). It is perhaps one of the most salient of human pursuits (Diener, Sapyta, & Suh, 1998). How can one attain this state of well-being? One answer is by increasing pleasure and decreasing pain (Kahneman, 1999). Indeed, some psychologists argue that happiness involves maximizing pleasant emotions and minimizing unpleasant emotions (e.g., Diener, 1984; Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999; Kuppens, Realo, & Diener, 2008; Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996). This approach has dominated the field of subjective well-being (SWB) over the last 30 years (see Diener, 2013, for a recent review). The present article explores another possible answer based on the Aristotelian approach. Aristotle suggested that happiness involves feeling the right emotions.

Such emotions are not necessarily pleasant emotions and may even be unpleasant, like anger or fear (Thomson, 1955). Indeed, Aristotle held that the absence of unpleasant emotions is *not* an indicator of happiness. Instead, happiness is linked to feeling unpleasant emotions when they are appropriate and goal-conducive. The present research is a first attempt to test whether feeling the right emotions may be critical in attaining happiness.

## What Are the Right Emotions?

For Aristotle, happiness entails experiencing the right emotions (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105b25–6). In Book 2 of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states that “to have these feelings at the right times on the right grounds towards the right people for the right motive and in the right way is (. . .) the mark of virtue” (1106b9–1107a1; Thomson, 1955, p. 101). Anger, fear, as well as pleasure are right, for some people, for some reasons. For example, for a minority group member who seeks justice because people in the majority mistreat him, feeling anger may just be the right emotion. Whether an emotion is right, therefore, depends on the goals and needs of each individual. Whereas anger may feel right to some, it may feel wrong to others. Happiness, according to Aristotle, should involve feeling emotions that people deem to be appropriate given their needs and motives. Building on Aristotle’s account, therefore, we define “feeling right” as feeling emotions that one considers to be desirable.

Which emotions people consider desirable differs systematically across situations, individuals, and cultures. Individuals differ in the extent to which they desire pleasant states. For instance, whereas some individuals desire high arousal pleasant emotions, such as excitement, others desire low activation pleasant emotions, such as

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calmness (Rusting & Larsen, 1995). This pattern also differs by culture, such that Americans, on average, desire high arousal pleasant emotions more than East Asians do (Tsai, Knutson, & Fung, 2006). Individuals also differ in the extent to which they desire unpleasant states. For instance, European Americans seem to be more motivated to minimize unpleasant states, compared with Germans (Koopmann-Holm & Tsai, 2014). In addition, whereas European Americans seek to maximize pleasant experiences and minimize unpleasant experiences, members of collectivistic cultures seek more balanced emotional experiences, and are less motivated to minimize unpleasant experiences (e.g., Miyamoto, Ma, & Petermann, 2014; Sims et al., 2015).

We have recently proposed that people's values are one factor that might determine which emotions they desire (Tamir et al., 2016). In a cross-cultural study, we found that people desired emotions that were consistent with their core values. For instance, individuals who valued self-transcendence (benevolence, universalism) desired more love, trust, and compassion (i.e., self-transcending emotions) than others did, whereas those who valued self-enhancement (power, achievement) desired more pride, but also more anger, hatred and contempt (i.e., self-enhancing emotions) than others did.

Aristotle claimed that feeling emotions that are consistent with one's values feels right, and feeling right relates to greater happiness. Is this indeed the case? Furthermore, is this the case even when the right emotions are unpleasant to experience? To address these questions, the present investigation tested whether individuals are happier if they experience the emotions they desire than if they do not, whether the emotions are pleasant or unpleasant.

We assessed the degree to which a person feels the right emotion by computing the discrepancy between the amount of the emotion the person desires to feel and the amount of that emotion the person actually feels. Previous research on pleasant emotions found that the smaller the discrepancy between experienced and desired pleasant states, the more satisfied people are (e.g., Kämpfe & Mitte, 2009; Larsen & McKibban, 2008; Rice, McFarlin, & Bennett, 1989). When individuals desire pleasant emotions, the Aristotelian prediction is the same as the prediction of traditional SWB researchers: people are happier if they experience as much of a pleasant emotion as they desire. However, when people desire unpleasant emotions, the Aristotelian prediction and the prediction of traditional SWB researchers are in stark contrast. The Aristotelian prediction is that such people would be happier the more they feel the emotion they desire, even though that emotion is unpleasant. The traditional SWB prediction is that people would be happier the less they feel that unpleasant emotion, whether they desire it or not. That is because SWB researchers typically treat pleasant emotions as good and unpleasant emotions as bad (at least for SWB; Diener, 1984; Kahneman, 1999).

### Right Emotions and Happiness Across Individuals and Cultures

To our knowledge, the Aristotelian claim regarding feeling right has not been explicitly tested in well-being research. However, this claim is consistent with several existing theoretical approaches. For example, according to the value-as-a-moderator model of SWB (Oishi, Diener, Suh, & Lucas, 1999), sources of SWB (e.g., achievement, self-esteem, social relationships) differ across indi-

viduals and cultures depending on their values. For instance, satisfaction with one's daily achievements predicted the overall daily life satisfaction of individuals more strongly if they were high (vs. low) in achievement values (Oishi, Diener, Lucas, & Suh, 1999). Likewise, satisfaction with one's finances predicted life satisfaction more in poor countries than in wealthy ones (Oishi, Diener, Lucas, & Suh, 1999). This pattern also extends to hedonic experiences. For instance, daily physical pleasure predicted overall daily satisfaction more among people high (vs. low) in sensation seeking (Oishi, Schimmack, & Diener, 2001). Similarly, experiencing excitement increased life satisfaction more among individuals high (vs. low) in sensation seeking (Oishi, Schimmack, & Colcombe, 2003, Study 5). At the national level, positive emotions related more strongly to life satisfaction in countries that stress self-expression values than in countries that stress survival values (Kuppens et al., 2008).

To the extent that value priorities differ across cultures (Schwartz, 2011), it is reasonable to assume that different emotions may be associated with happiness across cultures (Mesquita, de Leersnyder, & Albert, 2014). Kitayama, Markus, and Kurokawa (2000), for instance, found that interpersonally disengaging pleasant emotions (e.g., pride) were strongly associated with happiness among Americans, whereas interpersonally engaging pleasant emotions (e.g., *foreai*) were strongly associated with happiness among Japanese (see also Kitayama, Ishii, Imada, Takemura, & Ramaswamy, 2006). de Leersnyder, Kim, and Mesquita (2015) reported that people are happier the more they experience emotions that are characteristic of their culture. They found that the higher the correlation between a person's emotion profile and the average profile of their culture the greater that person's well-being among Koreans, Belgians, and European Americans. In general, there is evidence that people tend to be happier when their personal values are consistent with the dominant cultural values (e.g., Fulmer et al., 2010).

Both values and desired emotions differ across cultures (e.g., Eid & Diener, 2001; Schwartz, 2011). However, according to the Aristotelian account, regardless of their culture, individuals should be happier the more they feel emotions that they personally deem desirable. Thus, although experienced emotions and desired emotions may differ across cultures, the degree to which individuals experience discrepancies between them (i.e., the degree to which people feel 'right') should relate consistently to happiness across cultures. An alternative prediction is that feeling right relates differently to happiness across cultures. For instance, feeling right might relate more strongly to happiness in wealthier countries than in poorer countries, where happiness may depend more on satisfaction of basic needs (see Tay & Diener, 2011). To test these hypotheses, the present investigation examined the links between feeling right and happiness across a set of countries that vary on an index of general development (United Nations Development Programme, 2014).

### The Current Research

Previous research on the link between well-being and feeling "right" focused exclusively on pleasant affective experiences (e.g., excitement in Oishi et al., 2003) and a small set of cultures (e.g., Japan vs. U.S.). None of the previous research tested whether feeling "right" predicts life satisfaction and depressive symptoms

above and beyond feeling “good.” The current research assessed the desirability of distinct emotions, including both pleasant (e.g., love and compassion) and unpleasant (e.g., anger and hatred) emotions, and tested the Aristotelian prediction across cultures. The inclusion of distinct emotions enabled us to test whether happiness is related to feeling right across distinct emotions or whether happiness is related to experiencing certain right emotions more than others. We assessed relations of the absolute discrepancies between experienced and desired emotions with greater well-being and depressive symptoms in eight countries around the globe.

We recently identified four emotion categories that map onto key dimensions of core values (i.e., self-transcendence, self-enhancement, openness to experience, and conservation; Tamir et al., 2016). We demonstrated that, across cultures, people desire emotions that are more consistent with their values. People who value self-transcendence (e.g., universalism), for instance, desire more empathy than others do. Similarly, people who value self-enhancement (e.g., power) desire more anger than others do. Would people who desire more anger be happier if they experienced more anger? Or would experiencing more anger make them less happy? To address these questions, we assessed discrepancies between experienced and desired self-transcending emotions (e.g., love, empathy), negative self-enhancing emotions (e.g., anger, hatred), opening emotions (e.g., excitement, interest) and conserving emotions (e.g., calmness, relief). We tested whether smaller absolute discrepancies are linked to higher life satisfaction and less depressive symptoms.

## Method

### Participants

Participants in this study came from eight countries (i.e., United States, Brazil, China, Germany, Ghana, Israel, Poland, and Singapore). We chose these countries to represent seven of the eight world cultural regions (i.e., Anglo, Latin American, Confucian, West European, Sub-Saharan African, East Central European, and South Asian) distinguished by both Inglehart and Baker (2000) and Schwartz (2006). We recruited only native speakers in each country. The entire sample included 2,324 university students (57.5% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 22.47$ ), recruited either through ads or through local participant pools in their respective universities. Participants received monetary compensation (equivalent to \$3–\$5) or course credit. Table 1 presents the characteristics of each sample.

### Procedure

Participants completed the study in their native language or in their formal language of instruction. They responded either online (i.e., the study was administered on Qualtrics) or in writing (see Table 1). For non-English versions, we carried out iterations of translation and back-translation by independent bilinguals until we obtained satisfactory versions. Separate gender-matched versions of the survey were used in those languages that distinguish gender. After giving consent, participants first completed a scale of basic values (PVQ-R; Schwartz et al., 2012).<sup>1</sup> Participants then rated their desired emotions. To minimize carryover effects, they next completed an unrelated, affectively neutral task for five minutes

(i.e., creating words from letters in longer words; e.g., ‘go’ from ‘geography’). Finally, participants rated their experienced emotions, completed indices of depressive symptoms and well-being, and provided demographic information.

## Materials

**Desired and experienced emotions.** To assess desired emotions, participants rated how often they wanted to experience various emotions in their daily life. To assess the actual experience of emotions, participants rated how often they experienced the same emotions in their daily life. All ratings were made on 1 (*never*) to 5 (*most of the time*) scales. We assessed self-transcending emotions (i.e., *love, affection, trust, empathy, compassion*;  $\alpha = .59$  and  $.66$  for desired and experienced emotions, respectively), negative self-enhancing emotions (i.e., *anger, contempt, hostility, hatred*;  $\alpha = .66$  and  $.70$  for desired and experienced emotions, respectively),<sup>2</sup> opening emotions (i.e., *interest, curiosity, excitement, enthusiasm, passion*;  $\alpha = .64$  and  $.70$  for desired and experienced emotions, respectively), and conserving emotions (i.e., *calmness, relaxation, relief, contentment*;  $\alpha = .53$  and  $.67$  for desired and experienced emotions, respectively). Emotion terms were presented in a predetermined and fixed order.<sup>3</sup>

To confirm that our emotion indices were empirically distinct, we ran principal axis factor analyses with varimax rotation, separately on desired and experienced emotions, imposing four-factor solutions. The scree plots and eigenvalues supported the choice of four factor solutions. Table 2 presents the varimax rotated factor matrices for experienced and desired emotions, respectively. The table presents only loadings greater than  $.20$ . In each matrix, the items assigned a priori to each emotion composite loaded positively and most highly on one factor. For desired emotions, negative self-enhancing emotions loaded on Factor 1, conserving emotions on factor 2, opening emotions on factor 3, and self-transcending emotions on factor 4. For experienced emotions, conserving emotions loaded on factor 1, negative self-enhancing emotions on factor 2, self-transcending emotions on factor 3, and opening emotions on factor 4. These findings lend support to the discriminant validity of the four desired and experienced emotions scales.

<sup>1</sup> In Tamir et al. (2016), we examined links between values and desired emotions, controlling for experienced emotions. No analyses were reported in that paper involving well-being or depressive symptoms. In contrast, the current study investigates relations of well-being and depressive symptoms to discrepancies between the two types of emotions. This study does not concern values at all and includes the emotions themselves as controls rather than the predictors of interest.

<sup>2</sup> The original composite included ‘pride’ as an additional item. However, to compare feeling ‘right’ to ‘feeling good’ we created a composite that is exclusively negative in valence and dropped this item from the composite. We refer to the new composite as capturing ‘negative self-enhancing emotions’.

<sup>3</sup> For desired emotions, items were presented in the following order: *contentment, affection, enthusiasm, interest, compassion, contempt, curiosity, trust, excitement, hostility, pride, empathy, passion, hatred, calmness, relief, relaxation, love, and anger*. For experienced emotions, items were presented in the following order: *empathy, compassion, excitement, hostility, relief, calmness, passion, pride, enthusiasm, love, contempt, curiosity, anger, relaxation, contentment, affection, interest, trust, and hatred*. The order of the desired emotion terms differed from the order of experienced emotion terms.

Table 1  
Sample Characteristics

Country	N	% Female	Language	Age M (SD)	% Married	Mode	% Psychology majors
Brazil	653	64	Portuguese	24.35 (5.78)	8%	Online	17
China	213	53	Chinese	20.82 (1.97)	1%	Paper and pencil	53
Germany	200	50	German	25.03 (4.12)	10%	Paper and pencil and online	30
Ghana	207	59	English	22.90 (2.81)	3%	Paper and pencil	46
Israel	248	53	Hebrew	24.21 (2.91)	12%	Online	24
Poland	299	52	Polish	21.72 (1.74)	3%	Paper and pencil	7
Singapore	201	69	English	21.23 (1.83)	0%	Online	12
United States	303	54	English	19.51 (1.80)	0%	Online	34

**Well-being and depressive symptoms.** We assessed well-being with the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) that includes 5 items ( $\alpha = .83$ ) rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale. We measured depressive symptoms with the 10-item ( $\alpha = .83$ ) version of the Center of Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Andresen, Malmgren, Carter, & Patrick, 1994). Participants rated how frequently they experienced each symptom on a scale from 1 (*rarely or none of the time*) to 4 (*most or all of the time*).

**Cross-cultural measurement equivalence.** We applied multigroup confirmatory factor analyses (MGCFA) to test the measurement equivalence of our measures (e.g., Byrne, Shavelson, & Muthen, 1989; Vandenberg & Lance, 2000). These analyses are important to ensure that individuals from different cultures responded to our measures in comparable ways. We evaluated the models with multiple fit indices (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Marsh, Hau, & Wen, 2004). First, for each measure, we tested whether items loaded on the same latent factor across cultures (i.e., configural invariance). Second, we tested whether the loadings of items on

their latent factors were equal across cultures (i.e., metric invariance). All our measures demonstrated either partial or full metric invariance. This indicates that each of the cultural groups calibrate their measures the same way, so the manifest scales have the same meaning across groups. This justifies comparing patterns of associations between measures across cultures. Finally, we tested whether item intercepts were equal across cultures (i.e., scalar invariance). As is often the case in cross-cultural studies, our measures did not demonstrate scalar invariance. This means that identical observed scores do not necessarily map on to the same latent scores across cultures. Hence, it is not appropriate to compare means across cultures.

The final metric invariance model for the life satisfaction scale had good fit (confirmatory fit index [CFI] = .965, root-mean-square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .033, standardized root-mean-square residual [SRMR] = .048), as did the final metric invariance model for the depressive symptoms scale (CFI = .967, RMSEA = .021, SRMR = .065). The metric equivalence of experienced and desired self-transcending, opening, and conserving emotions was established and the relevant fit coefficients are

Table 2  
Varimax Rotated Matrices From Principal Axis Factor Analyses of Experienced (Left) and Desired (Right) Emotions

Experienced emotions					Desired emotions				
Item	Factor				Item	Factor			
	1 (conserving)	2 (negative self- enhancing)	3 (self-transcending)	4 (opening)		1 (negative self- enhancing)	2 (conserving)	3 (opening)	4 (self-transcending)
Relaxation	.698				Hatred	.644	-.205		
Calmness	.620				Hostility	.619			
Contentment	.604				Anger	.502	-.202		
Relief	.451				Contempt	.500			
Hatred	-.201	.701			Relaxation	-.265	.563		
Hostility		.626			Relief		.488		
Contempt		.528			Calmness	-.231	.389		
Anger	-.261	.494			Contentment	-.227	.388		
Compassion			.725		Curiosity			.592	
Empathy			.565		Interest		.267	.532	
Love	.279	-.266	.437		Enthusiasm		.264	.509	
Trust	.266	-.287	.363		Passion		.239	.434	
Affection	.224	-.230	.361		Excitement		-.284	.341	
Interest	.301		.201	.582	Compassion				.780
Curiosity				.556	Empathy			.239	.401
Enthusiasm	.292		.215	.498	Affection		.281		.348
Excitement	-.249		.244	.415	Love	-.263	.235		.341
Passion	.275		.292	.389	Trust	-.345	.265		.327

reported in Tamir et al. (2016). Because we dropped ‘pride’ from our original self-enhancement composite, we reran the measurement equivalence models for desired and experienced self-enhancement, excluding pride. The partial metric invariance model for the negative self-enhancing emotions had good fit for experienced emotions (CFI = .989, RMSEA = .049, SRMR = .030) and adequate fit for desired emotions (CFI = .913, RMSEA = .097, SRMR = .069).

**Human Development Scores.** The Human Development Index (HDI) provides scores that rank countries on their level of development. HDI combines indicators of life expectancy, education, and per capita income. We used HDI scores for 2013 (United Nations Development Programme, 2014), the year we gathered our data.

## Results

### Discrepancies Between Experienced and Desired Emotions

To compute discrepancy scores, we subtracted experienced emotions from desired emotions, separately for each target emotion category. We use difference scores because they provide an intuitively clear, direct representation of the conceptual discrepancy between desired and experienced emotions. Below, we explain how we dealt with the limitations of difference scores (Griffin, Murray, & Gonzalez, 1999; Zuckerman, Gagne, Nafshi, Knee, & Kieffer, 2002). Figure 1 presents the histograms, means, and standard deviations for the discrepancies in each emotion category. On average, people desired more pleasant (i.e., self-transcending, opening, and conserving emotions) and less unpleasant (i.e., negative self-enhancing) emotions than they experienced. However, there was substantial variation in discrepancy scores. Many individuals desired more pleasant emotions than they experienced, but some desired less. For instance, 11% of our sample wanted to feel less self-transcending emotions, such as love and empathy, than they actually felt. Many individuals desired less unpleasant emotions than they experienced, but some desired more. For instance, 10% of our sample wanted to feel more negative self-enhancing emotions, such as anger and hatred, than they actually felt.

### Happiness and Absolute Discrepancies Between Experienced and Desired Emotions

**Correlations.** We examined correlations of absolute emotional discrepancy scores with well-being and depressive symptoms within each emotion category.<sup>4</sup> We examined the correlations in the entire sample and separately for people who desired more frequent emotions than they experienced and for people who desired less frequent emotions than they experienced. As shown in Table 3, greater absolute discrepancies between experienced and desired emotions correlated with lower life satisfaction and more depressive symptoms. This was true for people who felt less pleasant and more unpleasant emotions than they desired, but, critically for the Aristotelian hypotheses, it was also true for people who felt more pleasant and less unpleasant emotions than they desired.

**Multilevel modeling.** We predicted that smaller absolute discrepancies between desired and experienced emotions would

be associated with greater well-being and less depressive symptoms, even when controlling for experienced and desired emotions. We further predicted that such patterns would hold across cultural samples. We tested these hypotheses with multilevel modeling analyses using the Hierarchical Linear Modeling program HLM 7.0 (Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, Congdon, & Du Toit, 2011). For each of our four target emotion categories, we tested one model that predicted well-being and another that predicted depressive symptoms. The predictor variable was the absolute discrepancy between desired and experienced emotion, controlling for experienced emotion, desired emotion, gender, and age. The effects of a discrepancy score may be due to either or both of the variables from which it is derived and with which it is correlated. We, therefore, included both experienced and desired emotions as predictors to control for their effects. Any effect of the absolute discrepancy scores over and above the effects of the experienced and desired emotions can then be attributed to the discrepancy between them (see Dyrenforth, Kashy, Donnellan, & Lucas, 2010).<sup>5</sup> In our analyses, gender was grand-mean centered and other predictors were group-mean centered. By running random-coefficient regression models, we also tested whether effects of the absolute discrepancy and control variables varied across cultures. Below is an example of a Level 1 equation predicting life satisfaction:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{SWLS}_{ij} = & \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}\text{Gender} + \beta_{2j}\text{Age} + \beta_{3j}\text{Experienced Emotion} \\ & + \beta_{4j}\text{Desired Emotion} + \beta_{5j}\text{ABS(Desired} \\ & - \text{Experienced Emotion)} + r_{ij} \end{aligned}$$

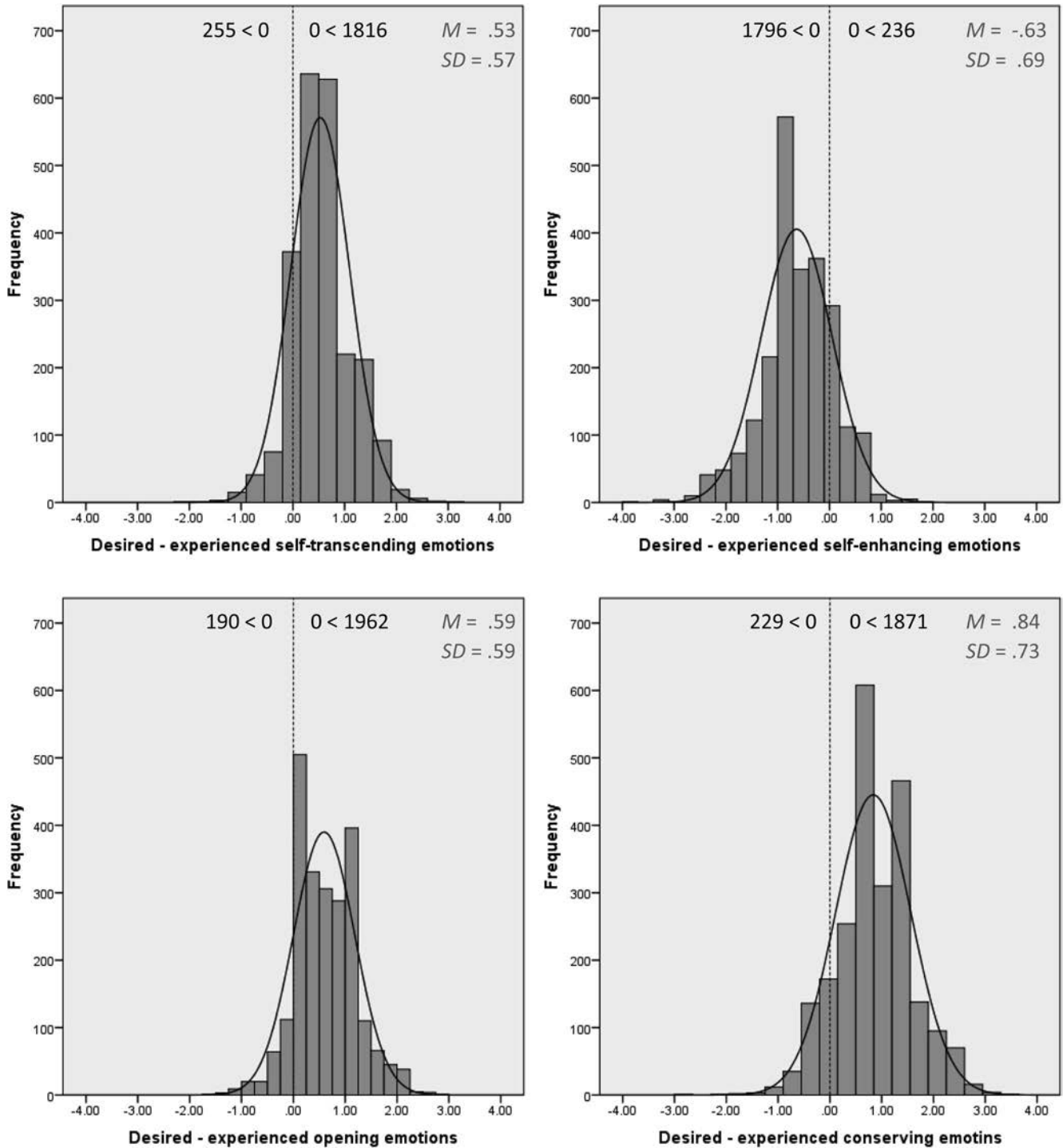
$\beta_{0j}$  is the mean level of life satisfaction across groups.  $\beta_{ij}$  are the average regression coefficients of the predictor variables across groups.  $r_{ij}$  is the individual level variance in life satisfaction that the predictor variables do not explain.

Table 4 presents the results of the HLM analyses predicting life satisfaction. As expected, experiencing more frequent positive emotions (i.e., self-transcending, opening, and conserving emotions) and less frequent negative emotions (i.e., negative self-enhancing emotions) predicted greater life satisfaction (Row 4). Similarly, desiring more frequent positive emotions and less frequent negative emotions also predicted greater life satisfaction (Row 5). Critically, supporting our hypothesis, smaller absolute discrepancies between experienced and desired emotions predicted greater life satisfaction for all four emotion categories (Row 6).

The random effects analyses assessed variation across cultures. Life satisfaction varied across cultures (Row 7) as did the effects of desired negative self-enhancing and opening emotions (Row 11). In contrast, effects of experienced emotions (Row 10) and of desired self-transcending and conservation emotions did not vary across cultures (Row 11). Critically for our hypothesis, the effects of the absolute discrepancies between experienced and desired

<sup>4</sup> In these analyses, we weighted samples equally to control for unequal sample sizes.

<sup>5</sup> A reviewer noted that discrepancy scores may have different effects depending on experienced emotions. To test this possibility requires adding an interaction term between the discrepancy scores and experienced emotions to the multilevel models for each emotion. We conducted these analyses. They did not affect the conclusions reported below. Part 1 of the online supplementary materials describes the results of these additional analyses.



*Figure 1.* Distributions of the discrepancies between experienced and desired emotions for the four types of emotions. Means and standard deviations are noted on the upper right of each graph. The dotted line represents zero discrepancy. Number of people in the sample who were below the dotted line (i.e., experienced more frequent emotions than they desired) or above it (i.e., desired more frequent emotions than they experienced) are listed to the left and right of it, respectively. The normal curve is depicted in black on each histogram.

Table 3  
Zero-Order Correlations Between Indices of Well-Being and Depressive Symptoms and Absolute Discrepancies of Desired and Experienced Emotions, Separately for Each Target Emotion Category

Emotion and sample	Life satisfaction	Depressive symptom
Self-transcending		
Total	-.24	.30
Experienced > Desired	-.18	.18
Desired > Experienced	-.27	.32
Negative self-enhancing		
Total	-.22	.36
Experienced > Desired	-.22	.38
Desired > Experienced	-.20	.17
Opening		
Total	-.20	.26
Experienced > Desired	-.00 <sup>a</sup>	.10
Desired > Experienced	-.23	.27
Conserving		
Total	-.21	.34
Experienced > Desired	-.02 <sup>a</sup>	.11
Desired > Experienced	-.24	.36
<i>M (SD)</i>	4.21 (1.16)	1.96 (0.53)

Note. The table presents correlations in the entire sample (Total) and separately for individuals who experienced the emotion more frequently than they wanted to experience it (Experienced > desired) and individuals who wanted to experience the emotion less frequently than they actually did (Desired > Experienced).

<sup>a</sup>  $p > .05$ , for all other entries  $p < .05$ .

emotions on life satisfaction did not vary by culture, except for self-transcending emotions (Row 12). Smaller absolute discrepancies between experienced and desired self-transcending emotions predicted greater life satisfaction in every country, but this effect was not significant in Ghana (slope =  $-.15$ ,  $p = .34$ ) and China (slope =  $-.42$ ,  $p = .071$ ).

Table 5 presents the results of the HLM analyses predicting depressive symptoms. As expected, experiencing less frequent positive emotions (i.e., self-transcending, opening, and conserving emotions) and more frequent negative emotions (i.e., negative self-enhancing) predicted depressive symptoms (Row 4). Similarly, desiring more frequent negative emotions and less frequent positive emotions (Row 5) predicted depressive symptoms. Supporting our hypothesis, larger absolute discrepancies between experienced and desired emotions predicted depressive symptoms for all emotion categories (Row 6).

The random effects analyses revealed that depressive symptoms varied across cultures (Row 7). Effects of experienced emotions (Row 10) and desired emotions (Row 11) on depressive symptoms did not vary across cultures, except for desired opening emotions. Critically for our hypothesis, the effects of the absolute discrepancies between experienced and desired emotions on depressive symptoms did not vary by culture, except for self-transcending emotions (Row 12). Larger absolute discrepancies between experienced and desired self-transcending emotions predicted more depressive symptoms in every country, but this effect was not significant in Ghana (slope =  $.08$ ,  $p = .224$ ) or China (slope =  $.02$ ,  $p = .856$ ).<sup>6</sup>

**Variation across cultures.** As noted, for self-transcending emotions, the effects of emotion discrepancies on life satisfaction and on depressive symptoms varied across cultures. In order to

understand the source of this variation, we examined whether socioeconomic development, one of the most important characteristics on which countries differ, moderated this effect. Specifically, we tested the possible moderation effect of the country level of development as indexed by HDI. We did this by running the multilevel analyses for self-transcending emotions with HDI as a Level 2 predictor and as a moderator of the effect of the absolute emotion discrepancy score. The cross-level interaction between HDI and the absolute discrepancy tested the moderation effect.

Table 6 presents the results of these analyses for both life satisfaction (left) and depressive symptoms (right). The interactions between HDI and the absolute discrepancy were significant for both (Row 8). This indicates that the country level of development moderated the effects of the absolute discrepancy between desired and experienced emotions on life satisfaction and on depressive symptoms. Moreover, once this moderation effect was included, no significant cross-cultural variation in the effects of the absolute discrepancy remained (Row 16). Figure 2 portrays the significant interactions. Figure 2 (left) portrays the slopes for the interaction predicting life satisfaction and Figure 2 (right) portrays the slopes for the interaction predicting depressive symptoms.

Figure 2 (left) shows that life satisfaction dropped more sharply in more developed than in less developed countries as the discrepancy people felt between the self-transcending emotions (e.g., love and empathy) they desired and those they experienced increased. Figure 2 (right) shows that depressive symptoms rose more sharply in more developed than in less developed countries as the discrepancy people felt between the self-transcending emotions (e.g., love and empathy) they desired and those they experienced increased.

## Discussion

For Aristotle, happiness entailed feeling the right feelings (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105b25–6). What feels right, in turn, differs across people and situations. Happier people, he argued, are those who feel what they consider the right feelings, given their unique circumstances. Our findings support Aristotle's claims empirically. We found that happier people are those who more frequently experience the emotions they want to experience, whether those emotions are pleasant (e.g., love or excitement) or unpleasant (e.g., anger and hatred).

What feels right often feels good. However, the two types of feelings are conceptually distinct and do not necessarily overlap. Our design enabled us to distinguish empirically between these two types of feelings and to test whether happiness is linked to maximizing 'right' feelings even if they are not 'good' feelings. Consistent with the predictions of the traditional SWB approach, we found that people were happier the more they experienced

<sup>6</sup> In addition to testing the effects of absolute discrepancy scores, we tested the quadratic effect of the signed difference scores on life satisfaction and depression in another series of multilevel models. Predictors in these models included gender, age, experienced emotions, desired emotions, the signed discrepancy scores, and the squared discrepancy scores. All these models yielded significant fixed effects for the squared discrepancy scores, as hypothesized. Indeed, in 7 of the 8 models the squared discrepancy score was the only significant predictor. However, these models did not produce reliable estimates of random effects due to multicollinearity between the experienced or desired emotions and the signed discrepancy scores. We, therefore, report the findings with absolute differences in the text and provide the fixed effects of the quadratic models in Part 2 of the online supplementary materials.



Table 4

*Multilevel Models Predicting Life Satisfaction From the Absolute Discrepancy of Desired and Experienced Emotion, Controlling for Gender, Age, Experienced Emotion, and Desired Emotion*

Effects	Emotion							
	Self-transcending		Negative self-enhancing		Opening		Conserving	
	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE
<b>Fixed effects</b>								
Overall mean	4.33**	.11	4.33***	.11	4.33***	.11	4.34***	.11
Gender	-.001	.06	.10	.06	.13*	.06	.18*	.07
Age	-.05*	.02	-.04	.02	-.04	.02	-.03	.01
Experienced emotion	.26*	.08	-.39**	.11	.38**	.09	.55***	.08
Desired emotion	.24*	.07	-.11	.10	.08	.10	.12	.07
Absolute discrepancy	-.61**	.12	-.26*	.09	-.41**	.08	-.27**	.08
	Variance	$\chi^2$	Variance	$\chi^2$	Variance	$\chi^2$	Variance	$\chi^2$
<b>Random effects</b>								
Culture sample mean	.09	132.67***	.09	133.60***	.09	133.77***	.10	145.56***
Gender slope	.006	6.18	.007	5.10	.007	6.52	.02	10.08
Age slope	.002	50.82***	.002	41.92***	.002	40.44***	.001	25.56***
Experienced emotion slope	.02	14.25	.054	15.67*	.29	10.68	.02	11.68
Desired emotion slope	.01	9.61	.05	15.19*	.05	15.32*	.02	7.55
Absolute discrepancy slope	.09	22.89**	.03	7.92	.02	7.72	.02	4.95
% variance explained	.15		.12		.13		.17	

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

pleasant emotions and the less they experienced unpleasant emotions, on average. However, over and above this effect, we also found that people were happier when they experienced smaller discrepancies between the emotions they experienced and the emotions they desired. The secret to happiness, then, may involve not only feeling good but also feeling right.

### Implications for Studying Emotions and Well-being

In this investigation, we adopted Aristotle's ideas regarding the potential links between emotions and happiness. This Aristotelian model differs from hedonic models of well-being because it suggests that both pleasant and unpleasant emotional experiences may

Table 5

*Multilevel Models Predicting Depressive Symptoms From the Absolute Discrepancy of Desired and Experienced Emotion, Controlling for Gender, Age, Experienced Emotion, and Desired Emotion*

Effects	Emotion							
	Self-transcending		Negative self-enhancing		Opening		Conserving	
	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE
<b>Fixed effects</b>								
Overall mean	1.95***	.04	1.95***	.04	1.95***	.04	1.95***	.04
Gender	.05	.04	.03	.03	.01	.04	-.01	.04
Age	.002	.004	-.0008	.003	-.002	.003	-.003	.003
Experienced emotion	-.11*	.03	.26***	.04	-.12*	.04	-.26***	.04
Desired emotion	-.02	.03	.06	.03	-.07	.04	-.02	.03
Absolute discrepancy	.26**	.06	.10*	.03	.23**	.05	.14**	.04
	Variance	$\chi^2$	Variance	$\chi^2$	Variance	$\chi^2$	Variance	$\chi^2$
<b>Random effects</b>								
Culture sample mean	.01	91.89***	.01	103.27***	.01	93.99***	.01	102.43***
Gender slope	.01	27.10***	.003	14.22*	.009	23.05**	.006	18.67**
Age slope	.0001	8.65	.00001	8.80	.00001	7.07	.00002	5.17
Experienced emotion slope	.002	12.05	.006	14.53*	.003	6.01	.009	12.06
Desired emotion slope	.002	10.71	.002	6.54	.008	14.13*	.003	8.44
Absolute discrepancy slope	.02	21.12**	.0003	7.32	.009	7.75	.004	8.34
% variance explained	.11		.18		.12		.18	

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

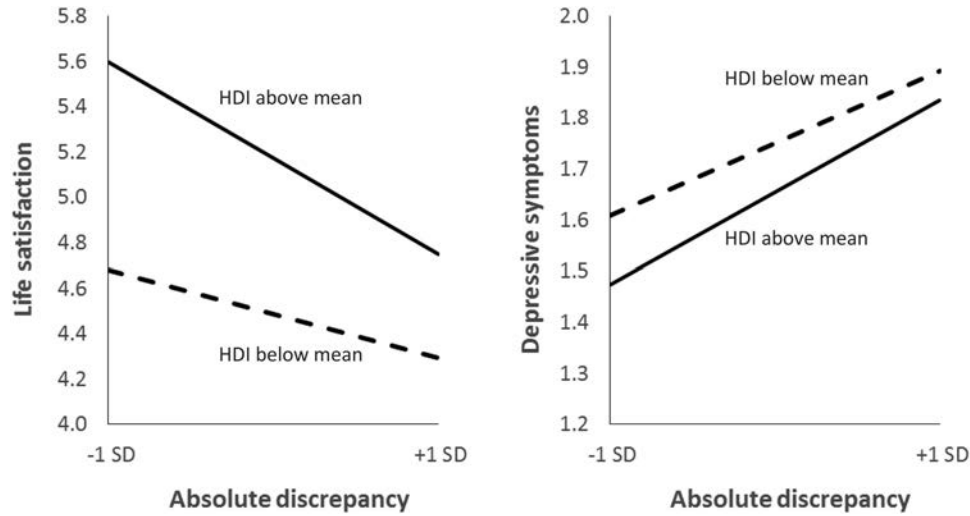


Figure 2. Life satisfaction (left) and depressive symptoms (right) as a function of the absolute discrepancy between experienced and desired self-transcending emotions ( $\pm 1 SD$  from the mean) in countries above and below the mean of Human Development Index (HDI) in our sample.

be linked to well-being if they feel ‘right.’ Emotional experiences feel right when people perceive them as desirable, given their motives and the situational context. The Aristotelian model also differs from extant eudaimonic models of well-being. First, eudai-

monic models (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 1989) assume the universal importance of specific life domains or psychological needs for all people and cultures. For instance, Ryff’s (1989) eudaimonic model assumes that eudaimonia consists in functioning well in six life domains: autonomy, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, and positive relations with others. Similarly, Ryan and Deci’s (2001) well-being model assumes that the satisfaction of basic human needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness is key. In contrast, our current research concerns feeling “right” emotions rather than functioning well in specific life domains or satisfying basic psychological needs. Second, like SWB models (e.g., Diener, 2013), eudaimonic models focus on positive attributes such as autonomy, successful goal pursuit, and positive relations (e.g., Emmons, 1986; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995; Waterman, 1984). None of these models posits that well-being may derive from feeling anger or hatred.

Table 6  
*Multilevel Models Testing Whether Socioeconomic Development (HDI) Moderates the Effects of the Absolute Discrepancy between Desired and Experienced Self-Transcending Emotions on Life Satisfaction (Left) and Depressive Symptoms (Right)*

Effects	Life satisfaction		Depressive symptoms	
	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE
<b>Fixed effects</b>				
Overall mean	4.33***	.11	1.95***	.04
<b>Individual level</b>				
Gender	.002	.05	.05	.04
Age	-.05	.02	.0002	.005
Experienced emotion	.26*	.09	-.10	.04
Desired emotion	.24*	.08	-.03	.04
Absolute discrepancy	-.61***	.08	.27***	.04
<b>Country level</b>				
HDI	1.74	.76	-.23	.33
Interaction: HDI $\times$ Absolute discrepancy	-2.1**	.48	.88*	.29
	Variance	$\chi^2$	Variance	$\chi^2$
<b>Random effects</b>				
Culture sample mean	.09	113.61***	.01	90.38***
Gender slope	.006	6.25	.01	27.22***
Age slope	.002	48.51***	.00009	9.52
Experienced emotion slope	.03	13.37	.008	12.09
Desired emotion slope	.03	9.63	.005	10.73
Absolute discrepancy slope	.02	5.09	.005	6.84
Residual variance	1.12	.25		

Note. HDI = Human Development Index.  
 \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

The hedonic, eudaimonic, and Aristotelian models of happiness are likely to overlap to some extent and to complement each other. For instance, it is plausible that emotions feel right when basic human needs are satisfied and that satisfying such needs induces positive affect. In such cases, happiness reflects feeling right, satisfying basic needs, and maximizing pleasure. However, to attain the best understanding of happiness and its variation across people, it is important to identify the unique cases in which the models of happiness make opposing predictions. The current investigation identified cases in which people are happier when they feel right even if they do not feel good. Of course, such cases are less common, but studying them enabled us to compare the predictions of different models. It demonstrated the unique importance of feeling right for happiness, independent of pleasure and pain.

Our findings show that happiness depends, in part, on the match between what people feel and what they want to feel. Consequently, understanding the link between emotions and happiness requires studying not only experienced emotions but also desired

emotions. Our findings reinforce the evidence for the potential role of desired emotions in well-being (e.g., Bastian, Kuppens, De Roover, & Diener, 2014) and depression (e.g., Millgram, Joormann, Huppert, & Tamir, 2015). They highlight the importance of understanding what people strive for emotionally. Consistent with the importance of discrepancies between actual and desired states (e.g., Higgins, 1987), our findings further highlight the importance of understanding how people compare their experienced emotional state to the emotions they strive for.

### Implications for Studying Emotions and Well-Being Across Cultures

The emotions people desire differ substantially across individuals, cultures, and situations (for a review, see Tamir, 2016). If well-being is linked to discrepancies between experienced and desired emotions, researchers and practitioners must be sensitive to such differences in desired emotions and understand what underlies them. Some people may be happier if they experience more empathy, and some may be happier if they experience more anger, at least to some extent. Such patterns are likely to depend on cultural contexts (e.g., de Leersnyder, Kim, & Mesquita, 2015; Ford et al., 2015). To enhance happiness around the world, researchers should acknowledge and respect the differences in the emotions people desire and understand how they vary across cultures.

Although we found that people across cultures differ in the emotions they experience and desire, people were generally happier the more their emotional experiences matched the emotions they desired. This held for negative self-enhancing (e.g., anger, contempt), opening (e.g., interest, excitement), and conserving (e.g., calmness, relief) emotions. However, for self-transcending emotions (e.g., empathy, love), the effects of the match between experienced and desired emotions on happiness varied somewhat across countries. Specifically, the match between experienced and desired self-transcendence values enhanced life satisfaction and reduced reported symptoms of depression more in highly developed countries than in less developed countries. Unlike the other emotions we examined, self-transcending emotions (e.g., love, trust) are linked to social connectedness. Social connectedness, in turn, is presumably a basic human need and a key determinant of well-being (e.g., Myers & Diener, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Perhaps, therefore, for people who struggle to meet their basic needs, the amount of love they actually feel matters more for their happiness than whether this amount feels right or not. Future research should explore further when, why, and how the links between emotion discrepancies and well-being varies across countries.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Our correlational design has several limitations. First, our findings are consistent with two interpretations (see Hardin & Larsen, 2014; Larsen & McKibban, 2008)—namely, that happiness is related to greater ideal self-actualization (i.e., experiencing emotions one desires) or to greater actual self-regard (i.e., desiring emotions one experiences). By providing empirical evidence for links of happiness to discrepancies between desired and experienced emotions, our findings highlight the need to consider these

potential accounts. Testing each account is an important task for future research.

Second, our findings do not allow us to infer causality. Smaller discrepancies between experienced and desired emotions may lead to greater happiness, but it is also plausible that people who experience greater happiness report smaller discrepancies between experienced and desired emotions. Future research should employ experimental designs to test these possibilities. It would also be beneficial to use longitudinal designs to examine experienced emotions, desired emotions, and happiness as they evolve and interact over time.

Finally, we investigated a limited set of emotion categories. Our selection was based on the idea, which was tested elsewhere (Tamir et al., 2016), that certain categories of emotions map on to certain values. Whereas our previous investigation was focused on differences between emotion categories, in this investigation, we highlight a principle that applies equally across them. Regardless of whether emotions differed as a function of values, valence or other dimensions, smaller discrepancies between desired and experienced emotion was linked to greater happiness. The emotion categories we examined allowed us to compare emotions that differ in valence but not arousal (i.e., negative self-enhancing and opening emotions), in arousal but not valence (i.e., opening and conserving emotions), and in other ways (e.g., self-transcending emotions and opening emotions). We did, however, examine a limited set of emotions. For instance, we assessed only one category of unpleasant emotions (i.e., negative self-enhancing emotions). Future research could test whether the current effects generalize to other negative emotions such as fear, guilt, sadness and shame, and assess potential cultural differences.

### Summary

What emotions should people strive for to be happy? Consistent with Aristotle's claims, our investigation suggests that people are happier when they experience emotions they desire, whether such emotions are pleasant or unpleasant. To the extent that people desire emotions that are consistent with their values, this suggests that happiness entails feeling emotions that are valued, as determined by the unique personal, social, and cultural context of each individual.

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