Living in Alaska: The Role of Self-Monitoring and Uniqueness in Subjective Well-Being

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Abstract

The present study investigates how self-monitoring and uniqueness personality characteristics play a role in predicting subjective well-being in Alaska after controlling for optimism and social support. West Virginia was used as a comparison group. The findings show that optimism and social support contributed to subjective well-being in both places, whereas self-monitoring and people's willingness to defend their beliefs publicly predicted subjective well-being in Alaska but not in West Virginia.

Keywords: Alaska, happiness, self-monitoring, uniqueness

Introduction

Alaska, admitted as the 49th state to the union on January 3, 1959, is thought of as "America's Last Frontier" because of its rugged landscape and climate as well as its vast distance from the continental United States (Borneman, 2004; Senkowsky & Coyne, 2009). Located of the northwest corner of North America, Alaska is the largest state in the United States, encompassing 656,425 square miles, roughly one fifth the size of the lower 48 states combined. Alaska's location near the Arctic Circle gives rise to harsh winter weather and extreme differentials in daylight (from less than 4 hours to 24 hours) and temperature (from -60°F to 90°F) between winter and summer. Given the weather and location, Alaska can be perceived as frozen, dark, and isolated during the winter months. Are people in Alaska happy? If most people are happy (Biswas-Diener, Vitterso, & Diener, 2005; Diener & Diener, 1996) and people in Alaska are no exception, it would be worth looking at what would be good predictors of their happiness

Being happy is important to people regardless of where they live (Diener & Oishi, 2000). Happy people tend to live longer (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001), to make more money (Diener, Nickerson, Lucas, & Sandvik, 2002), and to be socially more connected with others (Veenhoven, 1988) than less happy people. Do places matter to happiness? The geographic and climatic characteristics of the location of residence may not matter. For example, individuals might think that people in California are happier than people in Michigan or Ohio due to better climate and cultural opportunities in California. However, Schkade and Kahneman (1998) found that even though people in both California and the Midwest thought that they would be happier living in California, the residents of the two regions did not show a significant difference in reported overall life satisfaction. People may wrongly predict their happiness by focusing narrowly on the location in which they live and ignoring other factors that can affect their happiness (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003).

Several studies, however, have found significant differences in life satisfaction related to the place of residence. Americans, regardless of where they live, share many commonalities such as national media and the United States school system, but they may not share local or regional factors such as regional climate, traditions, and values (Cohen, 2001; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996; Plaut, Markus, & Lachman, 2002).

Therefore, some indicators of well-being may be valued by all Americans regardless of their place of residence, but other indicators are valued more or less depending on where they live. Plaut, Markus, and Lechman (2002) found that individuals in the Mountain region, which includes Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico, and Arizona, highly value freedom and autonomy as well as environmental mastery. In contrast, individuals in the East South Central region, which includes Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama, tend to value contributing to others' well-being.

Kitayama, Ishii, Imada, and Takemura (2006) showed that predictors of happiness differ depending on the places in Japan. They found that interpersonal duties and obligations are important predictors of happiness to Japanese peoples but personal achievement such as pride was an important predictor of happiness for the residents who voluntarily settle in Japan's Northern Frontier – Hokkiado, but not for mainland Japanese (Kitayama et al., 2006). Biswas-Diener and his colleagues (2005) also found that such culturally distinct groups as the Kenyan Maasai, the United States Amish, and the Greenlandic Inughuit, all reported positive levels of subjective well-being, but there was cultural variability in specific domains of satisfaction. For example, the Amish and Inughuit, who value humility and downplay achievement, reported low levels of pride. In sum, it is possible that people may show a similar level of subjective well-being regardless of their place of residence, but the relative weight of factors contributing to their well-being may differ.

Vandello and Cohen (1999) divided America into nine cultural regions and showed regional differences in the individualism-collectivism dimension. Alaska was categorized as Mountain West and Great Plains along with 10 other states. All states in Mountain West and Great Plains except Alaska were high on individualism. Alaska was ranked 27th out of 50 states on individualism, having the same score as West Virginia and Rhode Island. Considering the low chance of survival without interdependence on others under the extreme conditions in Alaska, it is not surprising that Alaskans were found not to be high on individualism.

Rentfrow, Gosling, and Potter (2008) found that people differ in their personality by geographic region. Alaska was ranked the lowest on agreeableness and conscientiousness, 49th on extraversion and openness to experience, and 47th on neuroticism out of the 50 states. These data show that people in Alaska are different from people in other states in terms of personality; being less agreeable, less organized, less outgoing, and having narrow interests.

The distinctive environmental characteristics of Alaska might appeal to certain people more than others. Some people may leave Alaska after they find out that the environmental uniqueness of Alaska does not appeal to them. Other may love Alaska and stay in or move to Alaska because of the environmental uniqueness. Despite its distinctive environmental characteristics, there is a lack of research on subjective well-being of Alaskans. What personality variables predict who is happier in Alaska? If people are not only passively influenced by their situations but also actively seek and change situations to match their personalities (Snyder & Ickes, 1985), then it is possible that there would be a match between personality characteristics and places. The present study investigates whether self-monitoring and uniqueness play a role in predicting subjective well-being in Alaska, along with the two well-known happiness predictors, optimism and social support. A convenience sample from West Virginia was chosen as a comparison group. The harsh but natured Alaskan environment might appeal to people who behave naturally rather than changing their attitudes depending on situational demands (low self-monitors) and who readily defend their beliefs when someone challenges them.

There is much evidence that optimism, a generalized positive expectancy of experiencing good outcomes (Scheier & Carver, 1985), is related to subjective well-being. Optimism has been linked to both physical and psychological well-being in a number of studies (Carver & Scheier, 2000; Carver et al., 2005; Myers & Diener, 1995; Peterson, 2000; Seligman, 1991).

Research on stress and health shows that social support (Cohen, et al., 2000) and the quality and quantity of social interactions (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001) can be important factors in counteracting the effect of stressors such as lack of resources. For example, individuals with low sociability were about 2.5 times as likely as individuals with high sociability to get a cold (Cohen, et al., 2003). Indeed, social support is often seen as one of the best ways to deal with chronic stress and anxiety disorders (Sapolsky, 2000). As social animals, humans have a desire to form and maintain relationships with other individuals (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and this relatedness with others is one of the key factors in happiness (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

High self-monitors change their behavior across situations because they are more sensitive to social and interpersonal cues of different social contexts, whereas low self-monitors behave consistently across situations (Fuglestad & Snyder, 2009; Gangestad & Snyder, 2000; Snyder, 1974, 1987; Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). Low self-monitors, compared to high self-monitors, are more likely to deliberately seek social situations that are congruent with their attitudes, and avoid social situations that are incongruent with their attitudes (Snyder & Kendzierski, 1982). Snyder and Ickes (1985) suggested that one good way to study personality and social behavior is to adopt a situational strategy that focuses on people's choices and influences on their situations. As quiet people may intentionally choose quiet places but talkative people may deliberately avoid quiet places, preference for living in certain places may reflect personality. Choosing attitude-congruent situations would be more important to low self-monitors because they can express their attitudes without molding them to fit situational demands. On the other hand, high self-monitors, who are good at changing their attitudes and behaviors, would prefer a situation that provides precisely and unambiguously defined situational guidelines. This is because they can tailor their behavior and attitude to the situation (Snyder & Gangestad, 1982).

Alaska is ranked 1st in size but 47th in population. The population density was 1.2 persons per square mile in 2010, making Alaska the nation's most sparsely settled state (O'Harra, 2011; United States Census, 2010). Alaska is about 70 times less densely populated than the United States as a whole and it is about five times less densely populated than Wyoming (5.8 persons per square mile) which is ranked second in population density, and about 64 times less densely populated than West Virginia (77.1 persons per square mile, ranking 31) (United States Census, 2010). Low self-monitors who want to be themselves might be more comfortable in living Alaska due to the low population density.

High self-monitors who want to create appropriate impressions in social situations are more persuaded by images associated with a product. High self-monitors value the physical attractiveness and social status of potential partners more than low self-monitors in selecting dating partners (Snyder, Berscheid, & Glick, 1985; Jones, 1993). On the other hand, low self-monitors who want to convey their underlying values and dispositions are more persuaded by a product's quality than are high self-monitors (Snyder & Debono, 1985; DeBono, 2006). High self-monitors tend to be less committed to relationships and are more prone to change their employers and locations (Jenkins, 1993; Kilduff & Day, 1994; Snyder, Gangestad, & Simpson, 1983; Snyder & Simpson, 1984). Imagine how important product images and fancy clothing would be when the temperature is below -50°F and daylight lasts only 4 hours. We predict that Alaska would not be an ideal place for people to whom self-presentation, images, and social status are highly valued. Thus, Alaska would be a less suitable place for high self-monitors.

After reviewing 25 years research on self-monitoring, the developers of the self-monitoring construct (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000) raised a question about the original definition of low-self-monitors: "As much as high self-monitors are concerned with constructing social images, low self-monitors may be equally motivated to establish and protect reputations of being earnest and sincere" (p. 533). "Are low self-monitors, far from being unconcerned about public opinion, in fact highly concerned that they have reputations of being genuine and sincere people who act on their beliefs?" (p. 547). By behaving consistently across situations, they might want to deliver a message to individuals that they are sincere (Fuglestad & Snyder, 2009; Gangestad & Snyder, 2000). Sincerity and reliability might also be more valued in a harsh environment. In other words, people may need to rely on others for survival, so they may want to know who others really are and what others really think. People who change their behavior depending on situations (high self-monitors) might be more distrustful than people who do not change their behavior regardless of situational demand (low self-monitors). In sum, although previous studies have indicated self-monitoring is usually not significantly related to life satisfaction (e.g., Morrison, 1997), self-monitoring could be related to subjective well-being in Alaska. Low self-monitors might be a better fit than high self-monitors in Alaska.

People in Alaska might value the uniqueness of each individual more and tolerate greater differences among others. Therefore, it is also predicted that a willingness to defend one's beliefs would be related to subjective well-being in Alaska. In a pilot study, it was found that Alaskans who are happy seem to be proud of living in a unique environment and of overcoming whatever obstacles the severe environment brings to them. Their preference of uniqueness (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977, 1980) may match well with the unique environment of Alaska and contributes to their enjoyment of life there.

Furthermore, a common question that Alaskans receive from others is "Why do you live in Alaska?" We predict that individuals' willingness to defend their beliefs publicly, which is one of three sub-factors in uniqueness, could be an important factor that is related to happiness in Alaska.

In this study, we tested four hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: There are no differences between people in Alaska and West Virginia on subjective well-being.
Hypothesis 2: Self-monitoring is a significant predictor of subjective well-being in Alaska but not West Virginia.
Hypothesis 3: Uniqueness is a significant predictor of subjective well-being in Alaska but not West Virginia.
Hypothesis 4: Both optimism and perceived social support are significant predictors of subjective well-being in both groups.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Two hundred seventy three college students (University of Alaska, Fairbanks, n = 124; Marshall University, West Virginia, n = 149) participated in the study in exchange for extra-credit at the end of November, 2007. Fairbanks is the second largest city in Alaska with about 50,000 people, with the next closest major city, Anchorage, being 359 miles away. There were 197 women and 75 men, with ages ranging between 18 and 56 years (M = 20.87, SD = 4.6). The majority of the participants were Caucasian (n = 227, 83.2%), with other ethnicities in similar proportion (Alaska Native, African-American, Hispanic, and Asian). All participants gave their informed consent prior to their inclusion in the study. Participants completed a questionnaire packet that had uniqueness, self-monitoring, dispositional optimism, perceived social support and subjective well-being measures.

Measures

Dispositional optimism. Optimism was measured with the revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R, Scheier et al., 1994). The LOT-R consists of 10-items, including 4 fillers on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Example items are "In certain times, I usually expect the best" and "If something can go wrong for me, it will." Scheier, Carver and Bridges (1994) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .78 and test-retest reliability (over a 28-month interval) of .79. The Cronbach's alpha in our sample was .80 (N = 273). Scores on optimism ranged from 6 to 30, and the overall sample mean and the standard deviation were 20.88 and 5.07 respectively.

Perceived social support. The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS, Zimet et al., 1988) measures adequacy of perceived social support from family members, friends, and one's significant other. The scale consists of 12 items on a 7-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 7 (*very strongly agree*). A higher score indicates a higher level of perceived support. Examples from this scale include, "I get the emotional help and support I need from my family", and "There is a special person who is around who cares about my feelings". Zimet et al. (1988) reported high reliabilities of the scale (Cronbach's alpha = .88; test-retest reliability over a 2-3 month period = .85). The Cronbach's alpha in our sample was .94 (N = 272). The overall sample mean and standard deviation on perceived social support were 68.72 and 15.03 respectively.

Self-monitoring. Self-monitoring was measured with the 18-item self-monitoring scale, which assesses the degree to which individuals change their behavior depending on situational demands (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). The self-monitoring scale has been shown to have good psychometric properties (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000; Snyder, 1974; Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). Some items from this scale include, "I find it hard to imitate the behavior of other people" and "At parties and social gatherings, I do not attempt to do or say things that others will like." The Cronbach's alpha in our sample was .71 (N = 266). The overall sample mean and standard deviation were 9.52 and 3.50 respectively.

Uniqueness. Uniqueness was measured by the Need for Uniqueness (NFU) scale which assesses a positive striving for being different relative to other people (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977, 1980). The scale consists of 32 items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strong disagreement*) to 5 (*strong agreement*). It contains three sub-scales: Lack of concern regarding others' reactions, desire not to always follow rules, and willingness to publicly defend one's beliefs. The single-factor model of NFU based on the full set of items has been criticized for significant heterogeneity among the NFU items (Tepper & Hoyle, 1996).

For example, according to the Need for Uniqueness explanation, people striving for uniqueness may value scarce products because having a scarce product is a way of achieving their uniqueness relative to others. However, the empirical findings on the moderating role of the need for uniqueness between scarcity effect and enhancement of value were inconsistent (Lynn, 1991). Tepper and Hoyle (1996) suspected that the NFU may not be a unitary psychological construct. This is why the NFU scale has not been widely used in published empirical research even though the uniqueness motivation is appealing, particularly in consumer psychology research. Using confirmatory factor analysis, they found that the oblique three-factor model was superior to the single-factor model. The present study used the three factor model, and the Cronbach's alphas for three factors in our sample were .77 (lack of concern regarding others' reactions), .64 (desire not to always follow rules), and .59 (willingness to publicly defend one's beliefs.)

Subjective well-being. The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, &, Griffin 1985) has five items designed to measure global, rather than specific, subjective well-being. The SWLS has been shown to have good psychometric properties (Pavot & Diener 1993; Pavot, Diener, Colvin, & Sandvik, 1991). Examples from this scale include, "I am satisfied with my life", and "So far I have gotten the important things I want in life", with responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The Cronbach's alpha in this sample was .83 (N = 273). The overall sample mean and standard deviation on perceived social support were 25.26 and 6.06 respectively.

Results

As predicted, there was no difference between Alaska (M = 24.65, SD = 6.07) and West Virginia (M = 25.77, SD = 6.03) on subjective well-being, $t(271) = -1.52$, ns. Both groups were relatively happy, and they were in the range of *slightly satisfied* to *satisfied* (Pavot & Diener 1993, p.165). Table 1 contains the descriptive statistics and correlations associated with each of the variables.

Table 2 presents the results of fitting of hierarchical multiple regression models predicting subjective well-being. Consistent with previous studies, optimism and perceived social support were statistically significant for predicting subjective well-being in both groups, $R^2 = .31$, $F_{\text{Alaska}}(2, 116) = 27.00$, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .43$, $F_{\text{West Virginia}}(2, 142) = 53.94$, $p < .001$.

After controlling for optimism and perceived social control, it was estimated whether self-monitoring and uniqueness still significantly predicted subjective well-being in Alaska, but not in West Virginia. With the addition of uniqueness and self-monitoring variables, R^2 was significantly improved for Alaska, $R^2_{\text{Change}} = .06$, $F_{\text{Alaska}}(4, 112) = 2.58$, $p < .05$, but did not significantly improve R^2 for West Virginia, $R^2_{\text{Change}} = .01$, $F_{\text{West Virginia}}(4, 138) = .74$, $p = .57$. Only in the Alaska group, self-monitoring ($\beta = -.18$, $t(112) = -2.18$, $p < .05$) and willingness to defend beliefs ($\beta = .24$, $t(112) = 2.76$, $p < .01$) significantly predicted subjective well-being. Although the two groups were similar in overall level of life satisfaction, self-monitoring, and willingness to defend beliefs are significant personality variables in predicting happiness in Alaska but not in West Virginia.

Discussion

Both the Alaska and West Virginia groups reported similar levels of subjective well-being, and they were relatively happy. This result supports the hypothesis that there is no difference between Alaska and West Virginia on the subjective well-being. It was also found that optimism and social support were major predictors of subjective well-being in both groups. Alaska and West Virginia shared similar levels of reported subjective well-being, but self-monitoring and willingness to defend beliefs were significant predictors of subjective well-being only for Alaska but not for West Virginia. The other two subscales of uniqueness, desire not to follow rules and lack of concern regarding other's reactions, were not significant for either group.

As the findings show, people in Alaska whose behaviors are more likely to be guided by their inner attitudes, dispositions, and values, and who report that they are willing to defend their beliefs publicly have a higher subjective well-being. This might imply that certain personality variables are more important in certain places for predicting happiness. Optimism and social support were important common predictors of happiness for both Alaska and West Virginia. Self-monitoring and defending beliefs, however, were place-contingent predictors of happiness, and they were only significant for Alaska, not for West Virginia. An anthem of an elementary school of Fairbanks says, "When it's 40 below and 10 feet of snow, you'll see what we're made of."

Using Gibson's (1979) concept of affordance, Baron and Boudreau (1987) write:

> From an affordance perspective, personality and the environment are related in complementary fashion, similar to the relationship between keys and locks. Personality, in this metaphor, is a key in the search of the "right" lock, whereas the environment, including other people, is the lock waiting to be opened so that its affordances can be realized. Viewed in this manner, personality and environment are interactive in that each is incomplete without the other. (p. 1227)

The present study left more questions than answers. We did not test how people in Alaska perceive and evaluate their environment. It is well known that the subjective evaluation of different traits and characteristics can dramatically change from insiders to outsiders of most groups. For example, positive traits such as *thrifty* and *generous* in in-group members can be perceived as negative traits such as *stingy* and *extravagant* in out-group members (Campbell, 1967; Peabody, 1968). Alaska's environment can be perceived as *cold and isolated* from an outsiders' view, but as *brave and adventurous* from an insiders' point of view. If there are perceptual differences of Alaska's environment between insiders and outsiders, it would help explain why there is no difference between people in Alaska and people not in Alaska on subjective well-being.

People in Alaska often mention that the unique environment of Alaska may not be suitable to everyone. The teacher turnover in rural districts in Alaska is over 20%, meaning one out of five teachers leaves their school district (Hill & Hirshberg, 2008). The turnover rate is even higher (over 30%) for new teachers with a year or less experience. The present study suggests that it is possible that certain personalities may match better with certain environments. For future research, it would be important to investigate the relationships between personalities and turnover rates in order to enhance hiring procedures in areas with harsh environments, such as Alaska.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Variables

	Alaska *M (SD)*	WV *M (SD)*	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. SWB	24.65 (6.07)	25.77 (6.03)		.38	.50	-.19	.12	-.22	.10
2. Optimism	21.12 (4.94)	20.67 (5.18)	.63		.25	-.03	.12	-.10	.30
3. SS	67.21(13.11)	69.98 (16.41)	.29	.16		-.15	-.03	-.30	.05
4. SM	9.89 (3.51)	9.22 (3.48)	-.08	-.01	.03		.38	.28	.14
5. WPD	50.80 (8.42)	49.71 (8.14)	.01	.07	-.01	.19		.36	.39
6. DNF	32.37 (6.33)	29.78 (5.53)	-.10	-.15	-.14	.17	.16		.24
7. LC	18.56 (4.10)	18.72 (4.04)	.19	.18	.14	.13	.29	.17	

Notes. SWB = subjective well-being; SS = social support; SM = self-monitoring; WPD = willingness to publicly defend one's beliefs; DNF = desire not to follow rules; LC = lack of concern regarding other's reactions. Correlation coefficients for Alaska are listed above the diagonal and for West Virginia below the diagonal. All correlations greater than .18 for Alaska (.17 for West Virginia) are significant, $p < .05$, two-tailed.

Table 2: Results of fitting of multiple regression models predicting subjective well-being

	Alaska		West Virginia	
VARIABLE	$b(SE_b)$	β	$b(SE_b)$	β
Optimism	0.27(0.10)[b]	0.22	0.70(0.08)[c]	0.59
SS	0.18(0.04)[c]	0.39	0.07(0.02)[b]	0.19
SM	-0.32(0.15)[a]	-0.18	-0.15(0.12)	-0.08
WPD	0.38(0.14)[b]	0.24	-0.04(0.10)	-0.03
DNF	-0.10(0.08)	-0.10	0.05(0.08)	0.05
LC	-0.01(0.06)	-0.01	0.05(0.05)	0.07
R^2	0.38		0.44	

Notes. SWB = subjective well-being; SS = social support; SM = self-monitoring; WPD = willingness to publicly defend one's beliefs; DNF = desire not to follow rules; LC = lack of concern regarding other's reactions. [a]p <.05, [b]p <.01, [c]p <.001.