Leisure beliefs and the subjective well-being of nations

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Leisure beliefs and the subjective well-being of nations

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

The policies of most governments focus on improving material prosperity. Yet, wealth only weakly predicts well-being. It is therefore important to understand whether factors other than money shape the happiness of nations. Here, we construct a data set of 79 countries (\(N=220,000\)) and explore whether differences in the prioritization of time (leisure) vs. money (work) explain cross-country differences in happiness. Consistent with our predictions, countries whose citizens value leisure more than work report higher subjective well-being at the country and individual level. These effects hold in high and low GDP countries. Critically, we find evidence for a novel mechanism: people who value leisure over work are less negatively impacted by financial instability. Moving beyond individual welfare, the value that nations place on leisure vs. work fundamentally shapes happiness.

\textbf{ARTICLE HISTORY}

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\textbf{KEYWORDS}
Leisure; work; happiness; subjective well-being; public policy

\textbf{Introduction}

Can wealth promote happiness, and if so, how? Money provides access to experiences that are linked to greater happiness, including vacations (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), education (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004), and healthcare (Shields & Price, 2005). Yet, other factors such as time affluence also uniquely contribute to well-being (Mogilner, Whillans, & Norton, 2018). In nationally representative samples of employed Americans, people who prioritize time over money report greater life satisfaction, controlling for factors such as income, age, and marital status (Whillans, Weidman, & Dunn, 2016). People’s leisure beliefs are especially important for well-being: Individuals who consider leisure wasteful are less happy than those who do not (Tonietto, Malkoc, Reczek, & Norton, 2019). Moving beyond the individual, we sought to explore whether cross-country differences in the proclivity to prioritize time (leisure) over money (work) shape wellbeing at the level of nations.

This research question follows from an emerging literature documenting the happiness benefits of prioritizing time over money (Hershfield, Mogilner, & Barnea, 2016; Whillans & Dunn, 2018; Whillans et al., 2016). In one set of studies, thousands of respondents completed a single-item measure assessing whether they valued time or money (Whillans et al., 2016). People answered whether they were willing to give up time to have more money (money-focused). Responses to this measure predicted people’s hypothetical choices when faced with a variety of scenarios, such as choosing a cheaper apartment that was further away from work vs. a closer, more expensive apartment. Responses to this measure also predicted people’s likelihood of selecting a housecleaning voucher versus a cash prize in a lottery and the number of hours that people reported working each week (Whillans et al., 2016). Most relevant for the current research, people who were time-focused were happier.

In a nationally representative sample of 1,265 working adults living in the United States, people who valued time over money reported higher life satisfaction and this result held controlling for variables that could otherwise explain these results, such as household income, education, age, marital status, number of children living at home, and number of work hours per week. Meta-analyzing the results of six studies conducted with students and working adults living in the US and Canada (\(N=4,328\); Whillans et al., 2016), there was a small, reliable effect whereby people who valued time more than money reported higher subjective well-being. This association held for all three facets of subjective well-being.

Of course, cross-sectional data are inherently limited, precluding inferences about whether the tendency to prioritize time causes greater happiness. It is possible that happier people are more likely to choose to prioritize time. To begin to disentangle these possibilities,
researchers have studied individuals on the brink of a critical life transition – graduating from university – tracking their priorities, feelings, and choices over time. In this research, after controlling for initial levels of happiness, individuals who prioritized time over money during their final year of college reported greater happiness 12–24 months after graduating (Whillans, Macchia, & Dunn, 2019). This longitudinal study provides the strongest evidence to date that the broad proclivity to prioritize time over money predicts subsequent well-being.

Additional data supports the idea that prioritizing time causally increases happiness (Whillans, Dunn, Smeets, Bekkers, & Norton, 2017). In one experiment, participants were provided with $40 to spend on each of two weekends. On one weekend, participants were assigned to spend this money on a time-saving purchase, in ‘any way that would save time.’ On another weekend, the same individuals were asked to spend this $40 payment on a material purchase for themselves. People reported higher positive affect, and lower negative affect on the day that they made a time-saving purchase as compared to the day that they made a material purchase (Whillans et al., 2017). Together, these data suggest that the broad orientations people have toward time and money can fundamentally shape happiness.

While informative, prior research has not yet explored the link between valuing time over money and well-being across countries. Indeed, prior research has focused exclusively on people who live in countries that are relatively affluent. To ensure the generalizability of these results (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010), research is needed that includes countries with varying levels of income. People pay most attention to scarce resources and derive emotional benefits from overcoming resource scarcity (e.g., Shah, Shafir, & Mullainathan, 2015). Thus, individuals living in wealthier nations who are more time constrained (Hamermesh & Lee, 2007) might benefit most from valuing time over money. In contrast, individuals living in less wealthy nations who are more financially constrained might benefit most from valuing money (Lee, Hall, & Wood, 2018 for a related argument).

In this paper, we explore the role of cross-country differences in the prioritization of time (leisure) vs. money (work) and well-being in a sample of 79 countries. Specifically, we explore how the tendency to prioritize leisure is associated with well-being within both low and high GDP countries. Following research showing that prioritizing time protects individuals against stress (Whillans et al., 2017), we also examine whether cross-country differences in prioritizing leisure protects citizens from the negative impact of financial uncertainty – a major cause of stress for working adults worldwide (Hobfoll, 1989).

Until recently, Gross Domestic Product (GDP: the monetary value of the goods and services produced in a country) was considered the main indicator of societal well-being, due to a general belief among policy makers that wealth results in happiness (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009). However, GDP fails to capture factors that impact citizens’ well-being, such as general optimism, income inequality, and air pollution (Graham, 2017; Stiglitz et al., 2009; Weinstein & Stone, 2018). Thus, this examination follows from a call for researchers to examine non-monetary factors that may promote nation-level happiness.

**Methods**

To examine our hypotheses, we employed data from the World Values Survey (WVS), which is a cross-sectional data set that includes data from nearly 100 countries (see supplementary material for more detail about the data set). The WVS uses stratified random sampling to obtain nationally representative samples: Across countries, individuals are randomly selected from census units, election sections, electoral registers, polling places, central population registers or are drawn from national registers (Inglehart, Basáñez, Jaime, Halman, & Luijkx, 2004). In addition, quota sampling is assigned on the basis of age, gender, religion and occupation to ensure that included countries are nationally representative on these factors. Data are collected every four years (starting from 1984) resulting in a final data set that contains over six waves of data. All WVS respondents complete a 30 or 60 minute questionnaire with a variety of psychosocial measures including happiness, self-reported health, financial and life satisfaction, religion and gender norms. Importantly, the WVS has a variable that is critical to our research question: the extent to which individuals value leisure more than work.

**Valuing leisure over work.** We created our main independent variable using two measures requiring respondents to report the importance of leisure and work in their personal lives. Specifically, respondents answered ‘For each of the following aspects (leisure time, work), indicate how important it is in your life’ on a scale from 1 (very important) to 4 (not at all important). First, we reverse coded these measures such that a higher number represented greater importance. Next, consistent with prior research (Whillans et al., 2016), we subtracted the importance of work question from the importance of leisure question to create a measure that represented respondents’ tendency to value leisure more than work, such that a higher number denoted the extent respondents valued leisure more than work.
Subjective well-being. Our key dependent variable of interest was subjective well-being (SWB), which is typically defined as a combination of high life satisfaction, high positive affect, and low negative affect (Andrews & Withe, 1976). To examine life satisfaction, respondents answered a well-validated question ‘All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?’ on a scale from 1 (Dissatisfied) to 10 (Satisfied). We selected this measure because it has high validity and reliability (Diener, Inglehart, & Tay, 2013) and because it has been used by other researchers to explore subjective well-being at the country and individual level (Easterlin, 2009; Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). We also examined positive affect: ‘Taking all things together, would you say you are: Very happy (1), Rather happy (2), Not very happy (3), Not at all happy (4).’ We reverse coded this measure such that a higher number represented higher happiness. Moreover, we created a composite of SWB by standardizing and adding the life satisfaction and happiness measures together (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). For the sake of brevity, and due to the higher psychometric properties of the life satisfaction measure, we focused our primary analyses on life satisfaction. We report the results of the other subjective well-being measures in the supplementary material. The results are statistically equivalent regardless of whether we focus on life satisfaction, financial satisfaction, positive affect, or SWB.

Financial well-being. To assess a specific domain of well-being, we also examined financial satisfaction. To provide this measure, respondents were asked ‘How satisfied are you with the financial situation of your household?’ on a scale ranging from 1 (Completely Dissatisfied) to 10 (Completely Satisfied). We also report these results in the supplementary material.

Financial stress/concern. We conducted additional analyses that included a proxy for financial insecurity: a dummy variable for the years around 2008 economic crisis (‘1’ represents people who took the survey in 2008 and 2009). The 2008 financial crisis has been shown to bring uncertainty about the economic future of the countries, a situation that can lead citizens to feel financially insecure (e.g., Chung & van Oorschot, 2011). We included 2008, and 2009 in the dummy variable as these years have been found to most clearly represent the effects of the financial crisis (Brunnermeier, 2009; Helleiner, 2011).

Demographic Controls (Individual-Level). Following prior research on time and money trade-offs (Whillans et al., 2017), we controlled for individual characteristics that could otherwise explain our results including age, gender, household income, employment status, and education (See supplementary material for the variable names of covariates from the WVS).

Demographic controls (country-level). We controlled for GDP per capita in US international dollars (GDP) from the World Bank database and country and wave fixed effects to account for factors that could differ across countries and years.

Data set overview. Overall, we obtained a data set with around 220,000 observations, 79 countries and five waves that covered the 1989–2016 time period (except for 1992, 1993, 1994 and 2015 as these years did not contain our key variables of interest).

Results

Hypothesis 1: The tendency to value leisure more than work predicts subjective well-being across countries

In our first set of analyses, we examined whether the tendency to value leisure more than work predicted the subjective well-being of nations. We averaged the data for every country over the 1989–2016 time period (N = 79) and predicted a measure of subjective well-being (life satisfaction) from the tendency to value leisure more than work at the country level. Consistent with our predictions, across the entire time span of interest (1989–2016), countries that valued leisure over work showed greater national life satisfaction (Figure 1).

Next, we conducted regression analyses to more rigorously examine H1. Taking every country and year into consideration (N = 220,000), respondents who valued leisure more than work reported higher life satisfaction, even after controlling for demographic factors, the log of GDP per capita lagged by one year, as well as wave and country fixed effects (B = 0.062, p < 0.001, 95% CI [0.052, 0.073; Table 1, column 1]). Respondents who valued leisure more than work also reported higher financial satisfaction, higher positive affect and greater subjective well-being on our composite measure controlling for our key demographic variables. See supplementary material for full regression models.

Furthermore, we extended Hypothesis 1 by examining whether the tendency to value leisure more than work predicted subjective well-being across countries with different level of wealth. The positive association between valuing leisure over work and life satisfaction held in high and low GDP countries, even after controlling for individual-level covariates, year fixed effects, and the log of GDP per capita lagged by one year (High GDP countries: $B = 0.049, p < 0.001, 95\% CI [0.036, 0.063]$ Low GDP countries: $B = 0.081, p < 0.001, 95\% CI [0.064, 0.099]$
Figure 1. Average of value of leisure over work and average life satisfaction between 1989 and 2016 by country. The fitted OLS regression is: \( y = 7.168 + 1.24x \) (Adj. \( R^2 = 0.21 \)).


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable: Life satisfaction</th>
<th>Full sample (1)</th>
<th>High GDP (2)</th>
<th>Low GDP (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leisure-work importance (Higher = leisure)</td>
<td>0.062***</td>
<td>0.049***</td>
<td>0.081***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−0.003***</td>
<td>−0.002***</td>
<td>−0.004***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>−0.061***</td>
<td>−0.067***</td>
<td>−0.050***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years old finished education</td>
<td>0.002***</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.005***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment status (Ref.: Employed full-time)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed part-time</td>
<td>−0.086***</td>
<td>−0.081***</td>
<td>−0.125***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>−0.037***</td>
<td>−0.013</td>
<td>−0.066**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>−0.414***</td>
<td>−0.541***</td>
<td>−0.301***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>0.129***</td>
<td>0.177***</td>
<td>0.037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>0.157***</td>
<td>0.138***</td>
<td>0.146***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>−0.089***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>−0.182***</td>
<td>−0.339***</td>
<td>−0.092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale of income</td>
<td>0.227***</td>
<td>0.180***</td>
<td>0.301***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log of GDP per capita ( t_1 )</td>
<td>−0.271***</td>
<td>0.219</td>
<td>−0.599***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>7.126***</td>
<td>3.627***</td>
<td>12.325***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>154,216</td>
<td>89,687</td>
<td>64,529</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( R^2 )</td>
<td>0.186</td>
<td>0.130</td>
<td>0.204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted ( R^2 )</td>
<td>0.185</td>
<td>0.130</td>
<td>0.203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual Std. Error</td>
<td>2.073 (df = 154120)</td>
<td>1.968 (df = 89625)</td>
<td>2.195 (df = 64476)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F Statistic</td>
<td>369.661*** (df = 95; 154120)</td>
<td>220.146*** (df = 61; 89625)</td>
<td>316.949*** (df = 52; 64476)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001. Standard errors in parentheses. All models include wave and country fixed effects.
Table 1, columns 2 and 3). See supplementary material for full regression models.

**Hypothesis 2: Prioritizing leisure over work predicts subjective well-being across countries, by protecting citizens from the negative effects of financial worries**

Prior research suggests that valuing time over money protects people from the negative effects of stress that can occur in everyday life (e.g., time stress; Whillans et al., 2017). Thus, we examined whether the tendency to value leisure over work would lessen the negative impact of a common stress that people worldwide experience: financial stress. To explore this possibility, we examined whether the tendency to value leisure over work was protective of the negative effects of the 2008 financial crisis on subjective well-being.

Consistent with this hypothesis, respondents who took the survey around the 2008 financial crisis and who valued leisure more than work, reported higher life satisfaction, even after controlling for demographic factors, the log of GDP per capita lagged by one year, and wave and country fixed effects, \( B = 0.068, p < 0.001, 95\% CI [0.044, 0.067] \) (Table 2, column 1). The results for life satisfaction were only significant for low GDP countries (High GDP countries: \( B = 0.026, p = 0.273, 95\% CI [-0.020, 0.072] \). Low GDP countries: \( B = 0.080, p = 0.004, 95\% CI [0.026, 0.135] \) (Table 2, columns 2 and 3). See supplementary material for full regression models.

**Discussion**

Using a large-scale data set with 220,000 respondents from nearly 80 countries, we provide the first empirical evidence that valuing leisure over work predicts subjective well-being at the individual and country level. Prior research provided causal evidence that prioritizing time over money is beneficial for the happiness of the individuals (Whillans et al., 2017) but no prior research had looked at this association at the country level or across different countries around the world. In our analyses, the impact of valuing leisure over work on life satisfaction was similar in magnitude to the impact of GDP (\( B = 0.05 \) vs. \( B = 0.04 \)) attesting to the idea that factors other than money can predict the happiness of nations.

The positive association between valuing leisure over work and well-being held in high and low GDP countries and after controlling for individual-level and country-level covariates such as income and education. Our approach of including wave and country fixed effects allowed us to rule out changes in political climate as an explanatory factor. We also found evidence for a novel mechanism: valuing leisure over work promoted well-being by protecting people from the negative effects of financial insecurity on well-being. Additional analyses suggest that these results were driven by citizens of low GDP countries, who were most protected from the financial crisis when they reported valuing leisure over work.

These results add to a growing body of literature suggesting that money (GDP) is not the only factor that matters for citizens’ happiness (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004; Easterlin, 1974; Luttmer, 2005). With these findings in mind, an important question to ask is whether there is any way to shift citizen’s time and money orientations to better promote happiness. An appealing answer to this question is that the role of policymakers is critical: In the World Values Survey, the proportion of people who valued leisure more than work varied from 40% (e.g., Netherlands 39.67%, Australia 38.74%, UK 38.22%) to 1.2% (e.g., Philippines 1.55%, Burkina Faso 1.52%, Tanzania 1.16%, see supplementary material). In general, Latin America and Africa were the regions where a lower number of people valued leisure over work (Figure 2).

Thus, the existence of policies that encourage citizens to make time-related decisions (such as incentivizing employees to take their paid vacations) could be vital. Indeed, such regulations could make valuing leisure possible and more socially desirable.

At the employee-level, workplaces could start to systematically reward employees with time. For example, a pilot programme at Stanford University School of Medicine that aimed to mitigate the consequences of time-related stress of academic medicine found that flexibility policies and a time-banking system that rewarded employees with time-saving services like housecleaning had positive implications for well-being. Employees who took part in this pilot study reported higher satisfaction with professional support regarding long-term career goals and personal life and were less likely to postpone their vacations and health habits due to a lack of time (Fassiotto, Simard, Sandborg, Valentine, & Raymond, 2018).

At the country-level, work-life balance policies are gaining popularity in the happiest countries around the world. The Gothenburg City Council in Sweden, a top 10 country in the World Happiness Report (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2018) switched from an eight-hour to a six-hour working day and employees who took part in this trial reported higher happiness, less stress, showed greater productivity and took less sick leave (Oltermann, 2017). Relatedly, in an attempt to reduce the risk of burnout and overwork for employees, the French government now requires companies with more than 50 employees to restrict email hours: workers should not send or answer...
emails after work (Morris, 2017). These and related policies could help citizens shift focus from money to time and increase citizens’ happiness.

While the current data does not speak to all possible underlying mechanisms, another pathway by which valuing leisure could promote happiness is by encouraging social connection. One of the most enjoyable activities in most people’s day is socializing (e.g., (Krueger, Kahneman, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2009); for recent analyses using the American Time Use Survey, see: https://osf.io/tgkn4/), and researchers have argued that simply thinking about time makes people more inclined to invest in social activities and relationships (Aaker, Rudd, & Mogilner, 2011). Given the central importance of relationships for happiness (e.g., Diener, Seligman, Choi, & Oishi, 2018), it is possible that prioritizing time over money promotes well-being to the extent that this value propels greater investment in cultivating relationships. Consistent with this reasoning, Hershfield et al. (2016) found that among people who said they would like to have more time (vs. money), those who reported that they would spend their additional time with other people exhibited greater happiness. Thus, people who value leisure more than work likely spend more time socializing, explaining why valuing leisure over work is linked to greater happiness in these data (see also: Whillans & Dunn, 2018). Future research should explore whether increased time spent socializing predicts the cross-cultural differences in happiness observed here.

Prioritizing leisure may promote well-being by protecting people from the negative effects of stress. Consistent with this idea, people who valued leisure more than work were less negatively affected by financial insecurity. These findings are consistent with research showing that prioritizing time protects people from time stress (Whillans et al., 2017). Across studies, respondents were asked how overwhelmed they felt by the demands of daily life (Whillans et al., 2017). Among


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable: Life satisfaction</th>
<th>Full sample (1)</th>
<th>High GDP countries (2)</th>
<th>Low GDP countries (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leisure-work value (Higher = leisure)</td>
<td>0.055***</td>
<td>0.046***</td>
<td>0.073***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 financial crisis (Yes=1)</td>
<td>0.079*</td>
<td>0.455***</td>
<td>−0.124*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure-work value (Higher = leisure) x 2008 financial crisis (Yes=1)</td>
<td>0.068***</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>0.080**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−0.003***</td>
<td>−0.002***</td>
<td>−0.004***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>−0.061***</td>
<td>−0.067***</td>
<td>−0.050**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years old finished education</td>
<td>0.002**</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.005**</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Employed part-time</td>
<td>−0.086***</td>
<td>−0.076**</td>
<td>−0.127***</td>
</tr>
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<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>−0.037*</td>
<td>−0.013</td>
<td>−0.065*</td>
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<td>−0.413***</td>
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<td>−0.301***</td>
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<td>0.039</td>
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<td>0.143***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Scale of income</td>
<td>0.227***</td>
<td>0.181***</td>
<td>0.301***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log of GDP per capita t−1</td>
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<td>−0.088</td>
<td>−0.612***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>Observations</td>
<td>154,216</td>
<td>89,687</td>
<td>64,529</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.186</td>
<td>0.131</td>
<td>0.204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0.185</td>
<td>0.131</td>
<td>0.203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual Std. Error</td>
<td>2.073 (df = 154,118)</td>
<td>1.967 (df = 89,623)</td>
<td>2.195 (df = 64,474)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F Statistic</td>
<td>362.246*** (df = 97; 154,118)</td>
<td>215.127*** (df = 63; 89,623)</td>
<td>305.624*** (df = 54; 64,474)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001. Standard errors in parentheses. All models include wave and country fixed effects.
individuals who spent money on time-saving purchases, the typically observed relationship between time stress and life satisfaction was attenuated. In the current analyses, we extend this prior research by showing that prioritizing time is protective from the negative effects of financial stress. Prioritizing time might help people cope with stress because they spend money on time-saving services that allow them to directly deal with their demands (i.e., hiring a housecleaner when working overtime: Whillans, Pow, & Norton, 2018). Prioritizing time could also help people cope with financial stressors because they are less likely to derive self-esteem from their finances and are less negatively impacted by changes to their financial situation (see Park, Ward, & Naragon-Gainey, 2017). Future research should further disentangle the mechanisms underlying these results.

In our correlational study, the benefits of prioritizing leisure over work were not moderated by cross-cultural differences such as income or education. However, it is possible that other cross-cultural differences could influence the benefits of valuing time. For example, individuals from certain cultural backgrounds may be particularly prone to experience guilt about prioritizing time. People who endorse the protestant work ethic – which emphasizes hard work as a moral obligation (Furnham, 1982) – may feel especially guilty about prioritizing leisure over work, undermining well-being. Consistent with this reasoning, in two correlational studies with a total of over 1,000 participants, the endorsement of the protestant work ethic was linked to greater feelings of guilt about making time-saving purchases, undermining the well-being benefits (Whillans, Lee-Yoon, & Dunn, 2019).

The hedonic consequences of prioritizing time could also depend on broader social norms about time use. The typical link between time stress and happiness does not emerge in places where it is normative to work a lot of hours. Combining data from the Gallup World Poll and the US Current Population Survey (N = 954,225), researchers found evidence that when people live in areas where the average number of hours worked by their peers is relatively high, the negative impact of time stress is attenuated (Whillans, Ward, Collins, & Norton, 2019). In contrast, when people lived in areas where the average number of hours worked by peers is relatively low, they experienced a greater negative impact of time stress on subjective well-being. This finding points to the possibility that prioritizing time over money may offer relatively few benefits when people are surrounded by other people who have very little free time. Additional work is needed to understand the role of these other mechanisms – protestant work ethic and work norms – in shaping the potential benefits of prioritizing time as well as to further determine the causal nature of these relationships.

Time is the most precious resource that people have, yet citizens and policy makers often believe money will result in greater happiness (Whillans & West, 2018). The current research is the first to show that prioritizing work over leisure comes at a cost to national happiness. Future research should examine the role of time-related policies in shaping citizens’ priorities, reducing distress, and improving the health and happiness of nations.
Including the lagged measure of the log of GDP per capita (i.e., a country’s national income) allows us to reduce the effects of reverse causality: Although current subjective well-being may contribute to a country’s GDP per capita, current subjective well-being cannot contribute to past levels of GDP per capita. Wave and country fixed effects allow us to account for other cultural and political factors that take place in specific years and countries that might not be captured by other control variables.

Disclosure statement

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