



Who is Happy?

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This article looks at a number of new studies which show that happiness and life satisfaction are available to everyone, regardless of age, gender, nationality or socio-economic background. Better clues to subjective well-being (SWB) are found by knowing about a person's traits, close relationships, work experiences, culture, and religiosity. We present here the elements that a theory of happiness should incorporate; adaption, world-view, and personal goals.

Introduction

"Happiness is an imaginary condition, formerly attributed by the living to the dead, now usually attributed by adults to children, and by children to adults." This was the view of psychiatrist Thomas Szasz and it reflected the opinions of many writers and academics in the early 20th century that 'happiness' was a rare commodity. However, due to a relatively recent surge of interest in well-being which started in the 80s, we now know that happiness is more abundant than was previously believed with researchers concluding that most people are generally happy. Whilst the scientific study of emotional well-being is new, theories about happiness are ages old and they provide a wide variety of explanations. Discerning the actual routes of subjective well-being requires rigorous scientific inquiry.

Measuring Subjective Well-Being

Psychological investigations of well-being usually use measures of physical and material well-being alongside assessments of subjective well-being. Measures range from multi-item scales to single questions. Self-reports of global well-being fall consistently within the 0.5 to 0.7 range. In order to verify that answers to SWB scales are not influenced by response artefacts (e.g. social desirability), scores are compared with other measures of well-being. For example; those who describe themselves as happy recall more positive events and fewer negative events and also they seem happy to their friends and family members. Ratings derived from interviews correlate well with their SWB scores. Measures of happiness are responsive to recent good events (e.g. therapy) and bad events (e.g. feeling ill). They also predict other indicators of psychological well-being; happy people are less self-focused, less hostile and abusive, and less vulnerable to disease compared to people with depression. This indicates that reports of subjective well-being are reasonably accurate.

The Components of Well-Being

At the cognitive level, SWB includes a sense of satisfaction with life, work, marriage and other domains. At the emotional level, people with high SWB feel primarily pleasant emotions, due to their positive interpretation of events. People with low SWB interpret their life circumstances and events as undesirable, and therefore feel unpleasant emotions such as anxiety, depression and anger. Surprisingly, positive and negative emotions are only weakly correlated with each other; knowing the total amount of good feeling a person experiences does not indicate the total amount of bad feeling the person experiences. However, people who experience their good moods intensely, tend to experience intense bad moods. Thus, positive and negative emotions do not

seem to be bipolar opposites. Positive well-being is not defined by the absence of negative emotions.

Myths of Happiness

Is Happiness Being Young? Middle Aged? Newly Retired?

A large survey conducted by Inglehart in 1990 on roughly 170,000 people from 16 different countries has revealed that no time of life is notably happier or unhappier than others. Whilst predictors of happiness do change with age (e.g. social relations and health become more important in later life), knowing someone's age gives no clue as to the person's sense of well-being. Nor do rates of depression, suicide or divorce increase during the supposed early 40s "midlife crisis" years. Whilst people do face times of crisis, they do not occur at any predictable age.

Does Happiness Have a Favourite Sex?

In reports of happiness, the overall result is a roughly equal balance for women and men and a meta-analysis has shown that gender accounts for less than 1% of people's well-being. In Inglehart's survey, 80% of men and 80% of women said they were at least "fairly satisfied" with life.

Does Happiness Vary by Race?

People of different nationalities score similarly on tests of self-esteem. Despite discrimination, people in disadvantaged groups maintain self-esteem by valuing things at which they excel, by making comparisons with other groups, and by attributing problems to external sources such as prejudice.

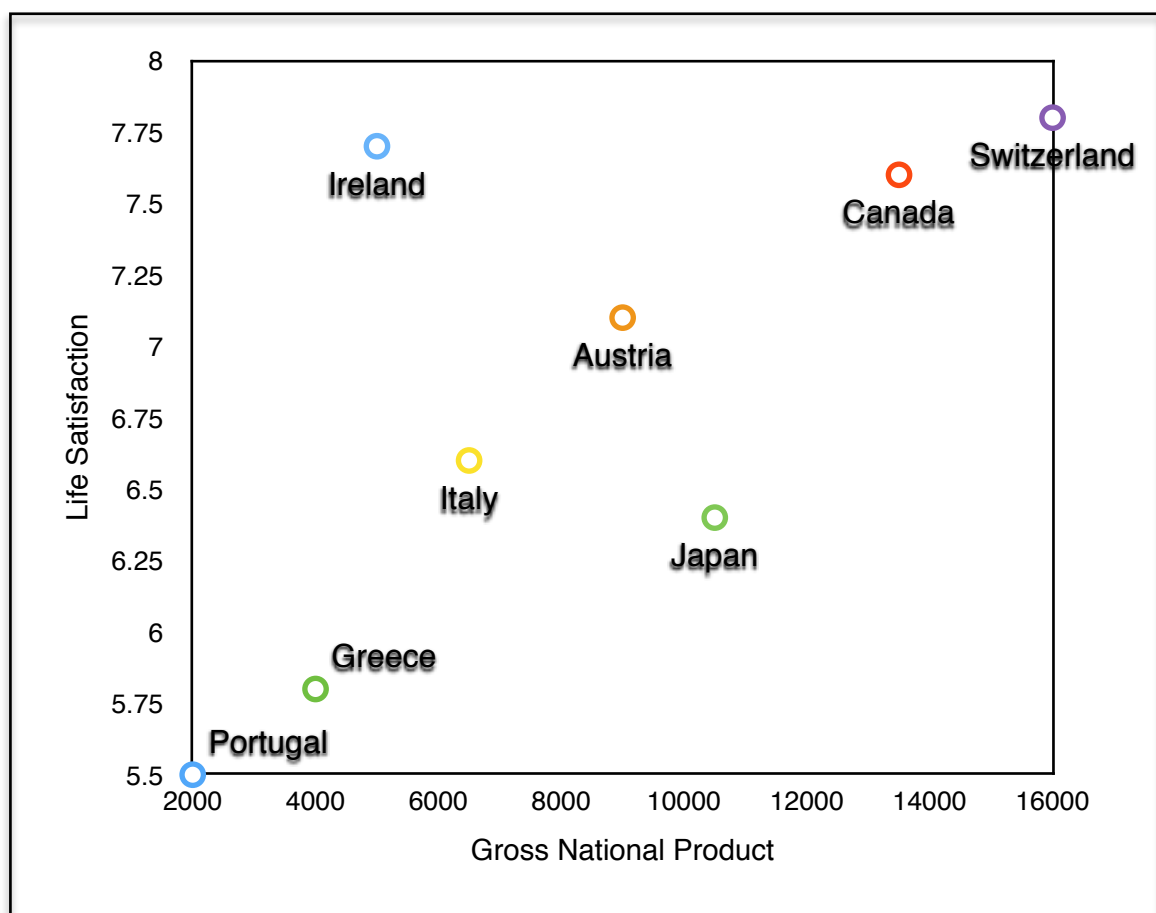


Figure 1. National wealth and well-being of 8 countries.

Does Happiness Vary by Culture?

Interestingly, nations differ strikingly in happiness even when income differences are controlled for. For example, in Portugal, about 10% of people say they are very happy whilst in the Netherlands, about 40% of people say the same. In general, collectivist cultures report lower SWB than individualistic cultures, where experiencing and expressing positive emotions is encouraged.

Does Money Buy Happiness?

In one survey, 75% of Americans beginning college said that “being very well off financially” was a “very important” life goal, and was often ranked more important than “raising a family” and “helping others in difficulty”. Many adults also believe that increased income would make them happier. There does seem to be a strong positive correlation between national wealth and well-being, as seen in Figure 1, despite certain exceptions (e.g. the Irish reporting greater life satisfaction than the wealthier Japanese). Whilst in poorer countries financial satisfaction is a moderate predictor of SWB, as soon as people are able to afford life’s necessities (e.g food and shelter), it suddenly matters a lot less. Although the correlation between income and happiness is not negative, it is modest. A better prediction of SWB is a person’s satisfaction with income, although there is only a slight tendency for people who make a lot of money to be more satisfied with what they make. For instance, lottery winners only experience a brief feeling of joy before their emotional levels return to normal.

Happy People

The Traits of Happy People

Studies have shown that the best indicators of a happy person are; self-esteem, a sense of personal control, optimism, and extraversion. First, happy people tend to like themselves; there is a strong correlation between self-esteem and SWB. Happy people believe themselves to be more ethical, intelligent, healthier, less prejudiced and better able to get along with others than unhappy people. However, this link is weaker in collectivist cultures, where the group is given priority over the individual.

Second, happy people typically feel a stronger sense of personal control. Those who feel empowered do better in school, cope better with stress, and live more happily. People in prisons, nursing homes and countries with totalitarian regimes - people with little control of their own lives - suffer lower morale and worse health. Third, optimists tend to be more successful, healthier and happier than pessimists.

Fourth, happy people tend to be extraverted. Compared with introverts, extraverts are happier both when alone and with other people. It is not known if these traits cause someone to be happy or if being happy leads to the development of these traits.

The Relationships of Happy People

People who can name several intimate friends are healthier, less likely to die prematurely, and happier than people who have few or no friends. Furthermore, when people are with others, they report higher positive emotion. Holocaust survivors who confided more openly in other people about their painful experiences had the most improved health. Married people are more likely to describe themselves as “very happy” than those who never married, are divorced or separated.

The “Flow” of Happy People

“Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life.” - Confucius.

People with greater work satisfaction also have better life satisfaction. For many people, work provides personal identity; it helps people define who they are. Work also adds to a sense of community: It offers people a network of supportive relationships. This sense of pride and belonging helps people construct their social identity. And work can add focus and purpose - a sense that one’s life matters. However it is important that the work is not so challenging that it causes stress or anxiety or that it is so underwhelming that people feel bored and unengaged. Work should fall in the middle ground between boredom and anxiety where challenges match and

engage with a person's skills. In this zone, it is theorised that we enter an optimal state referred to as 'Flow', where one is so caught up in an activity that the mind does not wander, one becomes oblivious to surroundings and time flies. Engaging in this way with a mindful challenge is a source of happiness. Whether at work or at leisure, people enjoy themselves more when absorbed in the flow of an activity than when doing something which is meaningless. Involvement in interesting and engaging activities is a major source of well-being.

The Faith of Happy People

Religious people are much less likely than irreligious people to become delinquent, to abuse drugs and alcohol, to divorce or be unhappily married, and to commit suicide. They tend to be physically healthier and live longer because of better eating and drinking habits. Religious people also report higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction and are less vulnerable to depression. Surveys have shown that people who are strongly religious are twice as likely to say they are "very happy". There is a strong positive correlation between happiness and life satisfaction and worship attendance. The two best predictors of well-being among the elderly are health and religiousness. Faith seems to help people to cope with a crisis. For example, recently widowed women reported more joy in their lives if they were religiously active. Religious mothers of disabled children were less vulnerable to depression. It is not fully understood what it is about faith that increases a person's well-being. Several explanations include the supportive close relationships often enjoyed by people in congregations, the sense of meaning and purpose that it gives to people or possibly having a worldview that offers answers to life's deepest questions and an optimistic appraisal of life's events.

Elements of a Theory of Happiness

A viable theory of happiness must recognise the importance of adaption. Over time, the immediate emotional response to significant events inevitably fades. Although lottery winners are initially elated, their euphoria soon wanes. "Continued pleasure wears off," noted Frijda, "Pleasure is always contingent upon change and disappears with continuous satisfaction. Likewise, the agony of most bad events gradually subsides. Even the psychological trauma of a paralysing car accident usually gives way to a return of normal happiness. Studies have found that only events within the last 3 months affect SWB and the more recent an event the greater its emotional effect.

Another component of a theory of happiness is cultural worldview. Some cultures construe the world as benevolent and controllable, whilst others place emphasis on the normality of negative emotions such as anxiety and guilt. One's cultural template influences how life events are interpreted, which can have a significant effect on SWB.

A third important component is values and goals. Having non-conflicting goals and making progress towards them are all predictors of SWB. Money, social skills and intelligence are only predictors of SWB if they are relevant to a person's goals. This explains why income predicts SWB in poor nations and why self-esteem predicts SWB in wealthy, individualistic nations.

Conclusion

Knowing a person's age, race, sex and income (assuming the person has enough to afford life's necessities) does not inform us about how happy a person is. Better clues come from knowing a person's traits, whether the person has a strong network of supportive relationships, whether the person's culture offers positive interpretations of daily events, whether the person is engaged in work and leisure, and whether the person has a faith that entails social support, purpose and hope. This new research on psychological well-being is a welcome complement to the long-standing studies of depression and anxiety, and of physical and material well-being. By asking who is happy, and why, we can help people rethink their priorities and better understand how to build a world that enhances human well-being.