In the Pursuit of Happiness

In the Pursuit of Happiness:
A Review of Positive Psychology and Research on Happiness

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Abstract

As Lyubominsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) pointed out, over the course of a few decades, various surveys have consistently shown that most people frequently think of happiness and how to pursue it. Despite the importance we give happiness, the term itself is unclear, leaving its pursuit to the individual and not to policy. I explore in this paper self-reported levels of happiness (Subjective Well-Being), the “architecture of sustainable happiness”, the origins of our happiness, the notion of negative feedback for people with low levels of happiness, and interventions to improve happiness. Hopefully, with happiness and a roadmap to pursuing it more clearly defined, this important quest will finally be taken seriously by policy makers.

Keywords: Subjective Well-Being (SWB); happiness; Self-Determination Theory (SDT); positive psychology; intervention
As Lyubominsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) pointed out, over the course of a few decades, various surveys have consistently shown that most people frequently think of happiness and the pursuit of happiness. Despite the importance we give to happiness, we often leave its pursuit to the individual and not to policy. This may have largely to do with the ephemeral nature of happiness. As Seligman et al (2005) pointed out “‘Happiness’ is too worn and too weary a term to be of much scientific use” (p. 296). Unable to rigorously and satisfactorily define happiness for ourselves, we feel that we cannot possibly tell others how to be happy. Regardless, if we can find some commonality between our various conceptions of happiness, then we can develop therapies that can improve happiness for a wide spectrum of people. The cumulative benefits of this, even if the benefits are slight, could be tremendous for a nation as a whole. Thus, it is the aim of this paper to review the cognitive and psychological literature on how happiness is understood, and to offer some potential guidelines for policy implementation.

The field of psychology concerned with the definition and pursuit of happiness is positive psychology. Positive psychologists argue
that while pathology—the study of illness and disorders—is important, psychologists should not be satisfied with achieving a neutral state of well-being for their patients. This neutral state is the satisfaction of the psychological prerequisites for physical (i.e. not suicidal) and social existence. It is a life where one is just getting by. Positive psychologists argue that the failure to push past this bare existence is a failure to explore more enriching avenues of life. In recognition of this insight, positive psychology is the study of how to help human beings thrive and push past a neutral state of well-being.

While thriving individuals may require more than just happiness, self-reported levels of happiness, or Subjective Well-Being (SWB), are regarded as essential components to well-being. The SWB of an individual is best understood as the answer to the question: *On a scale from 1 to 10, how happy are you?* However, this question is quite broad, and certainly one could imagine being happy overall, but still being upset in certain domains such as marriage or work. As further research has shown, there are various domains within SWB: overall satisfaction, satisfaction in important domains, and low levels of negative affect (the
absence of unpleasant emotions or moods). The subjectivity of this measure may seem questionable, but as Diener (2000) argued, “This subjective definition of quality of life is democratic in that it grants to each individual the right to decide whether his or her life is worthwhile” (p. 34). After all, if a person says she feels sad, but objective measures says she feels happy, then we must defer to the person. The emotions a person feels at a moment in time or the perceptions which one has overall are inherently subjective and therefore, it is the subject who is best capable of reporting her feelings and perceptions. This represents how SWB is a measure of both affective components—experience of emotions—and cognitive components—one’s perceptions and behaviors (Diener 2000).

In 1967, Wilson in a review of SWB proposed that those with the greatest SWB were happy due to fortuitous life circumstances. One of Wilson’s life circumstances was that the person be religious. This idea has been tested vigorously, but no one conclusive answer had emerged for many years. Some studies found a positive correlation between religiosity—or religiousness—and SWB, some found no correlation, and
some even found a negative correlation. To find an answer, Hackney and Sanders (2003) engaged in a meta-analysis. A meta-analysis gathers as many studies as possible within the field being analyzed. Once all the data is compiled, and those studies with issues of credibility filtered out, the researchers seek to find common metrics which unify the various studies—this is known as the effect size. By observing the effect sizes, researchers can find broader trends that might unify a seemingly contradictory body of work.

Hackney and Sanders (2003), in their meta-analysis, argued that the reason for the seemingly contradictory results in past studies was that many studies defined religiosity differently. They found three broad commonly used definitions. “Institutional Religion” is the social and behavioral aspect of religion, such as attendance of church or of church-related activities. “Ideological Religion” is based on the beliefs underlying religious activities, such as how rigidly one held religious values. Finally, “Personal devotion” focused on personal, intrinsically motivated devotion, such as intensity of devotion and emotional attachment to God. After performing a meta-analysis using this new lens,
Hacknye and Sanders found that the strength of the effect size nearly doubled when religiosity was defined as “personal devotion” rather than the other two (p. 48). This means that the mere act of being religious is not what is important. Granted there is no harm in being religious, Hacknye and Sanders found a slight positive relationship between religiosity and SWB overall. However, the motivations underlying religious actions are where one can find the positive impact.
Another life circumstance that Wilson (1967) argued was important to SWB was that the individual be "well-paid" (p. 194). In Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith's (1999) review of SWB, they found that while the very rich were slightly happier than the national average SWB, the difference was not great. Furthermore, despite a significant rise in income among Americans, Americans on average were not much happier than before (Fig. 1). All in all, the effect of income on SWB was small. While Wilson was not entirely incorrect with regard to the general correlation of income and SWB, he certainly mistook the magnitude of income’s effect on SWB.
Wilson overestimated the impact of life-circumstances on SWB. Livingston (2006) argued that a review of the research indicated that life circumstances account for only 11-12% of the variability in our happiness. One reason for this is a phenomenon known as the *hedonic treadmill*. This is the tendency for variations in SWB to move back toward a *set-point*. While in the past, this set point has been viewed as a neutral state of well-being, Diener, Lucas, and Scollon (2006) argued that the set point is in fact slightly positive (i.e. we are naturally inclined to be amused). Nonetheless, the notion that we return to our original set-point after variations in SWB helps to explain how, despite a massive change in income over the past decades, Americans remain at a steady level of SWB: we got used to the extra money.

Another reason for the small impact that life circumstances have on the variation in SWB is genetics. Lykken and Tellegen (1996) performed an experiment on fraternal and identical twins (i.e. genetically dissimilar and genetically similar twins) raised both together and apart. They surveyed the participants at age 20 and then again at age 30. Regardless of upbringing and despite the passage of ten years, the SWB
of one identical twin strongly correlated with the other’s SWB. In contrast, fraternal twins showed no correlation. Therefore, Lykken and Tellegen argued that up to 50% of an individual’s variation in SWB is based on genetics. This leaves 38-39% of the variation in SWB to our behaviors. Genetics, happiness-related life circumstances, and happiness-related behaviors—this trinity of factors, according to Lyubomrsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005), control an individual’s happiness and form the “architecture of sustainable happiness” (p. 114). While one might be discouraged by the significance of genetics in the variation of our SWB, one should be encouraged by the importance of our behaviors. Genetics is permanent, and life circumstances are generally stable; on the other hand, behaviors might be changeable through therapy, self-motivation, and maybe even policy.

Why do certain behaviors promote greater SWB? The evidence seems to point to the underlying motivations for performing these actions. As mentioned previously, with regards to religiosity, this was demonstrated by the results of Hacknye and Sanders (2003). Regarding the pursuit of income, Srivastava, Locke, and Bartol (2001) surveyed
business students. These surveys aimed to find out the business students’ SWB, and whether a student was motivated to pursue high-paid careers in business primarily for money or for other motivations. The researchers then observed differences in SWB between subjects. They found that, in general, there was a negative relationship between the pursuit of money and SWB. However, they found that if motivations are taken into account, then the relationship disappears. In fact, depending on what the motivation was for pursuing high incomes, the relationship became positive. Therefore, in this case, the behavior’s impact on SWB seems to be entirely based on the motivations, not the act itself.

Overall, happiness seems dependent on the motivations for our behaviors. Why? According to Deci and Ryan (2000), human beings have three innate psychological needs: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. They labeled this as Self-Determination Theory (SDT). While competence, meaning proficiency at an activity, seems independent of the other two, one might think that autonomy and relatedness are conflicting psychological forces. Autonomy refers to self-
organization of one’s life. Relatedness does not mean homogeneity, but having a network of relationships.

According to Deci and Ryan (2000), an individual can only maintain her psychological growth and well-being by providing herself with all three psychological nutriments. These psychological needs are similar to the physical need of food. Without food, the physical body wastes away; similarly, without the fulfillment of these psychological needs the mind wastes. When one cannot access her needed psychological nutriments, one develops substitutes, or *compensatory motives*, which do not satiate the need, but do provide some satisfaction. These substitutes distract from seeking and achieving need satisfaction.

In Deci and Ryan’s review of the material, they point out that children who rated their mothers as low in democracy and noncontrollingness (autonomy), and low in warmth (relatedness) grew up with significantly higher desires to pursue visible indicators of wealth. As shown in a prior mentioned study, in general, the degree to which one pursues wealth has a negative relationship with one’s happiness. Therefore, ironically, while these children grow-up and seek wealth to achieve greater well-being,
those who pursue visible indicators of wealth never achieve greater well-being.

An interesting trend to view through the lens of SDT is income inequality. Oishi, Kesebir, and Diener (2011) found that Americans were on average happier when national income inequality was lower than when it was higher. Using the General Social Survey, which gathered data from 1972 to 2008, Oishi, Kesebir and Diener had a sample size of 48,318 valid responses. However, the change in happiness between periods of high inequality and low inequality varied significantly by class: on average, poorer individuals had lower SWB than their richer counterparts. However, the higher SWB of the rich was not solely due to having more disposable income. During periods of greater income inequality, the average American trusted others less and perceived others to be less fair. According to their model, these perceptions were negatively correlated with happiness, not the disparity in income. Therefore, it seems that as income inequality increases, the average American perceives others as untrustworthy. Only able to trust herself, the average American increasingly isolates herself from her community.
Finally, the psychological stress from lacking relatedness manifests itself as the lower SWB that Oishi et al (2011) found.

According to SDT, our behaviors will satisfy our psychological needs only if our behaviors are intrinsically motivated, not extrinsically motivated. A behavior is extrinsically motivated when the focus of the motivation is based on external values or objects—things which are independent of the self and the self’s values—such as money. Intrinsic motivation is based on values which are centered on the self. The importance of intrinsic motivation is obvious in the context of autonomy. If one is extrinsically motivated, one is not acting for one’s own sake, but the sake of something outside one’s values. Therefore, one is not in full control of their actions, not completely autonomous.
As Fig. 2 shows, there is a wide spectrum of motivation, and it is far more complex than simply extrinsic or intrinsic. However, integrated regulation is especially important. After all, nearly all people can admit that there is something that they once disliked or were ambivalent to, but have come to intrinsically enjoy. That is the process of integrated regulation: internalization of once external values with one’s own values such that the pursuit of these values becomes entirely volitional, giving greater autonomy.

Some research indicates that low SWB could lead to negative feedback, further diminishing chances at higher SWB. Diener (2000) points out that the self-evaluations people give regarding SWB are both cognitive and affective. Happy people feel and perceive differently than sad people. This is supported by Pe, Koval, and Kuppens (2013). In this study, a final sample of 95 participants was given two surveys. To measure the cognitive side of SWB, participants were given a survey asking them to provide an overall evaluation of their lives on a scale from 1 to 7. To measure the affective side of SWB, participants were asked how frequently they experienced ten positive and ten negative
feelings; the difference between the positive and negative affect scales provided a measure of participants’ affective SWB. Participants were then presented in a series of trials with words either positive or negative, and asked if the word they were presented with matched or did not match the affect of the word two trials back.

The results showed that people who had higher life satisfaction and affect balance could more effectively retain and update positive information in their working memory. If the working memory of happier people is more likely to store positive information, it therefore follows that happier people are more likely to have long-term happy memories and that sadder people will have fewer (Pe, Koval, and Kuppens, 2013). This presents a feedback system similar to the one presented by those who lack one or more of the psychological needs outlined by SDT: those who are sad have trouble recalling happy memories and thus judge themselves to be sadder, further impeding their ability to retain happy thoughts.

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1 Working memory is a system that temporarily stores and processes relevant information prior to it being incorporated into long-term memory.
Presented with this negative feedback system and the self-destructive nature of pursuing activities which lack one or more of the three psychological nutriments of SDT, one might be led to believe that people are not completely free to pursue changes in behavior and that policy might be ineffective. Fortunately, Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson (2005) offered empirical evidence that intervention can improve self-reported levels of happiness. In this study, participants were asked to perform one of six exercises; of the six, one was a placebo, providing a control. Participants were explicitly told by Seligman et al to continue each exercise for one-week. These exercises were designed to recall positive aspects of one’s life. For example, one of the best interventions—called *three good things*—asked participants to write down three things that went well each day for a week. These interventions were designed to cost minimal effort and time, so as to encourage adherence to the program. The results found increased happiness and fewer reports of depressive symptoms for *six months* for two of these expectations, and one month for one other. In addition, the study found that the duration for which new higher levels of SWB were sustained was strongly impacted
by whether or not participants continued to adhere to the exercises beyond the explicit one-week limit.

Beyond just offering hope to the despaired, this study has profound policy implications. One important aspect of the exercises performed in Seligman et al. (2005) is that the most effective are relatively simple and quick. The ease of doing these exercises made sustained adherence easier, which, as mentioned previously, increased the duration of higher levels of SWB. For example, one of the most effective exercises in this study was simply writing down three things that went well each day and their causes. The simplicity of these tasks also means that they are easy to teach, opening the door for policy consideration. Cornum, Matthews, and Seligman (2011) designed the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) program. According to them, this program is designed to proactively address the psychological stress that US troops face in war. As the study points out, approximately 1.64 million military personnel have served in Iraq or Afghanistan. Hopefully, the seriousness with which the military considers the psychological well-
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being of its troops foreshadows a broader conversation on well-being by policy makers.

Hopefully, the military’s consideration of positive psychology indicates that positive psychologists have turned that ephemeral term “happiness” into a more concrete, scientifically-understandable form. For decades, the GDP has been the barometer for whether we as a nation were on the right track. Some of us may have heard of green GDP—a measure of economic growth that accounts for environmental damages. Diener (2000) advocated for a national index of happiness. Even those motivated purely by the pursuit of wealth pursue wealth due to the delusion that that pursuit will bring happiness. What is the purpose of economic growth if it does not sustain or improve the well-being of the people who live in that economy? The research makes clear that the introduction of simple mental exercises can significantly impact SWB. Teaching students these exercises seems much easier than teaching calculus or biology. Moreover, as research like Oishi et al. (2011) and Srivastava et al. (2001) shows, our SWB is significantly related to the intimacy of our relationships with our friends, family, and broader
communities. Maybe it is time that we stop pursuing dollars and growth rates, and begin examining *ourselves*. Such an endeavor could be far more profitable.
References


