The Creation of Personal Happiness

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Senior Capstone

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation from

The William O. Douglas Honors College

Central Washington University

June 2021

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Acknowledgments

Thank you to Central Washington University and the Douglas Honors College for the opportunity to carry out this research. Thank you to Christina Denison and the CWU Counseling Center for your assistance and support. Thank you to Dr. Allyson Rogan-Klyve for your guidance through this project. A very special thank you to Dr. Natalie Lupton and Dr. Fen Wang for your mentorship, wisdom, and unending patience and encouragement through this. I have enjoyed learning and researching alongside such amazing women and am forever grateful to you all.

Abstract

Happiness is something human beings strive to acquire but how to obtain this elusive feeling remains a longstanding and intriguing inquiry. One reason for this is that there is no one specific definition of happiness and no standard measurement for it. This project focuses on defining what is believed to affect happiness from an individual's personal perspective and aims to shed light on the current research and understanding of how to define happiness and what common variables lead to happiness. To this aim, a structured literature review was conducted which led to the development of a mixed methods survey designed for a sample population of college students. This project presents an extensive literature review, the developed survey, and discusses the disruptive impact of the pandemic on the study. Suggestions for future research will be provided.

The Creation of Personal Happiness

Happiness is a broad term with very personal definitions, and the understanding of it is still growing (Veenhoven, 2013). The purpose of this project is to explore the definitions and factors regarding happiness in hopes to determine common themes which would eventually lead to suggestions for the creation of happiness in one's life. An extensive literature review has led to the formation of a mixed-methods survey with multiple parts in an attempt to fully understand the participant and seek data that includes all factors related to their perception of happiness. The survey includes a quantitative data section to determine a level of happiness, and a qualitative section used to determine specific aspects of their personal view of happiness and collects demographic data. The quantitative section of the survey utilizes the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) by Lyubomirsky and Lepper. The SHS provided a new and widely accepted approach to measure the construct of subjective happiness with high validity (Lyubomirsky, 1999). Qualitative questions were added to provide more breadth and depth expanding the range of descriptive evidence to be gathered. Examples of these questions are, "What is your definition of happiness?" and "What would you say is/are a significant factor(s) that raises your happiness?" It is also noteworthy that the emergence of Covid-19 increased stress and anxiety, especially in college students, (Parry, 2021) disrupting the initial survey's intent and reliability. Questions regarding the studies limitation, COVID-19, were also added to the study in an attempt to remove bias. While the research and survey has been prepared, it has not been carried out due to the limitations and impact of the pandemic. The researcher hopes this survey can lead to development in mental health wellness in future studies by learning how to create factors in one's life to boost happiness levels.

Literature Review

This literature review identifies areas of happiness research including various definitions of happiness, how it can be measured, and specific factors determines to which it can be related.

Definitions of Happiness

Happiness can be defined in a myriad of ways, but there is no one distinct definition as happiness is a construct. Husser & Fernandez (2018) said happiness is "nature's way of telling us we are doing the right thing (p.591)." They view it as a reward earned and as one of the most, if not the most important goal to attain in life. Dambrun et al. (2012) described happiness as an favorable state of being in contentment and peace, while living through both the positive and negative phases of life. While happiness is a state of being as stated previously, it is also a fluctuating occurrence due to good and bad events happening in life. This is part of the hedonic equilibrium discussed later, but essentially is seen as a continual state maintained through the life's various disruptions (Dambrun et al., 2012).

Although there are two states of happiness: emotional and short-term versus a long-term cognitive state, the latter is the focus of this project. The frequency of experiencing joy in one's life as well as the absence of negative states becomes happiness, or also referred to as subjective well-being or life satisfaction. These terms were made to differentiate long-term happiness from the fleeting, momentary feeling of happiness and is used to consider the overall quality of one's life (Helm, 2000). It is also defined as how a person's life is going from said person's point of view (Alexandrova, 2008). Lyubomirsky, one of the authors of the Subjective Happiness Scale, defines happiness as "the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one's life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile" (Lyubomirsky, 2010). Aristotle

created his own term of happiness, eudaimonia, which was means "activity expressing virtue." He believed that while striving to be noble and good in character, one would find happiness along the way, and stated that friendship was one of the most important virtues in achieving this goal (Craig, 2021). Other definitions of happiness use the balance in one's life between positive and negative feelings or dividing happiness into life satisfaction and domain satisfaction (David, et al., 2013). Definitions of happiness vary between people and papers because it is unique to each person; however, there are recurring elements in these definitions that could be used to make a broad, vague definition worth future study.

Measuring Happiness

Even though this important topic is on a lot of minds, it is one of the most difficult concepts, not only to define, but to measure. Thus, many researchers have made suggestions on how to go about this: however, as there is no one way to define happiness, there is no one way to quantitatively measure it. An attempt to present some measurement techniques are offered.

Husser and Fernandez (2018) believe the only thing harder to measure than happiness is love. Quantifying happiness numerically to compare with others is meaningless as the numbers do not mean anything. Sufficient measurement can instead be made by ordering preferences, such as "I relate to this" and "I slightly disagree" (Hossenfelder, 2013). Survey methods are one of the most valid and reliable methods for measuring life happiness or their subjective well-being (Brockman & Delhey, 2010). Interviews and discussions are also used as well as observations inferring one's state. The last example can be used on those with mental illnesses who have a difficult time defining or explaining what they are feeling (Helm, 2000).

New scales of measurement are being created, such as the Subjective Fluctuating Happiness Scale (SFHS) and the Subjective Authentic-Durable Happiness Scale (SADHS) developed by Dambrun, et al., (2012). These scales are used to calculate current and fluctuating happiness, usually linked with selfishness; and are compared with durable happiness, seen as a more constant state linked with selflessness. The SFHS is a two-step, 10-item scale used to rate their agreement or disagreement with the statement about happiness. It is used to determine happiness levels in the moment. The SADHS is a 13-item scale used to determine durable happiness and is noted to directly correlate with one's sense of optimism (Dambrun et al., 2012). The Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) developed by Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999) is a 4-item scale used to determine one's subjective happiness also done by rating one's agreement and is used in the mixed-methods survey made in this project.

Psychophysiological methods are also being tested to try evaluating life satisfaction in a test subject. This includes using: an electroencephalogram (EEG), galvanic skin response (GSR), an electrocardiogram (ECG), blood volume pulse (BVP), respiration signals (RSP), eye trackers (ET) and facial electromyography (fEMG) among others (Pietro et al., 2014).

Factors Related to Happiness

Overview

While long-term happiness is what is being focused on, fluctuations can occur within these levels. Dambrum (2012) states that the attainment of happiness inside oneself is said to be linked with contentment and inner peace. It is also noted that selflessness is said to enhance emotional stability and harmony, leading to a higher well-being. Changes to one's life such as age, income, health, and marital status do slightly affect long-term happiness (Husser &

Fernandez, 2018). However, happiness is not dependent on these and are said to be outweighed in importance by goal achievement, close relationships, experiencing physical and mental pleasure, and having hobbies (Helm, 2000). Specific personal factors seen to be related to happiness include genetic dispositions, personality, social relations, and activity, followed by marital living condition, religion, and money to some extent (Brockman & Delhey, 2010). Brockman and Delhey's studies discovered that happiness is the highest when needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied. One newer study on happiness is what is known as the aversion to happiness; the belief that happiness is not always good (Agbo & Ngwu, 2017). This aversion shows up normally in cases of depression and bipolar disorders in cases when happiness can occur in wrong degrees or at the wrong time. If this "type of happiness" is pursued, those dealing with this aversion begin to believe that something bad will happen in their lives (Agbo & Ngwu, 2017).

Money

While money is noted to have a relation with happiness, people who look for happiness materialistically will actually derive less happiness from a given income than those who are not looking for satisfaction from money. Surveys show that the amount of happiness received from money in the US peaks around an annual salary of $75,000 (Brockman & Delhey, 2010). At this time, this salary is a little higher than a comfortable living wage, meaning that once basic needs are met, with a "safety net" for savings and occasional splurging, money stops giving happiness to people and is not an ultimate cause of happiness. Because money does not affect happiness after a certain point, gross domestic product is no longer a good measure of a nation's happiness (Hossenfelder, 2013).

Equilibrium

A large factor in the study of happiness is the concept of the equilibrium, the hedonic treadmill and hedonic adaptation (Helm, 2000). Hedonic relates to terms of pleasant sensations so this idea of equilibrium is that after a large event, positive or negative, over time, happiness levels will return to normal level (Bottan & Perez Truglia, 2011). Hedonic adaptation is when instead of having an exact level of happiness normalcy, humans adapt to their circumstances and overcome obstacles, coming to a new level of equilibrium (Diener et al., 2009). This is in the hope that happiness can grow over one's life. The idea of the hedonic treadmill explains that there is simply an equilibrium reverted to after a large event (Bottan & Perez Truglia, 2011). Brockman and Delhey's findings show that hedonic happiness can increase the pursuit of happiness, which would increase long-term happiness, which leans towards hedonic adaptation and the ability to raise well-being levels. Regardless of which kind of equilibrium is accurate, Brockman and Delhey (2010) notes that even with significant positive or negative life changes, one's levels of happiness eventually revert back to its original set-point or equilibrium.

Global Factors

Happiness has been studied for a long time in many different countries and cultures. The Gallup World Poll from the World Happiness Report is dedicated to studying which countries are the happiest and determining why (Gwyther, 2018). From the founding of our country, happiness was determined to be an unalienable right, protected by the government, listed in the Declaration of Independence as: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Cyrus the Great of Persia learned that prioritizing the happiness of his country led to prosperity for all which led to the Iranian calendar which dedicates the twenty-first day of every month to happiness, peace, and

tranquility. Recent studies of happiness have shown a significant link between it and productivity and economic growth (Gwyther, 2018).

Methodology

Mixed Methods Survey Development

A mixed methods survey was developed as both data types were necessary in the results that were desired to be found. Tashakkori and Creswell (2007) defined mixed methods studies as "research in which the researcher collects and analyzes data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or a program of inquiry" (p.4)

Quantitative data is needed to determine overall happiness level of the individual, while qualitative data is needed to get specific information regarding the building of happiness. Using this kind of survey allows a fuller understanding of the participant as it encompasses more than other survey types would allow and then integrates findings. The survey created for this project was designed to get a better idea of how people define happiness and what specifically they believe affects that and why. The developed survey, attached in the appendices, consists of twenty-five questions, and was created in Qualtrics.

Quantitative Design

The survey begins by gathering demographic information that can be used in making comparisons and understanding answers, then the Subjective Happiness Scale was added. This 4-item scale has been proven to both "meet, and exceed, minimum psychometric criteria for measurement accuracy" (Lyubomirsky, 1999). Because it is a rated system, it is more accurately

able to determine and describe one's overall happiness levels and has been tested in more than one language to "ensure comparability and equivalence in meaning" (Lyubomirsky, 1999).

Qualitative Design

The qualitative part of this survey was created to compare an individual's specific and personal answers regarding happiness with their overall level of happiness. Qualitative questions were added to provide more breadth and depth expanding the range of descriptive evidence to be gathered. This is used to determine reoccurring themes not only overall, but between those who ranked low in subjective happiness and those who ranked higher. These fill in the blank questions ask about the factors that people believe make them happy and what they believe happiness is. This allows the researcher to compare participant's answers with how happy they perceive themselves to be to see if there is a common theme between intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

Intended Procedure and Participants

Due to the emergence of Covid-19, the procedure to collect data and recruit participants was halted for one being logistics, but most importantly the survey implementation would have produced a skewed snapshot in time related to happiness equilibrium.

The survey participant population was designed to consist of students eighteen years or older who were enrolled in the Douglas Honors College of Central Washington University. As these were the only qualifications, a wide range of demographics were expected and anticipated. All possible participants would have been reached out to through university email by the Douglas Honors College Assistant Director. Information regarding the study would be included as well as the link for the study and the dates in which it would be open and available. Contact

information of the principal investigator would also be available for any questions regarding the survey. Due to the emotional element of this study, all students needed to sign a consent form before carrying out the survey and the Central Washington University Counseling Center was notified and was available for any needs that might have arisen from the taking the survey. Contact information for them, as well as information on how to receive help from the university's WildcatCare 365 website can be found at the beginning of the survey with the consent form, as well as the end of the survey upon completion.

This survey was purposefully created to protect the identity of the volunteer, and no name or contact information would be required to participate. There would be options at the end of the survey for the participant, if they were willing to give contact information, to be reached out to afterwards. They could opt to receive the results of the study once it is complete. They could also opt in to be contacted for additional information if questions arise regarding the long answer section and if clarification would be wanted. Once results are received, correlations between overall happiness levels and recurring themes and factors could be made.

Limitations to the Study

The main factor limiting this research revolved mainly around the pandemic. The emergence of COVID-19 in March of 2020 impacted everyone's life by increasing stress and anxiety worldwide. This is especially true for college students (Son et al., 2020). Due to the length of the pandemic and the limit in abilities to carry out every-day life activities, answers would be skewed and disrupt the initial survey's intent, reliability, and validity. There does seem to be a rise in happiness levels recently as vaccinations are becoming more readily available and more activities and jobs are opening (Judkis, 2021). With this limitation playing a large role in answers, carrying out the survey in hopes of valid data was not possible currently and will be

delayed until life seems to come to more of an equilibrium and the public's happiness levels can follow suit.

Discussion & Future Research

The use of this mixed-methods survey can be carried out in the future to compare one's overall happiness with factors to determine common themes between happiness levels. It can also provide insight and results that may lead to future research on mental health wellness by attempting to implement the findings into participant's lives to create a higher overall level of happiness in one's lives. While it is currently in survey form, there is potential to grow the research by incorporating a wider population, such as offering the survey to the entire student body at Central Washington University. There is also potential to gather more specific qualitative data through interviews, as opposed to an online survey. As the limitations of the pandemic are dropped, how the data should be gathered will be re-evaluated with both validity of the data and safety of the participant in mind.

Conclusion

Happiness is an elusive concept that a wide variety of people are striving to understand and pursue. Definitions and factors of happiness are being researched to an attempt to determine specifics. Forms of measurement are being made and tested to achieve this. Factors such as money, hedonic equilibrium, relationships, and more are being investigated as well. This project includes a new mixed-methods survey with the aim to fully understand the individual's perspective regarding happiness and get all forms of relevant information. This survey has been thoughtfully prepared and can be carried out in the future.

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Appendix A – Survey Questions

"The Creation of Personal Happiness" Interview Questions:

Demographics

- ❖ **Class Year:** Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, Other
- ❖ **How many credits are you taking this quarter?**
- ❖ **Race**: African American/Black, Native American/Alaskan Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latinx, Caucasian, Other
- ❖ **Major:**
- ❖ **Age Range:** 18-20, 21-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60+
- ❖ **Gender Identity:** Male, Female, Non-Binary/Third gender, Other
- ❖ **Where do you physically live currently:**
- ❖ **Where are you from:**
- ❖ **Are you working:** (No/Part time/Full time/Other)
- ❖ **Status:** (Single, In a relationship, Married, With children, other)

Questions for the Survey:

Please define happiness in your own words:

Quantitative Data:

- ❖ In general, I consider myself:
    - o (1-7, not a very happy person - a very happy person)
- ❖ Compared with most of my peers, I consider myself:
    - o (1-7, less happy – more happy)
- ❖ Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you?
    - o (1-7, not at all - a great deal)

❖ Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

    ○ (1-7, not at all – a great deal)

❖ (Possibly ask follow-up questions to these for elaboration.)

Qualitative Data:

❖ What would you say is/are a significant factor(s) that raises your happiness?

❖ Can you try to explain why you believe this/these factor(s) make you happy?

❖ If one or more of these factors were changed/removed, how would your happiness be changed?

❖ What is a significant factor that detracts from your happiness?

❖ Can you try to explain why you believe this/these makes you happy?

❖ If one or more of these factors were changed/removed, how would your happiness be changed?

COVID-19 Data and Follow-up:

❖ Do you feel that your overall level of happiness is different now than it was before COVID-19 began about a year ago?

❖ Can you elaborate on this?

❖ Have you had COVID-19? (Yes, No, Unsure, prefer not to say, I have COVID-19 now)

❖ Would you mind being contacted for a short Zoom interview to expand upon your answers if needed?

❖ Would you like to receive a copy of the results of the study?

Appendix B – CWU Counseling Center Support

LEARN. DO. LIVE

February 22, 2021

To CWU Human Subjects Review Committee:

This letter is to confirm that Jayme Zesiger has approached me about CWU Student Counseling Services being a referral source for participants would they need support or intervention secondary to study participation.

Student Counseling Services is happy to be resource and support Jayme's project. I have provided Jayme with our contact information as well as our supplementary warm/crisis line (TalkNow) information to provide to participant.

If you have questions or concerns, you are welcome to contact at

Sincerely,

Cindy M. Bruns, PhD
Director of Counseling
Licensed Psychologist
WA.PY.60079987

Please Note: A signature and phone number were redacted due to security and privacy concerns.

Appendix C – Participant Consent Form

Central Washington University
RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title: The Creation of Personal Happiness
Investigators: Jayme Zesiger, Dr. Natalie Lupton, Dr. Fen Wang, Douglas Honors College,

1. What you should know about this study:
- You are being asked to join a research study.
- This consent form explains the research study and your part in the study.
- Please read it carefully and take as much time as you need. You will get a copy to keep.
- You will be and remain anonymous throughout the entire study.
- Ask questions about anything you do not understand now, or when you think of them later.
- You are a volunteer. If you do join the study and change your mind later, you may quit at any time without any penalty.

2. Why is this research being done?
We want to better understand what causes happiness and how it is related with one's definition of happiness. We will interview Central Washington University Douglas Honors College students about their personal definition of happiness and what they believe affects it. You may not directly benefit from taking part in the research. However, we hope the results of this study will help us better explain how happiness is formed and can one day be recreated in others, perhaps benefitting those with difficulties in mental health.

3. What will happen if you join this study?
If you agree to be in this study, we will schedule a convenient time to interview you. It will take about an hour. We will ask questions about how happy you believe yourself to be on a range, what factors you believe play a large part in your happiness, etc. We will not use your name on our notes or in the written report unless you give us permission to use your name.
You can agree to be in the study now and change your mind later. If you want to withdraw from the study, we will ask you whether we may use any information gathered up to that point.

4. What information about you will be kept private and what information may be given out?
Taking part in this study is voluntary. You can stop at any time. Information about you is confidential but necessary to contact you about scheduling the interview. We will not identify you in any way in our notes and reports.

5. What should you do if you have questions about the study?
Call the principal investigator, Jayme Zesiger at _____. You may contact the CWU Human Protections Administrator if you have questions about your rights as a participant or if you think you have not been treated fairly. The HSRC office number is (509) 963 - 3115.

6. Who can I contact regarding my mental health after this interview if needed?
The CWU Student Counseling Clinic is available Monday-Friday from 8:00 AM – 5:00 PM at 400 E. University Way Corner of 11th and Poplar and can be reached at (509) 963-1391. CWU's TalkNow service is available 24/7 and a link can be found on the CWU Counseling Clinic page.

7. What does your signature on this consent form mean?
By signing this consent form, you are not giving up any legal rights. Your signature means that you understand the study, have been able to ask questions about the information given to you in this form, and you agree to join the study.

Participant's Printed Name:_____

Participant's Signature:_____   _____Date:_____

Please note: email addresses and phone numbers have been redacted due to privacy concerns.