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Chapter

Psychosocial Factors Associated with Happiness

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Abstract

This chapter provides an overview of psychosocial factors associated with happiness. Using an ecological framework, we will begin with a discussion of broad-based cultural factors and move downward to social and individual level psychological factors. This includes social support, interpersonal relationships, and psychological factors such as personality characteristics and cognitive factors. The relationship between finding meaning, posttraumatic growth, and happiness will be discussed.

Keywords: psychosocial factors and happiness, personality, posttraumatic growth, culture, interpersonal relationships and happiness, purpose and happiness, finding meaning

1. Introduction

Scholars and psychologists, from Aristotle to Seligman, have sought to define happiness [1]. Aristotle's exploration of what comprised a good, meaningful life has informed modern theories and definitions about well-being and happiness [2]. Happiness is conventionally known as a positive emotion that includes feelings of joy, contentment, and meaning [3]. Social psychologists have refined the definition of happiness because the literature has historically used the terms happiness and well-being interchangeably [3, 4]. Happiness is now best understood and achieved through an individual experiencing positive emotion, engagement, and meaning in their life [5, 6]. Some studies continue to use subjective well-being, which is defined as a combination of high positive affect, low negative affect, and life satisfaction, as the primary measure of happiness [7, 8]. Achieving, experiencing, and maintaining happiness are impacted by cultural, psychological (e.g., personality traits), and social (e.g., relationships) factors as well as a complex interaction between them [9]. Happiness and well-being are significantly influenced by culture which provides variations in how individuals experience and understand happiness [2].

2. Cultural considerations

Cultural norms shape human experiences, perceptions, expectations, and expressions of happiness [10–14]. Western cultures such as the USA, Canada, and

Australia are often known for their emphasis on individual freedom, achievements, and the pursuits of individual positive feelings whereas collectivistic cultures such as Japan, China, Korea, and Latin American countries put greater emphasis on the community, family, and human relationships [13]. The very construct of happiness varies across cultures. Uchida and Kitayama suggest that Americans often think of personal achievements and other positive experiences when asked about the definition of happiness, whereas in other cultures such as Japan give greater acceptance to the temporary nature of happiness and embedded in their definition is social stability [15]. How happiness is experienced and expressed varies across cultures. For example, in collectivistic cultures, happiness is displayed through low arousal positive emotions, such as calmness or contentment, while individualistic cultures tend to display high arousal positive emotions such as excitement, enthusiasm, and giddiness [16, 17]. It is therefore not surprising that European Americans typically desire experiencing peppy emotions like excitement and cheerfulness, while Hong Kong Chinese prefer calmer states like peace and serenity [18]. The relationship between some psychological variables and happiness varies by culture. For example, Diener et al. found that self-esteem was a stronger predictor of life satisfaction in individualistic communities only [18].

The notion that happiness is even universally desired is complex, and perhaps, mistaken. Consider research that found that Iranians and individuals from 13 other non-Western countries reported concerns that happiness has negative consequences [19, 20]. Their findings emphasized the strong relationship between fear of happiness and countries that tend to value conformity, formal rules, and interdependence. In many Asian cultures, fear of happiness is common due to the cultural belief that “extreme happiness begets tragedy” [21]. Happiness, therefore, needs to be balanced and moderated [21, 22]. In these countries, it is not uncommon for people to believe that one cannot always be lucky, especially after a long streak of happy events [19, 20].

In a survey conducted by the World Happiness Report in 2021, out of 149 countries, Finland ranked first in happiness, Iceland second, Denmark third, Switzerland fourth, and Netherlands fifth [23]. Happiness varies across and within different countries and regions. Consider the USA, for example, where researchers found that people living in more highly educated areas were happier than those living in less educated areas of the country [24–26]. However, highly educated people are not necessarily happier than less educated people within each city, county, or state. These findings highlight that the predictors of happiness vary at different levels even within the country or state an individual resides. Additionally, socio-political factors may also impact happiness. For example, good governance, political freedom, and low levels of corruption were found to be strong predictors of happiness [27].

3. Social factors

In this section, we consider three main social contexts or systems. The first is interpersonal relationships that include familial, platonic, and intimate. The second includes work environments where the bulk of people spend a significant proportion of their time, and the last is religious and spiritual contexts. We recognize that religion and spirituality have individual factors, but most religions have a social practice component.

3.1 Interpersonal relationships

One of the most essential social factors is the relationships we build with family and friends. Quality and quantity of social interactions are connected to increased levels of well-being when individuals experience more frequent and deeper social interactions [28]. Relationships with family and friends contribute to a range of psychological and physical health benefits. Holt-Lunstad and colleagues suggest that the quality of the close relationships we build are connected to healthier behavior, lower incidence of chronic illnesses, higher levels of happiness, and lower mortality [29]. The influence of friendship on happiness and life satisfaction has been well documented from a lifespan perspective. Friendships appear to be more important for older adults especially when their health begins to decline [30]. According to Smith and Christakis, happiness is nourished through social networks built by the individual with benefits ranging from sense of control, purpose in life, and are a source of self-esteem—all of which create resilience against the negative health effects that come from stress [31–33]. Several studies have also demonstrated that high subjective levels of happiness are connected to positive spousal and parent-child relationship which becomes even more important across the lifespan [34, 35]. Chopik states that friendships seem to be more important as they have a strong impact on health and happiness even after controlling for support and strain from other relationships [36].

Research suggests that the quality of the friendship may impact happiness. Erdley and colleagues [37] suggest that boys benefited more than girls from the quality of their best friend relationship. This is further supported by another study that showed that best friend relationships were more important in predicting happiness than close friendships [38]. The role of a best friend in the life of individuals and its relationship to happiness is connected. Best friends serve as a constant companion, a reliable confident, and supportive person who often knows us better than ourselves and can become like family to most individuals, so it is no surprise that they are essential to our levels of happiness. This is even more crucial as we see that a low quality of a best friend relationship may have an overriding negative impact on happiness even to the point that having a high-quality relationship with close friends could not negate the effects of having a low-quality relationship with best friend [38].

Just as important is the relationship we have with our family and like any other relationship, if they are healthy, we tend to benefit greatly from it. Relationships with family members can create a sense of belonging and unconditional love that is unlike any other. Despite the large body of research on happiness, there are limited studies that focus on the effects of family familial relationships on happiness. Smetana and colleagues [39] suggest that our familial relationships often create the foundation for our support system especially during childhood and adolescence. Children with supportive and healthy family relationships during childhood and adolescence tend to have better health outcomes and greater overall happiness in adulthood [40]. It also appears that the more stable these positive family relationships are from childhood to adulthood, the more general happiness increases later in life which shows that early positive family relationships are directly linked to health and happiness in later life stages [40]. When children have positive family relationships it also helps to increase the child's emotional security, thereby decreasing the risk for emotional dysregulation, hostility, and aggression which are directly associated with poor physical health and psychological functioning [41]. There are very serious long-term connections between early family life and later health and happiness in life. Promoting healthier family dynamics could make or break how happy and fulfilled we feel later in life.

Intimate partner relationships also are significantly correlated with happiness. Research demonstrates that individuals who are married experience higher levels of happiness and are associated with less negative outcomes compared with individuals who are unmarried [42–45]. When compared with unmarried people, individuals in happy marriages experience higher levels of happiness than those who remain in unhappy marriages [42, 46]. There also exists a relationship between happy individuals and higher levels of happiness experienced in marriage [47] which can then contribute to the quality and happiness individuals experience in their marriage. This is an important distinction as it indicates the quality and perceived happiness of the marital relationship [34] contribute significantly to happiness compared with the notion that just being married equates to higher levels of happiness experienced [46]. While the bulk of the literature focuses on heterosexual couples, it is important to note that when examining LGBTQ+ couples and happiness, evidence has shown there are no significant differences between married heterosexual couples and same-sex couples in marital and civil unions in terms of happiness experienced [48, 49].

Cohabitation and long-term dating without marriage have increased in recent years. In 2012, approximately one in five Americans had never been married [50]. This trend has continued to increase as data now shows that between 1990 and 2019, the number of Americans that have never been married increased from 17 to 33% [51]. Chapman and Guven found that happiness does not predict someone's decision to get married. Individuals higher in happiness are less likely to stay in unhappy marriages and someone is less likely to stay single when they believe that a partnership can result in a happy marriage [46]. Findings regarding happiness and cohabitation without marriage and happiness and marriage have been mixed. Grover and Helliwell found that married individuals experience less of a deep U-shape in happiness levels across the lifespan compared with unmarried individuals [44], however, research from Blekesaune, examining marriage and cohabitation in British households, found that marriage only slightly increases happiness among individuals who have never been married and that cohabitation gives couples similar benefits as their married counterparts [52]. Additional research will be needed as the dynamics between marriage and cohabitation and happiness have ever shifted in recent years.

3.2 Employment

The role of work and income is also important when examining happiness given the amount of time the average individual spends at work. High-income earners demonstrate higher levels of life satisfaction while low-income earners experience lower levels of happiness [53]. Low-income earners experience higher levels of stress, negative emotions, and cognitions related to their ability to meet financial burdens. When individuals have a lower ability to meet and maintain financial needs because of lower incomes, they experience higher levels of stress which negatively impacts their emotions [54]. Life satisfaction and life evaluation are two components that can influence well-being, and both are influenced by personal and societal income. Personal income influences well-being through life evaluation because individuals use income as a measure of their current status in relation to what they would like to achieve. Additionally, living in a wealthier or poorer country can influence life evaluation and life satisfaction because higher levels of life satisfaction are correlated to living in a country with a larger economy [55].

The initial assumption in much of the literature hypothesized that an individual's happiness with their job was based upon their career and job satisfaction, however,

the inverse of this relationship has also been demonstrated. Boehm and Lyubomirsky found significant correlations between happy people having more engaging jobs, experiencing higher job satisfaction, earning higher levels of income later in life, and demonstrating superior work performance compared with individuals with lower levels of happiness [56]. Additional research has continued to support the correlation between happiness and positive affect influencing an individual's success in their career or work through better job performance, earning higher levels of income, positive relationships with coworkers, and receiving positive reviews from management [57–60].

Furthermore, Hofmann and colleagues found a correlation between higher life satisfaction for individuals in a professional or management position as well as with jobs that required higher skill sets [61]. Another unique relationship was found between utilizing personal income to purchase something for others and its positive influence on happiness. The concept of prosocial spending examines the relationship between using personal finances to donate to charity or purchase something for another person. Prosocial spending has demonstrated a positive influence on happiness when individuals purchase or give something to someone else instead of themselves [62–64].

3.3 Faith-based practices

Religiousness or spirituality has been shown to impact happiness and well-being both positively and negatively [65]. For example, Carlson et al. found that individuals who were religious experienced higher levels of happiness when facing adversity or negative outcomes, but this relationship was mediated due to their self-enhancement [66]. Thus, the reported positive life satisfaction was attributed to their expectations and ability to effectively cope with negative situations. Religion and happiness are also mediated by the aspect of social interaction that is part of many religious or spiritual practices. Many religious teachings espouse fellowship and community which can impact the level of happiness individuals feel because they can engage in social interactions with other supportive members of their religion or community [65, 67]. The relationship between religion and positive and negative coping has also demonstrated mixed results with different religions and different beliefs about the role of God impacting positive coping, negative coping, happiness, and well-being [65, 68, 69].

The relationship between being an atheist compared with a person of faith and the impacts of their belief or nonbelief was examined by Speed and Hwang [70]. Their findings demonstrated that being an atheist or theist did not impact an individual's level of happiness. It is worth noting in their study that individuals who perceived themselves to be religious reported higher levels of happiness, however, perception and happiness are not uniform [70].

4. Psychological factors

4.1 Happiness across the lifespan

Contrary to popular belief, aging does not have to result in an inevitable decline in happiness. Older individuals are not unhappier than middle-aged or younger persons, despite the declines in physical health, the deaths of peers and spouses, and other

difficulties that accompany aging [71–74]. There is research to suggest that happiness fluctuates across the lifespan. The relationship between age and happiness has for decades often been looked at as a U-shaped pattern which holds true across the USA, Germany, Britain, Australia, Europe, and South Africa [73]. The U-shaped pattern shows that happiness declines from a high point in young adulthood, to a low point in midlife, and then increases to another high point in old age [72, 75–77]. While this is true, Beja suggests that the high points of happiness for young adults are higher than the high points of happiness for older adults and happiness never returns to the highest point from when an individual was younger [75].

In contrast, some psychologists have proposed the possibility that happiness might be more of an upward trend that improves with time and age [78–80]. Carstensen suggested that as people age, they generally develop a better capacity to regulate their emotions so that as they move through adulthood, they can conceptualize their future better by investing in things that bring them more fulfillment and meaning [78, 79]. Carstensen proposed that younger people see the future as being largely open, whereas older people see the future as being more bounded therefore older individuals tend to reframe their life by increasing positives and minimizing negative effects. This view suggests that changes in our social perspective and emotional regulation play an important role in our levels of happiness across the lifespan which is vastly different from other theories that focus on the importance of demographic and social categories. We agree with Mroczek and Kolarz that personality, contextual, and sociodemographic variables, including interactions, are all needed to fully understand the relationship between age and happiness [81].

Despite evidence to support the U-shaped relationship between happiness and age, it is important to note that there are variables that will change and contribute to experiential differences of individuals as they age. Research on older populations has demonstrated that the decline in happiness across the lifespan is related to moderators [82]. Cooper and colleagues found that compared with their younger counterparts, living with a partner was more strongly correlated with happiness in older individuals in their 70s [82]. Attendance at religious services or places was also more important contributor of happiness in the elderly. Some studies have found that characteristics such as endorsing positive attitudes about aging [83] and describing oneself as happy [84] are associated with higher levels of happiness. Cooper and colleagues show that as people age, negative factors such as increasing medical problems, declining independence, and the inevitable loss of loved ones, can be mitigated by a number of positive factors including spirituality, emotional stability, more close-knit family and friends, etc.

4.2 Individual level psychological factors and happiness

In this section, we include the psychological factors such as personality traits, cognitive styles, and self-regulation capacities that influence or impact happiness. We also include psychological constructs such as purpose and finding meaning. A major psychological experiential factor is posttraumatic growth and how one's ability to overcome trauma and stress can influence their well-being and happiness.

Personality is a combination of biological and environmental factors that contribute to an individual's distinctive character [85]. According to trait theory, the five major personality traits are neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience [86] and these traits are relatively fixed and stable [87–89].

The relationship between personality traits and happiness has been well studied. A meta-analysis by DeNeve and Cooper found that personality is predictive of life satisfaction and happiness and that it can impact happiness because of how individuals perceive and experience life [90]. The personality traits of neuroticism, extraversion, and agreeableness were strong predictors of life satisfaction and happiness compared with other personality traits. These findings have been supported throughout the literature. While happiness is not exclusively attributed to personality traits, the literature supports a strong correlation between specific personality traits and levels of happiness.

McCrae and Costa hypothesized that personality traits have an effect on one's well-being [91]. Research using the five-factor model found that extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and low neuroticism are typically associated with positive well-being and happiness [92–96]. Some traits operate directly, as in the case of neuroticism as those that are higher on neuroticism are more likely to experience more dysphoric and anxious moods. Neuroticism has been shown to be more closely associated with negative factors such as negative affect or lower levels of happiness [90, 96–99]. Neuroticism also demonstrates large amounts of variance regarding subjective well-being [95] and is negatively correlated with self-efficacy [100]. Positive orientation toward one's future, self, and life can serve as a mediator for neuroticism and subjective happiness [99] which is consistent with other findings [100, 101]. Additionally, neuroticism and psychoticism have been shown to be negatively correlated with happiness [94, 97].

When examining personality traits that operate indirectly, individuals higher in extraversion are more likely to engage in social interactions that are likely to be rewarding and reinforce positive emotions. Researchers have explored the relationship between the trait of extraversion and happiness by examining if individuals high on extraversion are happier because of the extraversion trait or if positive outcomes experience through their behaviors, activities, and socialization reinforce are responsible for their levels of happiness [102–104]. Findings have demonstrated how activities and socialization contribute to happiness, which supports theories that happiness is not only driven by the personality trait of extraversion, but by engaging in extraverted behaviors which may impact the level of happiness or well-being a person experiences. Those who are higher on extraversion are more likely to engage in social interactions that are likely to be rewarding and reinforce positive emotions [105].

Research from Soto examined how neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience influence life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect from a large sample ($n = 16,367$) of Australian residents [98]. This study supported prior findings [90] regarding the correlation between extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and low neuroticism to higher levels of happiness. On the other hand, the data also demonstrated that subjective well-being (or happiness) could influence changes in personality due to individuals with higher levels of well-being becoming more agreeable and conscientious over time [90]. This bidirectional relationship exists because as individuals grow older, they assume more responsibilities and experience enduring life changes which contribute to personality maturation [87].

Happiness is influenced by an individual's cognitive process and ability to regulate emotions. Neuroscientists have sought to investigate the connection between brain states associated with happiness components in relation to well-being [106]. Cognitive processes play a role in life satisfaction and happiness because individuals utilize comparison to evaluate their ability to meet their needs, achieve goals, and

expectations for their life [107, 108]. Cognition is influenced by positive and negative emotions which can impact a person's cognitive process [109]. Quoidbach et al. suggest that the upregulation of positive emotion is important to the experience of happiness [108]. Emotional regulation is defined as the automatic or controlled process in which individuals influence the emotions they have, how they are experienced and when they express them [110]. Past research shows that positive upregulation strategies such as using humor and creativity to mitigate negative emotions can create positive ones [111, 112]. Jose et al. found that emotional regulation strategies can mediate and moderate the impact of positive experiences on happy mood [113]. The importance of the relationship between emotional regulation and cognitive processes demonstrates that positive affect can expand cognitions while negative emotions narrow a person's ability to see beyond negative moments [114].

4.3 Purpose and meaning

Oishi and Westgate propose that psychological richness (i.e., experiences that provide interest and influence perspective) is an additional mechanism through which individuals can achieve happiness [2]. Purpose contributes significantly to an individual's life due to the influence it has on goals (career or family), behaviors, positive affect, religiousness or spirituality, and happiness [115–117]. Purpose can be achieved through a variety of ways such as achievement, selecting a career path, pursuing parenthood, and spirituality and is distinctly different from goals. Many Western, industrialized countries have afforded young adults the opportunity to engage in further identity exploration and pursuit of purpose through the concept of emerging adulthood [118]. During this time, young adults postpone typical “adulthood” markers such as marriage, parenthood, and financial independence in pursuit of education, career development, and social exploration.

Although there is a wide held belief that parenthood adds purpose to an individual's life and those without children often experience lower levels of happiness, the research on this ideology is mixed [119–121]. Angeles found that married couples with children are “better off” and unmarried individuals without children are “worse off” [122]. Much of the research has supported the theory that individuals with children are happier than individuals without children [123–127]. Despite these findings, other research has supported that parenthood is associated with lower levels of happiness [128], being childless can be associated with higher levels of happiness for women at different points throughout the lifespan [129] and that there is no significant difference between having children or being childless and psychological well-being [130]. Research from Nelson et al. highlighted the importance of focusing on how or why parents may experience more or less happiness [124]. Their findings demonstrate that parenthood and happiness is a complex relationship influenced by negative emotions related to lack of sleep, marital issues, and financial problems as well as happy emotions such as greater meaning in life and enhanced social roles which contribute to higher levels of happiness when they are experienced. Research looking at factors impacting happiness and parenthood demonstrates that workplace policies regarding paid time off and childcare provide advantages for parents that can contribute to the level of happiness parents experience [131]. Perhaps the central focal point of happiness and parenthood should not be on whether having children or not having children is intrinsically linked to purpose and happiness, but rather on what factors enhance happiness for individuals with or without children.

4.4 Posttraumatic growth and happiness

Since writing *Twilight of the Idols* in 1888, Friedrich Nietzsche's "Was mich nicht umbringt, macht mich stärker" or "What does not kill me makes me stronger" has been immortalized as a proverb. Encountering challenges and facing adversity is something most individuals encounter, however, trauma is a significant event that is associated with negative emotions, risk or harm, or sometimes one's life. Traumatic events, therefore, have more potential impact than challenges or adversity. How individuals respond and recover from trauma can be connected to their overall happiness. When individuals experience a positive psychological change subsequent and as a result of a traumatic experience, it is called posttraumatic growth [132, 133]. It may appear counterintuitive that happiness can subsequently be related to experiencing negative emotions; however, some research has demonstrated there is significant importance in experiencing emotions as they are, even negative ones. While research demonstrates that individuals are happier the more they experience positive emotions, an effect has been demonstrated that people are happier when they experience their emotions, rather than avoid or suppress them, even if they are negative [134–135]. This is significant because sometimes negative emotions are associated with accomplishing a task or a goal. For example, while individuals prefer happier emotions, there are times that negative emotions may be useful, such as in asserting one's needs or boundaries. Research supports that utilizing negative emotions, when necessary, can actually have benefits for overall levels of happiness experienced [135]. The concept of how negative feelings can in fact enhance happiness, is applicable to the concept of posttraumatic growth. Individuals who have experienced trauma can reflect, process, and integrate the trauma experienced. The more an individual processes and integrates the trauma, the more likely posttraumatic growth can be achieved unless ruminations become intrusive, excessive, and continue for long periods of time [136]. Posttraumatic growth has been demonstrated to provide an individual with an enhanced appreciation for life, stronger and more meaningful personal relationships, and a richer life [133].

5. Conclusion

Happiness may ostensibly seem like a simple construct, but it is highly culturally dependent and influenced by several psychological and social variables. The common conceptualization of happiness consists of positive affect, contentment, well-being, joy, and life satisfaction, which is often associated with finding meaning and purpose. Happiness is associated with social and psychological variables, but research suggests that these variables do not necessarily operate universally, suggesting more complex relationships and interactions.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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