

Examining the happiness stimulating impacts of close relationships

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ABSTRACT

Happiness can be explained by a variety of factors: life satisfaction, appreciation of life, moments of pleasure etc. But at a tautological level happiness results from the experiencing of positive emotions. Through an extensive literature review and a primary survey this paper establishes that such positive emotional experiences and therefore happiness can result from close relationships among humans. That is other things remaining the same, those involved in close relationships, based on mutual disclosure and emotional bonding, are happier than others.

1. Introduction

From Ancient Greeks and Buddhists to modern philosophers and politicians, thinkers have queried the meaning of happiness (McMahon, 2006). There are as many definitions of happiness as the number of people studying happiness. Webster's (1994) simply defines it as a) state of well-being characterized by emotions ranging from contentment to intense joy or b) a pleasurable or satisfying experience. Research studies show that our enduring level of happiness (H) is determined by our happiness set point (S), life circumstances (C) (influenced by aspects of temperament and character such as depression and sleep quality) and intentional or voluntary activities (V). Martin Seligman proposed an equation for happiness: $H = S + C + V$ (Seligman;

2002). Further, Sonja Lyubomirsky (2008), a prominent researcher in the field of happiness and author of “ The How of Happiness” , attached percentages to these components. She suggested that our set point, or happiness level determined by birth or genetics, accounts for 50 percent of happiness; circumstances such as marital status, earnings, and looks determine 10 percent; and the remainder of our happiness comes from intentional activities or things we can do to change our happiness level.

The 7th World Happiness Report; was first released in April 2012 in support of a UN High level meeting on “ Wellbeing and Happiness: Defining a New Economic Paradigm” . That report presented the available global data on national happiness and reviewed related evidence from the emerging science of happiness, showing that the quality of people’ s lives can be coherently, reliably, and validly assessed by a variety of subjective well-being measures, collectively referred to then and in subsequent reports as “ happiness.” Each report includes updated evaluations and a range of commissioned chapters on special topics digging deeper into the science of well-being, and on happiness in specific countries and regions. Often there is a central theme. Last year (2019) it focused on happiness and community: how the concept of happiness has been changing over the past dozen years, and how information technology, governance and social norms influence communities.

A 2018 report concluded that international ranking of migrant happiness was almost identical to that of the native born. This evidence made a powerful case that the large international differences in life evaluations are driven by the differences in how people connect with each other and with their shared institutions and social norms (World Happiness Report, 2019).

Many people believe that we need free choice in order to be happy. However, research on choice has actually turned up some interesting and contradictory data. Some studies have shown that economic development, democratization, and rising social

tolerance have increased the extent to which people perceive that they have free choice. This, in turn, has led to higher levels of happiness around the world (Inglehart, 2008).

People who believe that personal choices, rather than fate, control their future, often have a greater appreciation of freedom of choice than those who credit destiny as determining outcomes. The people who don't depend on fate are thought of as having an internal locus of control, while those favoring luck and fate are said to have an external locus of control. For example, if we think of a novelist selling her first book, she could either send the manuscript off and hope for the best or enlist every useful contact and friend of a friend in making sure the manuscript is given a fair read. In the following sections of this present chapter a trial is taken to ascertain the determining factors of "happiness" in context of relationships and its various aspects.

2. ' Persona' - The Mask We Wear Says a Lot on How We Feel: Happiness and Behavior

Lyubomirsky and colleagues (2006) found that an individual's intentional behavioral strategies can account for as much as 40% of the variance in happiness. This is important to note, especially for those individuals who might not have the personality variables that predispose them toward happiness, such as high extraversion (Extraversion is a broad personality trait and extraverts are relatively outgoing, gregarious, sociable, and openly expressive) or low neuroticism (individuals who score high on neuroticism are more likely than average to be moody and to experience such feelings as anxiety, worry, fear, anger, frustration, envy, jealousy, guilt, depressed mood, and loneliness).

People who are neurotic respond worse to stress and are more likely to

interpret ordinary situations as threatening. Specifically, in lieu of positive personality traits engagement in happiness enhancing strategies or happiness inducing behaviors (HIB) have been empirically validated as a means to increase happiness (Lyubomirsky et. al, 2006). Importantly, Tkach and Lyubomirsky (2006) strongly believe genetics do not predetermine happiness and that participating in HIB can increase happiness. Thus, any individual can increase their happiness by participating in these activities.

Tkach and Lyubomirsky (2006) have identified eight happiness-enhancing strategies in their research: social affiliation, partying and clubbing, mental control, instrumental goal pursuit, passive leisure, active leisure, religion, and direct attempts. While there are many strategies available, they are not all relied on to the same extent. Researchers exploring engagement in such HIB found that the most frequently used behaviors were maintaining friendships, being optimistic, doing random acts of kindness, and exercising (Warner & Vroman, 2011). The same research also found that the least used HIB were forgiving, avoiding worry, practicing spirituality, and meditation. Others have demonstrated that expressing gratitude is also an effective strategy to increase happiness (Senf & Liao, 2013). At the same time, Warner and Vroman (2011) found, that, while there were positive associations between HIB and happiness, the connection was only marginally significant. More research, particularly experimental in design, needs to be done in order to determine the relationship between behaviors that are expected to increase happiness and self reported happiness.

3. Personality and Happiness Inducing Behaviour (HIB)

Research has also found that personality traits predict not only happiness, but also the use of HIB. For example, Tkach and Lyubomirsky (2006) found that personality traits were related to engagement in their eight strategies to enhance happiness. Specifically, individuals who are high in extraversion were more involved in happiness inducing behaviors compared to those low on this variable. In another study, extraversion and agreeableness were positively correlated with HIB, whereas, neuroticism was negatively correlated with such strategies (Warner & Vroman, 2011). In particular, these researchers found a strong negative correlation between neuroticism and the avoidance of worry. Extraversion and agreeableness were positively correlated with cultivating relationships, expressing gratitude, doing random acts of kindness, being optimistic, and maintaining good physical health. This suggests that the connection between personality factors such as increased extraversion or neuroticism and happiness may be partly mediated by one's participation in happiness inducing behaviors.

4. Gender, Personality, Happiness, and HIB

Researchers have shown that there is a gender difference in personality, in regard to neuroticism. For instance, Albuquerque et al. (2013) discovered that females were significantly more neurotic than males. However, there was no gender difference in regard to extraversion. Their research also extended to gender differences in both positive and negative affect (affect here means feelings or mood). Albuquerque et al. (2013) found that although there were no gender differences in positive affect, there were marginally significant findings for negative affect where female score higher

than males. Researchers have also demonstrated gender differences in the use and choice of happiness inducing behaviors. For example, Warner and Vroman (2011) found that men and women tended to rely on different HIBs. Specifically, they found that women reported more engagement in nurturing relationships compared to men and that men reported more experiences of flow compared to women. More research must be conducted on gender differences in happiness and not simply on engagement in particular happiness inducing behaviors.

5. Personality and Happiness

Personality traits have frequently been observed to be associated with happiness. It has been suggested that personality traits may lead individuals to experience life in certain ways which, in turn, influences their happiness. However, the exact mechanisms underlying this relationship remain unknown. A very recent study that hypothesized ways in which individuals endorse strategies for achieving happiness (i.e., orientations to happiness: through a life of pleasure, through a life of engagement, or through a life of meaning) mediates the associations that personality traits have with subjective well-being (i.e., satisfaction with life, positive affect, and negative affect). Results indicated that an orientation to meaning in life partially mediated the relationship between extraversion and life satisfaction. In addition, all three orientations to happiness (i.e., pleasure, engagement, and meaning) partially mediated the relationship between extraversion and positive affect (Pollock, Noser, Holden, Hill, 2016).

Personality has been found to be more strongly associated with subjective interpretation of happiness in many instances than life circumstances. In part, this might be due to the fact that temperament and other individual differences can

influence people's feelings and evaluations of their lives, but also because people's emotions are an inherent part of personality. A study discussed the heritability of "happiness," or that portion of subjective well-being that is due to genetic differences between individuals. The stability of subjective well-being over time is substantial, and this is likely due in part to the stability of personality. Specific personality traits are related to various types of well-being. For example, extroversion appears to be more strongly related to positive emotions, while neuroticism is more related to negative feelings. Although personality is an important correlate of subjective happiness, situations and life circumstances can in some cases have a considerable influence as well. Furthermore, personality can to some degree change over time, and with it, levels of subjective well-being can change (Diener; 2009). Tkach and Lyubomirsky (2006) stated that many associations between individuals' personality and happiness levels are to some extent mediated by the strategies people use to increase their happiness – in particular affiliation, mental control, and direct attempts.

A study explored the relationships among personality, leisure involvement, leisure satisfaction and happiness in a representative sample of Chinese university students (Lu and Hu; 2005). Extraversion and neuroticism were significant predictors of happiness; leisure satisfaction generated incremental effects which were significant but of a lower magnitude than those generated by personality traits.

Recent studies suggested an important role of neuroticism and extraversion as incremental predictors of subjective well-being outcomes. Research has shown that positive cognitions mediated the relation between personality traits and well-being. A study examined the relationship between neuroticism and extraversion, measured as

general and group factors, and subjective happiness through a general positivity factor (social relationships, temperament/adaptation, money, society and culture, and **positive** thinking styles) (Lauriola and Iani; 2016). The general positivity factor completely mediated neuroticism-subjective happiness relationships and overlapped with general neuroticism, whilst it partially mediated extraversion-subjective happiness ones. Other paths to happiness involved cheerfulness and enthusiasm. Assertiveness, motor activity level and seeking excitement had a weak relationship with subjective happiness. Gregariousness and friendliness had neither direct nor indirect effects on subjective happiness. Life satisfaction had a twofold role as a component of positivity as well as providing an independent contribution to variance in subjective happiness. Cheerfulness and extraversion made an incremental contribution to variance in subjective happiness.

A paper which contains two studies set out to examine to what extent attributional style, that is about how one explains the causes of events - internal, stable or global; and personality traits predicted happiness and psychiatric symptoms in a normal, non-clinical, population of young people in their early twenties (Cheng and Furnham; 2001). Attributional style was a significant predictor of happiness and mental health. It was significantly associated with extraversion and neuroticism. The results indicated that optimistic attributional style was a stronger predictor of self-reported happiness than pessimistic attributional style. Extraverts tended to have optimistic explanatory style for positive outcomes whereas neurotics tended to have pessimistic explanatory style for negative outcomes.

Two studies investigated the predictive ability of romantic relationship quality in regard to happiness above and beyond the influence of personality (Demir; 2008).

Study 1 (n = 221) showed that romantic relationship quality accounted for 3% of the variance in happiness while controlling for personality. Study 2 showed that emotional security and companionship emerged as the strongest features of romantic relationship quality that predicted happiness. Besides, identity formation also moderated the relationship between relationship quality and happiness such that individuals were happier when they experienced high quality relationships at high levels of identity formation.

6. Happiness as Perceived By Present Generation Women

On the basis of many measures the progress of women over recent decades has been extraordinary. The gender wage gap has partly closed; and female educational attainment has risen and is now surpassing that of men; women have gained an unprecedented level of control over fertility; technological change in the form of new domestic appliances has freed women from domestic drudgery; and women's freedoms within both the family and market sphere have expanded. Women's lives have become complex: their wellbeing now likely reflects their satisfaction with more facets of life than the women of previous generations. For example, the reported happiness of women who are primarily homemakers might reflect their satisfaction with their home life to a greater extent compared with women who earn their bread and butter and have a family at home. In these latter women, reported happiness may reflect an aggregation of facets over their multiple domains. Social and legal changes have given people more autonomy over individual and family decision making, including rights over marriage, children born out of wedlock and the

use of birth control, abortion, and divorce (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2007). During this period there have also been large changes in family life. Divorce rates doubled between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s, and while they have been falling since the late 1970s, the stock of divorced people has continued to grow (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2007).

Even if women have been made unambiguously better off throughout this period, a richer consideration of the psychology behind happiness might suggest that greater gender equality may lead to a fall in measured well-being. For example, if happiness is assessed relative to outcomes for one's reference group, then greater equality may have lead more women to compare their outcomes to those of the men around them. In turn, women might find their relative position lower than when their reference group included only women. This change in the reference group may make women seemingly worse off or it may simply represent a change in their reporting behavior. An alternative form of reference dependent preferences relates well-being to whether or not expectations are met. If the women's movement raised women's expectations faster than society was able to meet them, they are more likely to be disappointed by their actual experienced lives (Kimball & Willis, 2006). As women's expectations move into alignment with their experiences this decline in happiness may reverse. A further alternative suggests that happiness may be driven by good news about lifetime utility (Kimball & Willis, 2006).

There is a blunt disconnect between what most of us think will make us happier and what research shows will actually make us happier. Most of us believe that material or monetary increases will improve our happiness the most (Dunn et al. 2008), whereas a growing body of research shows that the deepest and most stable levels of

happiness come from having meaning in our lives (Veenhoven 2012; Post 2011; Post and Neimark 2007; Seligman 2002). But what exactly does it mean to have meaning in our lives? This existential question is examined through the lenses of, in particular, positive psychology research and philosophical induction. It is proposed that individual meaning-making might not be so subjective an exercise as existentialism (human existence as having a set of underlying characteristics, such as anxiety, dread, freedom, awareness of death, and consciousness of existing) generally would suggest. Multidisciplinary research suggests that the major religions might have been right all along with regard to one core message at least: that loving one another generates meaning in our life.

7. Happiness and Marriage: Myth or Reality?

Stutzer and Frey (2003) conducted a research on- “ Does marriage make people happy, or do happy people get married?” which analyzed the causal relationships between marriage and subjective well-being in a longitudinal data set spanning 17 years. It gave evidence that happier singles are more likely to opt for marriage and that there are large differences in the benefits from marriage across couples. Potential as well as actual division of labour seems to contribute to spousal well-being, especially for women who all have to raise a young family. In contrast, large differences in the partners’ educational levels lead to a negative effect on experienced life satisfaction.

A metanalytic review of nearly 100 studies found marriage to be a strong predictor of life satisfaction, happiness, & overall well-being (Woods, Rhodes & Whelan, 1989). The positive effects of marriage were found to be large. One national survey of 35,000 people in US found that the percentage of married adults who said they were “ very

happy' (40%) was nearly double that of those who had never been married (26%). Compared to other domains of life (e.g job status and health), being married and having a family repeatedly show the strongest connection to life satisfaction & happiness (Inglehart et al, 2008).

Subjective well-being research has often found that marriage is positively correlated with well-being. Some have argued that this correlation may be result of happier people being more likely to marry. Others have presented evidence suggesting that the well-being benefits of marriage are short-lasting. A research entitled ' New Evidence on Marriage and the Set Point for Happiness' , used data from the British Household Panel Survey to control for individual pre-marital well-being levels or selection effects. Marriage was found to have a positive effect on happiness even after such controls were incorporated. Moreover, new data from the United Kingdom's Annual Population Survey revealed a U shaped relationship of happiness with age for both married and unmarried people but the dip in happiness in mid-life was found to be more pronounced for unmarried people than for married people, indicating that marriage eases the causes for this dip and its benefits are unlikely to be short-lived. Friendship was considered to be the mechanism through which marriage caused greater life satisfaction. The significance of this mechanism was revealed when it was found that well-being effects of marriage were doubled when a person' s spouse was also his/her best friend (Helliwell and Grover, 2014).

A study which examined the relationship between interpersonal communications and marital happiness (Juwitaningrum & Basuki, 2006) found it to be significantly positive.

8. The Implications of “ No Strings Attached” for Happiness

A couple walking on the beach holding hands or snuggled up close to each other on a park bench and a single woman enjoying some alone time. Both scenarios are appealing and are potentially associated with high levels of well-being. In today's society decisions to remain single and unattached are respected. Such a decision might be wise even for those who find being in a relationship to be an attractive proposition but learn from experience that they are not comfortable in living up to the commitments that a serious relationship entails. The associated failure in honoring commitments often leads to the termination of relationships with the persons failing then becoming reluctant to enter into new relationships. We now discuss some related researches

Research by Demo & Acock (1996) entitled ' Singlehood, Marriage, and Remarriage: The Effects of Family Structure and Family Relationships on Mothers' Well-Being' , found that mothers in their first marriage enjoy the highest well-being, mothers in step families fare nearly as well, and divorced and continuously single mothers have the lowest wellbeing. Another study examining wellbeing and choice associated with current marriage trends yielded the following related results: first, unmarried adults attribute being single to both barriers and choices; second, men desire marriage more than women and the never-married want to marry more than the divorced; third, if we categorize both sexes according to whether they are married, divorced or never married then divorced women have the least desire for marriage; fourth, divorced individuals report more life satisfaction than never-married individuals (Frazier et. al.; 1996).

A study explored single women's views towards the institution of marriage (Perez; 2014). This study utilized a qualitative design with in-depth face-to-face interviews

with ten unmarried women living in San Bernardino County being conducted to collect the data. Participants were asked in a structured interview to provide their views in regard to premarital sex, cohabitation, non-marital childbearing, divorce, and same sex marriage. This study found that the extent of conservatism in women's views regarding premarital sex, cohabitation, non-marital childbearing, divorce, and same sex marriage was not impacted by extent of religiosity. The study also found that women commonly held the traditional view that starting a family should be preceded by marriage and the probability of holding such views was not affected by whether premarital sex and cohabitation was accepted by women (Perez; 2014).

A study was conducted to measure the life satisfaction among married and unmarried women in India which relied on a sample of 200 women (100 married and 100 unmarried) drawn randomly from the population of Ranchi town. Findings indicated a significantly higher life satisfaction for married women (Ghosh, 2016). On the other hand, a comparison of marital adjustment and subjective wellbeing between samples of 200 each drawn from the populations of Indian educated housewives and married working women revealed significantly higher scores in regard to general health, life satisfaction, and self-esteem measures and lower scores in regard to hopelessness, insecurity, and anxiety for the latter group. This leads us to the conclusion that working women did significantly better in terms of both marital adjustment and wellbeing which in turn indicates the salutary impact of a working life outside home on mental health (Nathawat & Mathur; 1993). Housewives though had lower scores on negative affect than working women.

9. Love and Happiness: Do the Two Go Hand-in-Hand?

When one is unhappily single, it is easy to assume that love would remedy the lack of happiness. But does it? Researchers have long tried to determine if there is a correlation between happiness and the thing we call 'love'. The hypothesis that single young adults who perceive their singlehood as voluntary would report a higher level of positive mental health (i.e., emotional, psychological and social well-being) and lower levels of mental illness (i.e., somatic symptoms, anxiety, social dysfunction, severe depression etc.) and romantic loneliness than young adults who perceive their singlehood as involuntary was tested (Adamczyk; 2016). This paper also investigated whether it is romantic loneliness which accounts for the difference in the levels of positive mental health and mental illness experienced, if any, by those who are voluntarily and involuntarily single. Quite expectedly, voluntarily single young adults reported a lower level of romantic loneliness than involuntarily single young adults but the two groups did not differ in regard to either the extent of positive mental health or the incidence of mental health problems. In addition, gender differences were observed solely in the domain of romantic loneliness, with women reporting greater romantic loneliness than men. The mediation analysis revealed that romantic loneliness did not affect the extent of positive mental health and the incidence of mental illness unequally across the two groups of voluntarily single and involuntarily single adults with both voluntary and involuntary singlehood being predictive of somatic symptoms, anxiety and insomnia, severe depression, and romantic loneliness.

When the relationships among psychopathy, romantic relationships, and wellbeing were investigated in 431 undergraduates, it was seen that for both males and females various components of romantic relationship quality were positively correlated with subjective wellbeing (SWB) and negatively correlated with ill-being. However, only for

females was overall romantic relationship quality positively correlated with life satisfaction, happiness and positive affect, and negatively correlated with negative affect and depression (Love & Holder; 2015).

According to Markey, Markey and Gray (2007) the perception of happy kinship is associated with relationship quality and actual good health. The participants in their study perceived their romantic partners to be primarily positive health influences; women believed their partners were more influential than did men, and eating and physical activity were believed to be most affected by partners. A direct association was revealed between relationship quality and health of participants on the one hand and reports of the perceived health influences of partners on the other.

Gere and Schimmack (2013) found that goal conflict, as reported by a partner, adversely impacted relationship quality and this effect was manifested in lower subjective wellbeing of the other partner. A general observation which emerged was that lower relationship quality was inevitably associated with lower subjective happiness.

A study aimed to see the difference in loneliness between a middle aged unmarried woman and a married associate (Rakhmattie & Widayarni, 2006). The answer that emerged was that the first type of adult experienced more social and emotional loneliness than the second type of adult, with the first type of loneliness impacting the subject when she was alone and sometimes even in a crowd.

One Can Be Happy Being Alone

While many people think of their marriages as a source of happiness it is possible for a single adult also to be happy. A study of 24,000 people in Germany over 15 years by

Tara Parker-Pope, revealed that getting married only triggered a small bump in happiness, measured as one-tenth of a point on an 11 point scale. Of course, there were big variations among individuals. Some people were much happier after marriage; however, sadly, some reported less happiness after marriage. The bottom line was that if someone is already happy, she/he will not gain much extra happiness from marriage which will not have a significant impact on a social network that is already rich and is the cause of high pre-marital happiness. . The extra companionship of marriage, while nice, doesn' t have a marked impact on her/his overall sense of happiness. At the same time, if someone lacks a strong social network, she/he would get a bigger happiness benefit from partnering up. At the same time, a married person with a limited social network will suffer more after divorce or the death of a spouse. In summary:

1. Individual personality tends to influence overall happiness irrespective of whether a person is married.
2. Happier people are more likely to get married.
3. Marriage triggers a short bump in happiness, but after two years, everyone settles back and stagnates to one level.
4. Improving our social connections and relationships is good for overall happiness. But if one is not married, or does not have a happy marriage, one can still improve her/his happiness by nurturing their friendships and social connections.

10. Conclusion

Thus, to sum matters up it can be said that happiness can be explained by a variety of factors: life satisfaction, appreciation of life, moments of pleasure etc. But at a tautological level happiness results from the experiencing of positive emotions. Through an extensive literature review and a primary survey this paper establishes that

such positive emotional experiences and therefore happiness can result from close relationships among humans. That is other things remaining the same, those involved in close relationships, based on mutual disclosure and emotional bonding, are happier than others.

The science of close relationships boils down to fundamental lessons that are obvious and difficult to master: empathy, positivity and a strong emotional connection drive the happiest and healthiest relationships. However, yet some people are not happy enough for the fact that they often fail to see the brighter aspects of events and difficult situations. Remaining single with simply being in love with self can be equally satisfying. The process of learning to master happiness is indeed a journey towards enlightenment.

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