How do people define happiness?

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BUT FIRST

Let’s talk about Subjective Well-Being
“Happiness” makes sense to people. People have “LAY” or “Folk” theories about what happiness is. Happiness is enmeshed in our social/cultural fabric.
So, we have been asking people:

What is your definition of happiness?

AND

What factors contribute to your happiness?
Folk theories as Heuristics

The world we live in is the same for all of us, but the way we experience it is different for each individual.


Folk theories may be prescriptive or descriptive.

“How you think about yourself might be very important in creating yourself.”

— Shinobu Kitayama
Happiness is not “one size fits all”
happiness is...

“Happiness is...”

...singing in the car.

Happiness
Success
Today

How do people define happiness?

- **Study 1:** Open-ended (online) – “What is your definition of happiness?”
- **Study 2:** RATE (online) – 28 statements – “How much is your happiness determined by . . .”
Examine group differences

- Low SES vs. High SES

SES = Socio-Economic Status
Study 1 – Spontaneous definitions of Happiness

Having the opportunity to love and be loved, and finding wonder in everyday things.

Happiness is not being upset at anything.

Being happy means feeling that your life is full of meaning and purpose.

Money and women. Luxuries in the world. Good food.

For me happiness is to be free of negative emotions, nasty problems, negative people in order to enjoy life.

It means security and being content.
Study 1 – Spontaneous definitions of Happiness

I'm happiest when I am fully engaged in things that i enjoy. I am "in the zone"

It is a feeling of contentment. It is a lack of worry or depression.

It's knowing who you are, what you're capable of, and showing that to yourself every day.

To me, happiness is helping others and seeing them happy. It is watching my kids enjoy life.

Happiness is having fun doing things. It is feeling like laughing, fooling around and making jokes.
Glaring Absences in people’s spontaneous definitions

- Physical Health
- Mental Health
- Freedom
- Absence of a corrupt Government
Back to what the data did say . . . .

Let’s examine between group differences

e.g., Low SES vs. High SES

n = 457
Curious: How do low income (low SES) people differ in their spontaneous happiness definitions?
Low Happiness | High Happiness
---|---
Low SES (income) |  |  
|  |  
|  |  
High SES (income) |  |  

Ran a 2 x 2 ANOVA
Living in the Moment

Lo Happy

Hi Happy

Lo Income

Hi Income
Living in the Moment *

Lo Income

Lo Happy

Hi Income

Hi Happy

$p = .04$
- Taking the good with the bad
- Making the best of situations
- Taking the good with the bad
- Making the best of situations

\[ p = .05 \]
SUMMARY:

For ‘self-generated’ (spontaneous) definitions of happiness, LOW SES people report MORE instances of

1. Living in the Moment, and
2. Making the best of situations

Corroborating Evidence:
Palys & Little (1983)
Higher Life Satisfaction when projects were:
- Short term – enjoyable tasks – moderately difficult
GOOD - right?

DISCOVERED: Unique strategies that low SES people may tend to use.

BUT – self-generated definitions seemed to MISS important factors

AND – is 35K an appropriate split between LOW and HIGH income?
$r = .39$ (collapsed across countries)  

$ r = .23^{**}$ (our U.S. samples)  

Let’s see if there is something that can better capture
– SES

HOW ABOUT:
If your income needs are MET?
Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs
(1943) Psychological Review

- **Physiological**: Food – Water – Shelter – Sex
- **Safety**: Body - Family - Psychological
- **Love/Belongingness**: Friends – Family – Sexual intimacy
- **Esteem**: Confidence – Respect from others
- **Self-Actualization**
Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs
(1943) Psychological Review

- Physiological Needs
  - Food – Water – Shelter – Sex

- Safety
  - Body - Family - Psychological

- Love/Belongingness
  - Friends – Family – Sexual intimacy

- Esteem
  - Confidence – Respect from others

- Self-Actualization

Income Needs
Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs
(1943) Psychological Review

- **PHYSIOLOGICAL**
  - Food – Water – Shelter – Sex

- **SAFETY**
  - Body - Family - Psychological

- **LOVE/BELONGINGNESS**
  - Friends – Family – Sexual intimacy

- **ESTEEM**
  - Confidence – Respect from others

- **Self-ACTUALIZATION**

INCOME NEEDS

MET
Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

(1943) Psychological Review
LASTLY . . . .

I don’t really trust self-reported HAPPINESS
An ‘optimism’ bias – a ‘happiness’ bias

Study 1

Study 2
SO . . .

Splitting on low vs. high happiness might not necessarily be appropriate either.
Study 2: New variable: Are your income needs met?

Qu: What **factors** contribute to your happiness?

How much is YOUR overall happiness determined by:

28 factors

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<td>Not at all important for my happiness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Very important for my happiness</td>
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n = 205
A Much simpler analysis:

What do people rate as more important to their happiness when:

Income needs are MET

VS

When Income needs are NOT MET
Factors (important for happiness) for which there were NO differences between groups:

- Positive Affect
- Negative Affect
- Goals
- Connectedness
- Feeling Safe
- Self-Esteem (e.g., liking myself)
- Spirituality
- Secure job
- Liking my job
- Physical health
- Mental health
Factors (important for happiness) for which there were differences between groups:

Calm
Content
Living in the Moment
Grateful
Hope
Doing things for others, with others

Emotional Control *
Happy Philosophy *
Doing things for others *
Calm

Income Needs Not met

Income Needs Met

p = .02
Content

$\text{Income Needs Not met}$

$\text{Income Needs Met}$

$p = .04$
Living in Moment

Income Needs Not met

Income Needs Met

\( p = .05 \)
Feel Grateful

Income Needs Not met

Income Needs Met

p < .01
Hope

Income Needs Not met

Income Needs Met

$p = .05$
Doing things with others for others

\[ p = 0.08^t \]
The factors THAT contribute to the ‘happiness’ of low SES people?

Calm
Content
Living in the Moment
Grateful
Hope
Doing things for others, with others

Emotional Control  *
Happy Philosophy  *
Doing things for others  *
In addition
Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs
(1943) *Psychological Review*

- **PHYSIOLOGICAL**
  - Food – Water – Shelter – Sex

- **SAFETY**
  - Body - Family - Psychological

- **LOVE/BELONGINGNESS**
  - Friends – Family – Sexual intimacy

- **ESTEEM**
  - Confidence – Respect from others

- **Self-ACTUALIZATION**
What factors contribute to happiness for these NEED levels?
CONCLUSION:

There is more than one definition of happiness.

It may depend on the NEEDS people are seeking to fulfill and if those needs are met or not met.
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Many thanks to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for funding my PhD research
Study 1 – Coded for 28 common categories

Top 10

- Relationships
- Contentment
- Positive Emotions
- Outlook - Philosophy
- Lack of Negative Emotions
- Living in the moment
- Pursuing Goals
- Having Basic Needs met
- Having Safety & Security