

DETERMINANTS OF HAPPINESS IN UNDERGRADUATE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

DEBORAH M. FLYNN
Nipissing University

STEPHANIE MACLEOD
Nipissing University

Abstract

This study explored the relationship between happiness, and six other life domains: Academic Success, Financial Security, Familial Support, Living Environment, Self-Image and Social Relations. Participants were one hundred and ninety-two students from a small undergraduate university. The purpose of the study was to determine which life domain had the greatest influence on student happiness. Assessment tools included the Oxford Happiness Inventory, the Multidimensional Student Life Satisfaction Scale, and a Financial Success Survey created by the authors. Results indicate that Self-esteem, Academic Success and Financial Security, respectively, explained most of the variance in student happiness.

Key Words: Happiness, University Student Stress, Determinants of University Student Happiness

Introduction

Positive psychology has brought awareness to the study of individual happiness and the obvious and potential benefits to society. Identifying variables responsible for and correlated with the feeling of well-being or happiness has become an important topic in many areas of psychological research. Researchers such as Cummins et al. (2009) go as far as to suggest that when individuals are happier whole societies function better.

The concept of happiness is one that has been defined by researchers and lay people in many ways, ranging from life satisfaction, a sense of well-being, to brief momentary pleasures. However, in the literature, happiness has been broadly described as positive subjective experiences. Using frequency of positive experiences as an indicator of happiness has

empirical support. In a large number of studies, measuring happiness in a variety of ways, it was found that happy people are those that report feeling mild to moderate positive moods and emotions the majority of the time. The consistency of positive affect appears to be more important in defining happiness than intensity (see Diener et al. 1985; Diener et al. 1991). Regardless of definitions used by researcher over the years, the evidence appears to be quite consistent; being happy is advantageous to the individual in a multiple of life domains.

It is well known in the positive psychology literature that increased happiness is related to multiple benefits including better mental and physical health, (see Lyubomirsky et al. 2005). A number of positive health behaviours have been associated with happiness

including better dietary habits and the maintenance of normal body weight (Chang and Nayga 2010; Piqueras et al. 2011), better oral health practices (Dumitrescu et al. 2010), and being more physically active (Piqueras et al. 2011). The industrial organizational literature has happiness correlated with greater productivity, higher salaries and greater success at work (Hoggard 2005; Lyubomirsky et al. 2005). Happiness is correlated with individuals being more energetic, sociable, altruistic, original and having more fulfilling marriages, friendships and a longer life (Martin 2005; Norrish and Vella-Brodrick 2008).

The individual benefits can pale in comparison to the potential societal gains of having a population comprised of such happy and therefore, "successful" individuals.

Accomplishing the goals set out by one's society is often the operational definition of such success. Most societies value intelligence and academic accomplishment and therefore the relationship to happiness is a well investigated one.

The relationship between the concept of happiness or positive affect and the intellectual ability of university students has been researched for quite some time (Hartman 1934; Jasper 1930; Washburne 1941). The interest in happiness has mostly been in the relationship between intelligence and positive affect. Some have found a positive relationship (Diener and Fujita 1995; Fox and Spector 2000; Kashdan and Yuen 2007) some a negative relationship (Block and Kremen 1996) and others, none at all (Chamorro-Premuzic et al. 2005). Studies that have investigated the relationship between positive affect and grades have similar mixed results. Frisch, et al. (2004) found that people who report high subjective well-being are more likely to graduate from college than those whose self-reports are less favorable to their happiness. Small but positive correlations are found (Chow 2005; Marsh

et al. 2006), as well as negative (Trockel et al. 2000) and others report no relation at all (Myers 2005) between grades and happiness or positive affect.

Studies are often inconsistent in their findings with regard to the importance of academic achievement as a contributing factor in happiness. For example, Kirkcaldy et al. (2004) explored the relation between academic performance in reading, mathematical and scientific literacy of 30 nations, using the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey. In this study, happiness was consistently related to the three literacy scores, with the greatest association being with reading. Huebner (1991) contradicts this theory when he examined students on various life domains, including grades, concluding that grades were not significantly related to life satisfaction.

Chang et al. (2003) studied Hong Kong 2nd and 8th graders focusing on developmentally invariant and variable predictors of life satisfaction and concluded that social self-concept was a strong predictor of life satisfaction in adolescents only, with actual academic test scores being a strong predictor among only the children. Cheng and Furnham (2002) studied the effect of three variables (peer relations, self-confidence, and school performance) on happiness evaluating high school students with results demonstrating that both school performance and self confidence were significantly correlated with happiness with self confidence more strongly related.

Studies evaluating the variables of debt and financial security on happiness resulted in contradictory outcomes. For example, Zhang & Kemp (2009) examined the relationship of student debt on motivation, happiness and academic achievement. Results showed that none of the three variables were affected by student debt. Students with debt were no less happy than students without

debt, however higher debt levels were associated with a more tolerant attitude to debt. Moghaddam (2008) also showed that non-pecuniary factors (religion and emotion) were significantly correlated with happiness, whereas pecuniary factors (income) were not. However, the results did indicate that financial security remained a significant determinant in measured happiness; although absolute income was not a significant factor. Pinquart and Sorensen (2000) in a meta-analysis of 286 studies investigating older adults, income was significantly correlated with happiness and life satisfaction and more so than with education.

Numerous other studies have discussed the effect of various life domains on happiness including the role of support from family and friends. Crossley and Langdrige (2005) conducted a study on the evaluation of the various sources of happiness for men and women. The results indicated that females listed "helping others", having a "close family" and "being loved by loved ones" as the most important determinants of happiness; while men listed "sexual activity", "sports" and "being liked". Chang et al. (2003) found that emotional support and parental warmth significantly correlated with happiness, but less than test scores, general self-concept, social self, academic self-concept, and sports self-concept.

Nonetheless, it appears social relations are a strong indicator of overall happiness regardless of one's stage in life. Westaway et al. (2007) measured happiness on seven independent variables (oneself, family life, friends, time to do things, neighbours, social life and health). The study also incorporated sample groups (Indians, Caucasians and African Americans) to see whether race was correlated with happiness. Although Caucasians were found to be most happy, satisfaction with people was a highly significant determinant of happiness in all races. Chan

and Lee (2006) also showed that happiness is positively correlated with network size and social support and that network size was more significantly correlated, suggesting that the number of friends was more important than the quality of the friendships in predicting happiness. Demir and Weitekamp (2007) however showed that friendship quality was the greatest predictor of happiness, followed by number of friends, and personality.

It remains unclear which among these many factors play the greatest role in happiness of the average university student. The aim of the present study is to evaluate which of the following factors is the greatest determinant of happiness in the life of the university student: academic success, financial accessibility, familial support, living environment, self-image or social relations.

Materials and Method

Method

Participants and Procedure

Two hundred undergraduate students participated on a voluntary basis and were from various programs across 5 years of study. Participants were informed of their rights under the Research Ethics Guidelines including their right not answer questions if they so chose and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Those with omitted data or completion errors were discarded, leaving a sample size of 192. Participants consisted of 155 females and 37 males (representative of the gender distribution of the student body). Ages ranged from 18 to 44 years old ($M = 20$, $SD = 2.56$). Participants completed their package in approximately 20 minutes. The questionnaire package consisted demographic information, the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire, the Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale, and a Financial survey.

Materials

Oxford Happiness Questionnaire

Participants’ happiness was assessed by means of the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ) (Hills & Argyle, 2002). The OHQ was developed to provide a more accessible measure of the Oxford Happiness Inventory (OHI). Robbins et al. (2010) found the inventory to demonstrate good internal consistency reliability ($\alpha=.92$) and good construct validity in terms of positive association with extraversion ($r = .38\ p<.001$) and negative association with neuroticism ($r = -.57\ p<.001$) an indication, according to the authors, that the kind of happiness measured by the OHQ is associated with stable extraversion. Participants responded to each of the 29 items on this questionnaire using a six-point likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). High scores indicate high state happiness.

Multidimensional Students’ Life Satisfaction Scale

The Multidimensional Students’ Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS) developed by Huebner et al (1994) , is a widely used measure of the individual’s satisfaction in their lives with specific domains such as Academic Success, Family Support, Social Support, Self-Image and Living Environment. Internal consistency (α) coefficients have been reported in various publications (Dew, 1996; Greenspoon & Saklofske, 1997; Huebner et al. 1994; Huebner et al. 1998). The findings suggest that the reliabilities range from .70s to low .90s and are acceptable for research purposes. Participants responded to 40 items in total on this questionnaire, using a six-point likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

Financial Survey.

The final potential determinant of student happiness was evaluated by a financial survey created by the authors. This survey was created to provide a measure of financial security in a university student population. Participants completed 6 items using a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Sample questions include: “I have the money I need to pay for school”, “Lack of finances has prevented me from reaching my goals” and “I do not have resources that I need (car, books, etc) because of the lack of money.” Two items had reverse scores. High scores on the scale indicate more positive financial circumstances.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presented the descriptive statistics on both age and year of study including; means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum (range) values. The mean age for participants in the sample was 20.7, the SD = 2.56. It is important to note that women comprised 81% (n = 155) of the sample and men comprised 19% (n = 37).

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Mini- mum	Maxi- mum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age	192	18	44	20.71	2.566
Year of Study	192	2	6	2.98	.963

Gender and Happiness

Table 2 depicts gender differences with regard to happiness. Males (m = 128.97, SD = 24.05) and females (m = 127.62, SD = 18.77). Participants did not differ significantly on levels of happiness, $t(190) = 0.372, p = 0.71$.

Table 2 Gender and Happiness

Happiness			Gender
Gender	Mean	N	Standard Deviation
Male	128.97	37	24.056
Female	127.62	155	18.771
Total	127.88	192	19.835

Year of Study and Happiness

Table 3 displays the year of study with regard to Happiness. The various years of study did not differ significantly on levels of happiness, $F(3,188) = 0.271, p = 0.85$.

Table 3 Year of Study and Happiness

Happiness Year of Study			
Year of Study	Mean	N	Standard Deviation
2	126.56	86	21.533
3	129.38	26	16.201
4	128.69	78	19.283
5 or more	133.5	2	14.8
Total	127.88	192	19.835

Reliability

All 192 participants were included in the calculation of Cronbach’s alpha. The Multi-dimensional Student Life Satisfaction Scale, with the addition of the newly created financial scale consisted of 46 items ($\alpha = 0.767$). The obtained alpha score indicates that the scale has acceptable internal consistency (reliability).

Outcome Variables

A standard multiple regression analysis was performed using SPSS. The dependent variable was level of Happiness derived from the OHQ scores and the predictor variables were the six Life Domains which included; Academic Success, Familial Support, Living Environment, Self-image, and Social Relations derived from the MSLSS and the sixth variable was the Financial Security score. The linear combination is significant, $F(6,192) = 27.4, p < .01$. The squared multiple correlation coefficient was 0.47, indicating that approximately 47% of the variance of happiness in the sample can be accounted for by the linear combination of Life Domains. It is important to note that 34.9% of happiness can be accounted for by Self-Image, 6.9% of

Table 4. Standard Multiple Regression analysis of happiness with Family Support, Self-Image, Financial Support, Social Relations, Living Environment and Academic Success as predictor variables

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Significance
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	29.111	9.475		3.072	.002*
Family Support	.120	.170	.045	.706	.481
Self- Image	1.634	.267	.437	6.130	.000 *
Finance Security	0.387	.173	.131	2.237	.026*
Social Relations	.022	.251	.006	.086	.932
Living Environment	.257	.191	.904	1.347	.180
Academic Success	.579	.193	.200	3.007	.003*

happiness can be accounted for by Academic Success, and finally, 4.1% of happiness can be accounted for by Financial Security.

Three out of six life domains were statistically significant. The significant predictors were Self-Image, Academic Success and Financial Security respectively. All three variables had a significant positive correlation with level of happiness.

Self-Image proved to be the strongest predictor of student happiness, $b = 0.437$, $t(192) = 6.13$, $p < .001$. Academic Success proved to be the second strongest predictor of student happiness, $\beta = .20$, $t(192) = 3.0$, $p < .01$. Lastly, Financial Security proved to be the third and final significant predictor of student happiness, $\beta = .131$, $t(192) = 2.24$, $p < 0.026$.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship between perceived happiness and six life domains; academic success, financial accessibility, familial support, living environment, self-esteem and social relations. The results of this study are consistent with previous research, which support the importance of self-image, academic success and financial security as being good predictors of the happiness of a university student. Chang et al (2003) concluded that social self-concept was a strong predictor of life satisfaction in adolescents. As well, Cheng and Furnham (2002) found that self-confidence most strongly related to happiness.

Academic success is a well known stressor in college life (Deroma et al. 2009; Ross et al. 1999). With respect to academic success, Kirkcaldy et al (2004) found that happiness was positively correlated to reading, scientific, and mathematical literacy in his study of school-age children. This result is also consistent with the present study, which found that happiness comes, at least in part, from an individual's scholastic abilities and

academic success. Chang et al. (2003) found that actual academic test scores were a strong predictor of happiness among adolescents. It is important to take note of two considerations. First, both studies used a sample of middle and high school students, as opposed to a university student sample. Second, both studies measure academics objectively, using either literacy or test scores.

The finding of the current study that financial security is a significant determinant of happiness is not surprising given the rising cost of obtaining a university education. These results are consistent with the findings of previous studies. Guo et al. (2011) found that future employment opportunities and financial burden to be high stress triggers in the lives of college students. Moghaddam (2008) concluded that although absolute income was an insignificant factor, financial security remained a significant determinant in measured happiness. As well, Camfield et al. (2009) sampled individuals living in Bangladesh, and reported that happiness was directly related to levels of wealth. Further research could be conducted on the specific financial concerns of students, as well as whether these concerns are related to immediate and present needs (i.e., paying tuition, purchasing groceries) or future concerns (i.e., finding a career that will support one-self and family).

The current study offers some insight into the relationship between happiness and the six life domains but there are limitations that should be highlighted. The analyses have uncovered no difference in happiness related to gender. This finding is consistent with previous studies (i.e., Cheng and Furnham 2002.) However, is still important to note that this sample, even though it is representative of the student body, has a gender imbalance (e.g., 81% female, 19% male) and may not be as generalizable to the male population. Secondly, as with many of the studies in this

area of research, the data are correlational and cannot address the topic of causality.

Given the importance of being happy both at the individual level and societal level, it follows that the development of interventions to increase individual happiness and sustain these gains over time would be an important goal (Seligman et al. 2002). Su-Yen Chen & Luo Lu (2009) concluded that 2.5% of students report feeling 'very unhappy' and 11.6% of students report feeling 'not quite happy' in their day-to-day life. This study sets the groundwork for a means to improve overall student happiness in future years. Noting that self-esteem, academic success and financial security accounted for 47% of student happiness, further research could be conducted on other potential determinants of student happiness in order to provide a more comprehensive model of what is important when trying to explain, and predict future happiness. A comprehensive model would also aid in the creation of new intervention alternatives geared directly toward the factors responsible for attaining the greatest levels of happiness in a given student population. Never before has there been a great need for effective support services made available for those students who are greatly effected by difficulty with self esteem issues, academic performance and financial distress.

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