

Relationships and Happiness

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(Review Report)

Abstract— In modern terms, happiness is used in the context of positive or pleasant mental or emotional state, varying from contentment to euphoria. A relationship refers to the way in which two or more people interact or stay connected. In this paper, we tackle the different aspects of happiness and the ways in which these are affected by social and intimate relationships. We further proceed to address the issues related to the measurements of happiness and its relation with relationship.

Index Terms— Social relationship, marital relationship, subjective well-being, happiness, relationship moderators, empirical relationship.

I. INTRODUCTION

Relationships have been known to be so interlaced with happiness that at a certain point it is difficult to differentiate between their existences. They have long been considered as one of the important factors in determining the state of happiness of an individual. This assumption is in accord with the arguments of numerous scholars [1], regarding the importance of group living and interpersonal relationships in shaping human evolution. These arguments aren't completely baseless either. Numerous evidences can be found in our day-to-day life. For example, support from family, friends, or from your significant other is tied to reports of greater subjective well-being.

But recently, a faction among the scholars [2,3] have suggested that the status offered to relationships in the

centrality of happiness is overstated. They argue with the gaps present in the empirical evidence and are now causing a widespread reconsideration of certain assumptions about the association of happiness and relationships.

We begin with issues of definitions and measurement. We then review empirical findings on the relative effects of relationship quantity and quality on happiness, or more specifically, subjective well-being. We also try to highlight the substantial role, the “significant other” plays in the subjective well-being (SWB) of an individual. Towards the end, we also acknowledge certain less considered aspects that moderate the effects of relationship on happiness like age, gender, culture, etc

II. SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

While exploring the effects of relationships on happiness, it is usually studied as Subjective Well-Being [4,5]. SWB is defined as ‘a person’s cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life [6]. The cognitive element refers to what one thinks about his or her life satisfaction in global terms (life as a whole) and in domain terms (in specific areas of life such as work, relationships, etc.) whereas the affective element refers to emotions, moods and feelings. Affect is considered positive when the emotions, moods and feelings experienced are pleasant (e.g. joy, elation, affection etc.) while it is deemed negative, when the emotions, moods and feelings experienced are unpleasant (e.g. guilt, anger, shame etc.).

In short, SWB refers to the general hedonic tones of their day to day lives and how well their life is going overall.

Researchers [7,8] usually subscribe to the tripartite model which comprises of Positive Affect (PA), Negative Affect (NA), and Life Satisfaction (LS). In this paper, henceforth, we use the term happiness when addressing broad-based questions and perspectives, reserving the term SWB for references to specific theoretical and empirical work in the SWB tradition. We, following tradition, will adopt the tripartite model which provides an useful framework for categorizing the results of studies utilizing a wide range of measures. For example, measures of mental health and depression are the most commonly used measures of SWB, yet such measures primarily capture NA; PA and LS are less frequently assessed [9]. Second, it is easy to see that the pattern of correlations observed between social relationships and happiness will differ depending on which factor of SWB is being assessed. For example, as will be seen, relationship

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quality is often more highly correlated with LS than with PA or NA, and so reviews that focus on affective correlates of relationships may overlook important effects on LS.

III. SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND HAPPINESS

Early research [7,10] on relationships and happiness investigated satisfaction with social life, but attention soon turned to quantitative measures, such as number of friends or confidants, size of social network, and degree of integration. As a surge of interest in social support led to the development of several well-validated measures, qualitative assessment of other relationships began to emerge during the 1980s and have continued down to the present day (for a comprehensive review, see [11]). Social activity is continued to be studied with more refined methods of measurement day by day, such as experience sampling and the Day Reconstruction Method [12,13].

A. *Why Should Relationships Matter?*

Although scholars frequently assume that relationships are important to happiness, the question of why is less frequently addressed. Baumeister and Leary [2] presented an influential articulation of the importance of relationships to human psychology, arguing that all humans have a fundamental “need to belong” that has been shaped by natural selection over the course of human evolution. They argue that this need leads people to form relationships and resist their dissolution, with concomitant beneficial effects on adjustment and well-being. The primary functional argument for the importance of social relationships focuses on social support and its salutary effects on mental and physical health (for reviews, see [11,14]).

B. *Do These Relationships Affect Happiness?*

But the question that finally arises is that, whether relationships can be considered reliably important to happiness? If one considers objective, measurable aspects of an individual's relationships and social network, then the answer can be said to be yes, but not to the point. Meta-analyses of the relation of objective social variables to SWB have obtained effect sizes in the small to moderate range [2,3]. For example, a meta-analysis [15] of the association between “social activity” and SWB found that the average effect on LS and happiness was $r = 0.16$, and another meta-analysis [16] found that the quantity of social activity had effects ranging from $r = 0.12$ – 0.17 , depending on the specific dependent measure used. Across several samples, Cooper, Okamura, and Gurka [17] found that satisfaction with social activities was significantly correlated with PA ($r = 0.20$), NA ($r = -0.26$) and LS ($r = 0.38$), whereas the frequency of social activities was consistently related only to LS ($r = 0.19$). Lucas and Dyrenforth [2] analyzed data from the General Social Survey and found that the correlation between number of friends and happiness was only 0.13. From their analysis and the meta-analytic findings of [15] and [16], Lucas and colleagues concluded that the impact of social relationships on happiness has been overstated, and that theories of SWB should be reconsidered accordingly.

In sum, this leads to believe the objective measures have at max, a modest influence on the level of happiness of individuals, but the case is not closed. Effect sizes tend to be larger for subjective measures of the quality of social relationships, relative to objective measures. Wan and colleagues [17] measured receipt of four types of support from four or five sources in a sample of parents. They were able to predict 35 % of the variance in LS for married women and 15 % of the variance in LS for married men. However, nearly all of the explained variance for married men was attributable to partner support, whereas the addition of the 16 other measures accounted for an additional 6.7 % of the variance in married women's LS. Demir [18], measured quality and conflict in relationships with mother, father, friends, and romantic partner (when relevant); these assessments accounted for 17 % of the variance in a composite measure of happiness in single participants and 28 % of the variance in happiness of participants in intimate relationships. Similar results were obtained by Walen and Lachman [19], who used the MIDUS measures of social support and strain [20] to assess the combined effects of family relationships, friendships, and intimate relationships on LS (27 % variance explained), PA (16 % variance explained), and NA (11 % variance explained). These findings are very helpful in distinguishing the effect the three factors of SWB have on happiness: the effects on LS are considerably larger than the effects on PA and NA.

However, as Lucas and colleagues have pointed out, such measures likely share common method variance with measures of SWB. This is especially true when similarly worded measures of relationships and SWB are used. For example, Alfonso, Allison, Rader and Gorman [21] constructed an Extended Satisfaction With Life Scale that measured domain satisfactions by making only small modifications to the wording of satisfaction with life questions. Thus, it is not surprising that satisfaction with social life was highly correlated with LS ($r = 0.62$), as were satisfaction with family ($r = 0.41$) and romantic relationships ($r = 0.39$). Despite such methodological concerns, it would be premature to draw strong conclusions about the strength of the correlation between relationships and happiness without consideration of additional issues. Chief among these are the diversity of relationships that characterize human social life and the possibility that factors such as gender and age may moderate the association of relationships with happiness.²

IV. MARRIAGE AND HAPPINESS

Although huge portion of the existent research that has been done on relationship and happiness has been devoted to global measures of overall relationship quality, most of this research has been focused on the importance of intimate relationships and how its quality affects one's happiness. However, it is also a well-known fact that existing in the state of being married in itself, that is by virtue of being married, one tends to be happy, whether or not the quality of the relationship is good or not [15,17,22,23,24].

It is often observed that marital status is cited as a well-established predictor of happiness with a lot of research and

observational analysis showing higher levels of happiness amongst married people than those who are single or no in a relationship. Despite the data showing the aforementioned, psychologists also propose the conjecture that married people are merely more inclined toward happiness since they're happier to begin with. Humans are predisposed to certain happiness ranges depending on their genetics, personality and life circumstances. Also, happier people are generally more social, and it follows that people who actively socialize will be more likely to meet someone they'd like to marry. The idealistic method in order to find out the true affect of happiness we would have to observe a pair of people's happiness, and then make them start a relationship and observe the change in happiness levels, however this is not possible as a lot of factors cause two people to start a relationship and these cannot be manipulated. Thus the studies we follow to cite marital status as a well-established predictor of happiness are generally a comparative study of two distinct groups, which are the people in a relationship and the people who are not in a relationship, with possibly distinct characteristics and happiness levels.

A. *Change In Marital Status And Relationships*

Here we consider a comparative affect of marital status with happiness. The analysis of the simple effect of marital status on happiness actually confounds the separate effects of being married relative to being a never-married single with the effect of being married relative to being divorced or widowed [2]. The research has shown that one's own subjective well being was found to have a small increase as one proceeded from being single to being married [2,22,23]. However the reverse, that is being proceeding from being married to singlehood often comes with a greater adverse effect than the positive effect of being married. Thus divorces or the death of a spouse leads to a greater weight of depression than the weight of happiness during the time of being married. [2] Certain studies also show that there is a steady, linear relationship between various stages of relationship commitment commitment (e.g. moving from singlehood to steady dating to marriage) and happiness [24]. This kind of relationship is largely observed in asian countries where the concept of arranged marriage is present, as the people getting married often don't know each other well enough to possess feelings that lead to the happiness you get when marrying the one you love.

B. *Marital Quality And Happiness*

Despite the literature on quality of marriage and happiness is relatively large, most of it has been focused on how it is related to depression. The effect of marital quality on PA and LS is one that hasn't received much attention. Dush and Amato [24] made a comparison of marital status and relationship happiness on multiple measures of happiness. They found out that the correlation of marital status with life happiness was positive as expected but relatively modest. In comparison the correlation of relationship happiness and life happiness was considerably stronger indicating the effect of relationship on overall life satisfaction. Similar results were obtained with measures of distress symptoms.

Proulx, Helms, and Buehler [25] created findings from 66 cross-sectional and 27 longitudinal studies of marital quality and happiness. They found an average effect of marital quality that was moderate in size for the cross-sectional studies and smaller. In addition, the relation between marital quality and happiness was moderated by gender, such that the association was stronger for women than for men. Unfortunately, the Proulx et al. [25] meta-analysis is limited by the scope of the literature search and the particular choice of happiness measures selected for inclusion; specifically, they included depression, anxiety, and symptoms of distress, but not LS, happiness, or PA.

V. MODERATORS OF THE EFFECT OF RELATIONSHIPS ON HAPPINESS

Here, we present, not a comprehensive, but a certain biased analysis of those moderators which had received substantial empirical attention.

A. *Gender*

There are theoretical reasons to suggest that relationships may be more important to SWB for women than for men. Drawing on evolutionary theory, the tend-and-befriend model [26] hypothesizes that, because women were historically more involved in the care of dependent, immature offspring, their dependency on their social groups is higher, especially in times of threat for joint protection of self and offspring than may have been true for men. Consistent with this perspective is a large literature in sociology and social psychology suggesting that relationships are more central to the activities and daily experience of women than men (see [26] for a comprehensive review). Relative to men, adult women maintain more same-sex close relationships, report more benefits (as well as drawbacks) from contacts with their female friends and relatives, and provide more frequent and more effective social support to others (see [27] and [28]). Moreover, studies in elderly populations [29,30,31] have found that older married men rely almost entirely upon their wives for social support, whereas older women report receiving more social support in general and derive their support from a wider range of friends and family members.

B. *Age*

Numerous scholars [32] have speculated that the effect of relationships on happiness might be moderated by age too. proposed that the relative influence of friends on happiness should decline in early adulthood and continue to remain low into early middle age, whereas family relationships should have a much greater influence on happiness during these years; by contrast, relationships with friends may predominate in the determination of happiness by late adulthood, where the influence of relationships with family members on happiness may be reduced. Ishii-Kuntz's rationale for these predictions is that people presumably concentrate on establishing themselves within their occupational and family contexts during early adulthood, whereas older adults may be more concerned with reciprocity in relationships, which is difficult to maintain with family members. Generally speaking, Reference [32] supported these predictions.

C. Culture

The effects of cultural variation on happiness has been an interest in the field for some time, but whether the presence and quality of relationships have different effects in different cultures has yet to be answered definitively. Kwan, Bond and Singelis [33] measured the influence of "relationship harmony" and self-esteem on LS in college students from the USA and Hong Kong and found significant positive relations in both groups of about the same magnitude. Similar findings were reported by Reference [34]. A cross-cultural study [35] of SWB predictors in 42 countries found that the relationship between marital status and SWB was largely the same across cultures, although the association was moderated somewhat by national differences in individualism-collectivism. Thus the available evidence suggests that culture may not strongly influence the association between relationships and happiness.

D. Additional Moderators

It isn't surprising that there are other moderators out there influencing the effect of relations on happiness and SWB. The personality trait extraversion may moderate the effect of social relationships on happiness. Reference [13, 18, 36] found that identity formation moderated the association between relationship quality and SWB among emerging adults such that the correlation was stronger among those at more advanced levels of identity formation. Additional candidates for potential moderators include personal needs, values, goals, income and the successful resolution of developmental tasks.

VI. CONCLUSION

As assumed, we can say that relationships, especially intimate relationships, have measurable effects on happiness. Although one can argue that the effects of objective relationship variables are very small, when the overall influence that includes the subjective measures such as quality of relationship as well, the role of relationships in happiness is considerably greater. When it comes to research on relationships and happiness, the outlook is bright and the questions are many. All we have to is address them.

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