Close Relationships and Happiness

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Shimon Saphire-Bernstein
University of California, Los Angeles
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CHAPTER 60

CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS AND HAPPINESS

SHIMON SAPHIRE-BERNSTEIN AND SHELLEY E. TAYLOR

University of California, Los Angeles, USA

Social relationships have long been considered one of the strongest and most important predictors of happiness (Argyle, 2001; Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976; Myers, 2000). This assumption is in accord with the arguments of numerous scholars regarding the importance of group living and interpersonal relationships in shaping human evolution (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Taylor, Klein, Lewis, Gruenewald, Gurung, & Updegraff, 2000). Empirical evidence that relationships are tied to happiness is plentiful. For example, support from family, friends, and especially from a significant other is tied to reports of greater subjective well-being (e.g., Walen, & Lachman, 2000; Gallagher, & Vella-Brodrick, 2008; Wan, Jaccard, & Ramey, 1996). Recently, however, critics have suggested that the status given to relationships in the field of happiness overstates their centrality and importance (e.g., Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006; Lucas, Dyrenforth, & Diener, 2008). Although these critiques are themselves somewhat controversial, they underscore important gaps in the empirical record and force scholars to reconsider their assumptions about the strength of the association between social relationships and happiness.

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 especially profile the significant other relationship, which accounts for a substantial portion of the variance that relationships play in subjective well-being (SWB). Finally, we consider some less explored issues, such as the roles of gender, age, and culture in moderating the effects of relationships on happiness that may help to explicate some of the puzzlingly modest associations in the literature.

Subjective Well-Being: Definition and Measurement

In the relationships literature, happiness is most often studied as SWB (cf. Diener, 1984; Diener et al., 1999). SWB refers to the subjective perceptions people hold of: (1) the general

hedonic tone of their day-to-day lives and (2) how well their lives are going overall (Diener, 1984). Researchers in this tradition most commonly subscribe to the tripartite model, which views SWB as being comprised of positive affect (PA), negative affect (NA), and life satisfaction (LS) (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Diener, 1984; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). In this review, 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. Although a thorough discussion of the definitions of happiness is beyond the scope of this chapter (for recent reviews, see Miao, Koo & Oishi, Chapter 13, this volume; Schimmack, 2008), we adopt the tripartite model to highlight several key points: First, the model provides a 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 (Reis, 2001). Second, the pattern of correlations observed between social relationships and happiness differs depending on which factor of SWB is assessed. For example, as will be seen, relationship 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.

Assessing Social Relationships

Early research on relationships and happiness investigated satisfaction with social life (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Campbell et al., 1976), but attention soon turned to quantitative measures, such as number of friends or confidants, social network size, degree of integration, and the frequency and amount of social activity (for a meta-analysis of early research, see Okun, Stock, Haring, & Witter, 1984). Reliable measures of marital relationships have existed for decades (e.g. Dyadic Adjustment Scale; Spanier, 1976), although they are infrequently employed in the study of SWB. Qualitative assessment of other relationships began to emerge during the 1980s as a surge of interest in social support led to the development of several well-validated measures that have continued to be widely used to the present day (for a comprehensive review of social support measurement, see Cohen, Underwood & Gottlieb, 2000). The National Study of Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS) measures assess both the positive features of relationships (i.e. social support) and sources of relationship strain, such as conflict (Schuster, Kessler, & Aseltine, 1990). Intimacy and closeness, related constructs, have attracted a great deal of attention in the relationships literature in recent years (for a comprehensive review, see Mashek & Aron, 2004), but they have yet to be fully studied in relation to LS and SWB. Other measures, such as the Network of Relationships Inventory (NRI) (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) assess the quantity and quality of a wide array of relationships. Social activity continues to be studied with more refined methods of measurement, such as experience sampling and the Day Reconstruction Method (Kahneman et al., 2004; Srivastava, Angelo, & Vallereux, 2008).

Why should Relationships Matter for Happiness?

Although scholars frequently assume that relationships are important to happiness, the question of why this should be the case is less frequently addressed. Baumeister and Leary (1995) 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 maintain that this need leads people to form relationships and resist their dissolution, with concomitant beneficial effects on adjustment and well-being. Other researchers have emphasized the importance of intimacy, defined as the perceived responsiveness of another to emotionally self-relevant disclosures that reflect key aspects of one's core psychological self (Reis, 2001). 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 Cohen et al., 2000; and Taylor, 2010).

Are Relationships Important for Happiness?

Are relationships reliably related to happiness? If one considers objective, measureable aspects of an individual's relationships and social network, then the answer is yes, but modestly. Meta-analyses of the relation of objective social variables (such as number of relationships and number of friends) to SWB have obtained effect sizes in the small to moderate range (Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006; Lucas et al., 2008). For example, a meta-analysis of the association between "social activity" and SWB found that the average effect on LS and happiness was $r = 0.16$ (Okun et al., 1984), and another meta-analysis found that the quantity of social activity had effects ranging from $r = 0.12$–0.17, depending on the specific dependent measure used (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2000). Cooper, Okamura, and Gurka (1992) assessed both the frequency of and satisfaction with social activities. Across several samples, they 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 ($r = 0.19$). Note that these results indicate a stronger association of social activity with LS than with the affective components of SWB. Lucas and Dyrenforth (2006) 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 Okun et al. (1984) and Pinquart and Sörensen (2000), Lucas and colleagues concluded that the impact of social relationships on happiness has been overstated, and that theories of SWB should be reconsidered accordingly (Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006; Lucas et al., 2008). It should be noted, however, that Okun et al. (1984) included only studies published before 1980, and the Pinquart and Sörensen (2000) meta-analysis was conducted only on studies with elderly populations.

In sum, the effect of objective measures of social relationships on happiness may be modest, 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 (1996) measured receipt of four types of support from four (for single mothers) or five (for married mothers and fathers) sources in a sample of parents (single fathers were not included due to low *n*). They were able to predict 35% of the variance in LS for married women and 15% of the variance in LS for married men, using all 20 support variables (including four measures of partner support). 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. Support from four sources (child's grandparents, relatives, friends, and coworkers) predicted a total of 9.6% of the variance in single mothers' LS. Demir (2009) measured quality and conflict (derived from the NRI) (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) 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 (2000), who used the MIDUS measures of social support and strain (Schuster et al., 1990) 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 results are especially noteworthy, as they also demonstrate the need to distinguish among the three factors of SWB: the effects on LS are considerably larger than are the effects on PA and NA.

However, as Lucas and colleagues (2006; 2008) point 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 (1996) 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.

Intimate Relationships, Marriage, and Happiness

Although much of the extant literature on relationships and happiness has been devoted to global measures of overall relationship quality, the lion's share of the research has focused on the role of intimate and marital relationships. The mere fact of being married has been repeatedly linked to happiness, irrespective of the quality of the marital relationship (Dush & Amato, 2005; Haring-Hidore, Stock, Okun & Witter, 1985; Wan et al., 1996;

Williams, 2003). Indeed, marital status is frequently cited as one of the most well-established predictors of happiness (e.g. Argyle, 2001; Myers, 2000), although the size of the association between marital status and SWB is weak: In a meta-analysis, Haring-Hidore et al. (1985) found the average effect to be small ($d = 0.14$; $r = 0.07$).[1] As noted, critics have pointed to this and similar findings as evidence that reports of the importance of relationships to happiness have been exaggerated (Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2005).

Despite the weak overall effect size, two of Haring-Hidore et al.'s (1985) findings point to potentially important moderators of the relation of marriage to happiness. First, the average effect size for the relation of marital status to SWB was significantly larger for men ($d = 0.17$; $r = 0.085$) than it was for women ($d = 0.12$; $r = 0.06$), suggesting that gender may be an important factor to examine. In addition, effect size magnitude was significantly correlated with the age range of the samples ($r = -0.54$), such that being married was a stronger predictor of SWB in younger samples than it was in older samples (the possible roles of gender and age in moderating the link between relationships and happiness will be considered in more detail below). Unfortunately, the meta-analysis by Haring-Hidore et al. (1985) includes only studies published before 1980, and no authoritative meta-analysis on the marital status-SWB relation has appeared since that time.

Changes in marital status and happiness

Some scholars have argued that 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 (Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2005). Indeed, research has found that the transition from singlehood to marriage is associated with a small increase in SWB (Haring-Hidore et al., 1985; Lucas, 2005; Williams, 2003). By contrast, the experience of divorce or the death of a spouse has a greater adverse effect than the positive effect of being married (Lucas, 2005). Other research has found a steady, linear relationship between various stages of relationship commitment (e.g. moving from singlehood to steady dating to marriage) and happiness (Dush & Amato, 2005).

Marital quality and happiness

The literature on marital quality and happiness is large, but much of it has focused on how marital quality is related to depression, whereas the role of marital quality in PA and LS has not received as much attention. However, Dush and Amato (2005) compared the effects of marital status and "relationship happiness" (a composite of seven items) on multiple measures of happiness. They found that the correlation of marital status with a single-item global measure of "life happiness" was positive but modest (i.e. $r = 0.15$), whereas relationship happiness had a considerably stronger correlation with life happiness ($r = 0.42$). Similar results were obtained with measures of distress symptoms (rs = −0.12 and −0.32, respectively).

Proulx, Helms, and Buehler (2007) synthesized 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 ($r = 0.37$) and smaller but

[1] Effect size d is reported when provided by the work cited, but the equivalent effect size r is also provided in order to facilitate comparison with other effect sizes, which are for the most part reported as r.

significant in the longitudinal studies ($r = 0.25$). Both of these effects are considerably larger than the 0.07 average effect (in r) reported by Haring-Hidore et al. (1985) for marital status. 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. (2007) 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.

Marriage and happiness—a summary

The research affirms that there is an association between marital status and happiness, although it is not large. By contrast, the relation between marital quality and happiness is considerably stronger. Moreover, meta-analyses suggest that gender may moderate the effect of the marital relationship on happiness: Marital quality seems to be more closely associated with well-being for women than for men (Proulx et al., 2007). In the next section, we turn our attention to a consideration of such potential moderators of the link between relationships and happiness.

Moderators of the Effect of Relationships on Happiness

Due to space limitations, our review of moderating variables is not comprehensive but rather serves to highlight a handful of moderators that have received substantial empirical attention: gender, age, and culture. Other potential moderators are also briefly considered.

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 (Taylor, 2002; Taylor et al., 2000) hypothesizes that, because women were historically more involved in the care of dependent, immature offspring, they had greater needs to turn to their social groups in times of threat for joint protection of self and offspring than may have been true for men. As such, women may have developed more awareness of the quality of their social relationships, because of their greater needs to depend upon them.

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 Taylor (2002) for a review). Relative to men, adult women maintain more same-sex close relationships, report more benefits from contacts with their female friends and relatives (although they are also more vulnerable to psychological stress resulting from stressful network events), and provide more frequent and more effective social support to others (Ptacek, Smith & Zana, 1992; Thoits, 1995). Moreover, studies in elderly populations 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 (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Gurung, Taylor & Seeman, 2003; Patrick, Cottrell & Barnes, 2001). Other research has found parallel differences throughout the life course (e.g. Umberson, Chen, House, Hopkins, & Slaten, 1996).

Whether gender differences in social support quality and structure translate into differences in the importance of these variables to happiness is unclear. In a study of older rural residents, Patrick and colleagues (2001) found that family support significantly predicted both PA and NA, over and above the effects of age, marital status, and education, in both men and women. When friend support was added in a subsequent step, only family support significantly predicted PA in men, whereas only the effect of friend support was significant in women (friend support did not significantly affect NA in either gender). However, this result should be interpreted with caution, as both family and friend support had positive effects on PA in both genders. In a similar vein, Antonucci and Akiyama (1987) used 15 measures of support quantity and quality to predict a single-item indicator of global happiness in older adults, accounting for 18% and 23% of the variance in men and women, respectively. With regard to marital quality, recall that the meta-analysis by Haring-Hidore and colleagues (1985) found that men's SWB was more affected by marital status than was women's SWB. Gender moderation of the association between marriage and happiness is found in other studies as well (e.g. Lucas, 2005; Umberson et al., 1996), although results are somewhat inconsistent, including some null findings (e.g. Williams, 2003).

Taken as a whole, the research suggests that the association between the quality of a person's relationships and happiness will differ by gender in a manner consistent with the tend-and-befriend model, specifically, that women's happiness will be more affected by relationship quality than is true for men. In a recent study, the quality of young adults' relationships (as indexed by the MIDUS measures) with their parents, siblings, close friends, and roommates was examined in relation to LS (Saphire-Bernstein, Taylor, Moore, Lam, & Seeman, 2010). For women, the quality of every one of the relationships was highly and significantly related to LS (rs = 0.26–0.46, mean r = 0.33, all ps <0.05), whereas only the quality of close friendships were associated with LS for men (r = 0.28, p <0.05; all other rs = −0.02 to 0.21, ps >0.05; mean r =0.14). Gender differences in the magnitudes of these correlations were significant only in some cases, but the trend for a stronger correlation in women was present across all relationship types. The findings of this study, along with the meta-analysis by Proulx et al. (2007), support the assertion that relationships are more important determinants of happiness for women than is true for men.

Age

Numerous scholars have speculated that the effect of relationships on happiness might be moderated by age. Ishii-Kuntz (1990) 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, Ishii-Kuntz's (1990) empirical pattern supported these predictions.

Culture

The effects of cultural variation on happiness has been an interest in the field for some time (for a review see Diener et al., 1999), but whether the presence and quality of relationships have different effects in different cultures has yet to be answered definitively. Kwan, Bond and Singelis (1997) 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 Kang, Shaver, Sue, Min, and Ying (2003). A cross-cultural study 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 (Diener, Gohm, Suh, & Oishi, 2000). Thus the available evidence suggests that culture may not strongly influence the association between relationships and happiness.

Additional moderators of the relationships–happiness link

Other moderators of the association between relationships and happiness link merit consideration as well. The personality trait extraversion may moderate the effect of social relationships on happiness (e.g. Hotard, McFatter, McWhirter, & Stegall, 1989; Srivastava et al., 2008), and Demir (2008) recently 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.

Future Directions in the Study of Relationships and Happiness

This brief review highlights several important issues relevant to the future of research on relationships and happiness. First, the intuitive prediction that relationships are central to happiness is largely supported in the literature, although the effects are much stronger for quality of relationships than for objective features of relationships, such as number of friends or length of time married. Although shared method variance in the assessment of relationship quality and happiness is likely a contributor to these effects (cf. Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006; Lucas et al., 2008), they also appear to represent a real contribution of relationship quality to happiness. For example, the robust gender differences in the association between quality of relationships and SWB cannot be explained by shared method variance.

Accordingly, the challenge for future researchers is to find ways to assess quality of relationships and SWB that avoid overlapping variance.

A second conclusion is that, on the whole, there is far more literature devoted to studying the association of the significant other relationship with happiness than to the association of other close relationships with happiness. This is an unfortunate gap, as family and friends are also likely to affect the degree to which people experience happiness. Researchers have recently begun to investigate the effect of friendship quality (Demir & Weitekamp, 2007) and the quality of the relationship with parents in both teens (Gohm, Oishi, Darlington, & Diener, 1998) and adults (Amato & Afifi, 2006) on SWB. However, additional research is needed, especially with regard to the relative and cumulative effects of the quality of different types of relationships on happiness.

Rather than simply documenting that the effects of relationships on happiness are positive, researchers should devote more attention to the parameters of relationships that make them important for happiness. For example, the robust finding in the social support literature that having a single confidante is more important to well-being than having a large number of social relationships should be a strong signal to researchers that there is much still to be learned about the pathways and mechanisms by which relationships affect happiness (see Taylor (2010) for a review).

The available literature makes clear that gender and age are likely to be important moderators of the impact of relationships on happiness. There is a robust gender difference, such that the quality of all relationships appears to matter more for women's happiness than is true for men (e.g. Proulx et al., 2007; Walen & Lachman, 2000; Wan et al., 1996). Although there is some evidence that this gender difference persists across the lifespan (e.g., Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987), changes in the patterns of relationships and their impact on happiness are likely to be found as a function of age as well.

Measurement issues plague the study of relationships and happiness. A disproportionate number of studies focus on how relationships are related to depression and psychological distress, yet PA and LS are also extremely important components of SWB (Diener, 1984; Reis, 2001; Schimmack, 2008), and measures of these constructs have received far less attention. Predictors of happiness may vary in the extent to which they predict these distinct subcomponents. For example, the LS component of SWB appears to be more strongly related to relationship quality than are the affective components of PA and NA (reviewed earlier). The exact reason for this differential relation is not known, as it is not predicted by current theories of SWB. According to the judgment model perspective (Kahneman, 1999), people are often unaware of the true sources of their momentary affective mood states but are likely to explicitly consider important facets of their life when providing retrospective evaluations of their lives as a whole. Thus it is possible that relationships do not have very strong effects on PA and NA but that they are nevertheless given priority in the conscious construction of LS judgments. Moreover, women may be more likely than men to draw on the quality of their existing relationships when considering their life as whole, which might account for the gender differences described previously (cf. Saphire-Bernstein et al., 2010). These issues provide potentially fruitful avenues of investigation for future research.

Direction of causality issues, best examined in longitudinal data, also merit consideration. To what extent does happiness lead people to construe their relationships as satisfying, and to what extent do satisfying relationships lead to happiness? This fundamental question has long been debated in the literature (reviewed in Diener et al., 1999), yet the

issue remains far from settled (see Lyubomirsky, King & Diener, 2005). A related question concerns the effects of social networks on an individual's happiness. Fowler and Christakis (2009) recently presented evidence for the spread of happiness in social networks using longitudinal social network data. Future research on the role of network dynamics in the determination of happiness may reveal new and important effects on human happiness and well-being.

Conclusion

Social relationships, especially intimate relationships, have measurable effects on happiness. Although the effects of objective relationship variables are relatively small, the role of relationship quality in happiness is considerably greater. When it comes to research on relationships and happiness, the outlook is bright and the questions are many. The task before us now is to answer them.

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