

## **The Pursuit of Happiness**

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Happiness is an elusive concept with no obvious cause. A person can be happy with their situation and be healthy or unhealthy, rich or poor, loved or alone, pious or heretical. To understand people, you have to look at more than just their demography: you have to look at the broad range of their attitudes.

The MRI-Simmons Survey of the American Consumer is a large-scale, rolling sample study that has been conducted in the forty-eight contiguous states for over forty-five years. Sampling over fifty-thousand people per year by in-person and online interviews, it was originally made to study magazine audiences and demography. Other media, products, and services were added to make it one of the most respected media research instruments in the USA. It features several psychographic question batteries, including one covering attitudes toward life in general, making it a good fit for answering the question, "What is the root of happiness?"

The tricky part of collecting so much data is balancing the number of questions with the depth of each question. In this case, the battery includes 125 different questions, but only offers four possible answers to each: strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree. I attempted to probe more deeply by combining multiple, correlated questions into "factors", Health, Wealth, Love, and Faith, each ranging from scores of 5 through 20. It turned out that the results of each factor, when compared to the happiness score of 1-4, did not produce meaningful correlations. This might not have been the case if the happiness score was on a scale of 1-10 or more, but given that the battery already faces the problem of respondent fatigue as it is, it's understandable why the study's authors chose a simpler four-point scale. However, I found that several individual questions that were much more highly correlated with overall happiness.

Beyond this review, I would like to revisit this analysis after a few more years, as the psychographic section I used was very different and not comparable before five years ago. I'd also like to expand the scope to include lifestyle and product choices, such as cars owned or trips taken, or demographics such as age, education, and residence.

Overall, I expected more noise from the regression analysis comparing happiness to all of the questions in the battery separately, but I was pleasantly surprised by the five answers that came out on top. I especially liked that the attitude most correlated with happiness was:

"It is important to continue learning new things"