12 Bentham, Mill, Darwin

Sonja Lyubomirsky – Limits of the Scientific Literature on Happiness

1. Over-reliance on Self-Report Measures

- Most studies measure happiness with simple self-report scales (e.g., "How happy are you, 1–10?").
- Problems:
    - Subjectivity & mood effects: answers can change with temporary mood, weather, or recent events.
    - Social desirability: people may overstate happiness to look good.
    - Cross-cultural issues: cultures differ in how acceptable it is to say "I'm very happy."
- Result: measurements are noisy and may not reflect stable, deep well-being.

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2. Predominantly Correlational Evidence (Causation Is Unclear)

- Much happiness research is correlational (e.g., happiness is correlated with marriage, religion, income, extroversion).
- From correlation alone, we cannot tell:
    - Direction of causation: Are happy people more likely to marry, or does marriage make people happy?
    - Third variables: A separate factor (e.g., health, personality) might cause both.
- This limits our ability to say which factors genuinely cause increases in happiness and which are just associated with it.

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3. Non-Representative Samples (WEIRD Bias)

- Many studies use:
    - College students, especially psychology undergraduates.
    - People from WEIRD societies (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic).
- Problems:
    - Findings may not generalize to:
        * Older adults, children, less educated people.
        * Non-Western cultures or poorer populations.
    - What predicts or constitutes "happiness" may differ across age, class, and culture.
- Result: the literature may be biased toward how young, Western, relatively privileged people experience happiness.

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4. Short-Term Studies and Adaptation

- Many experiments:
  - Last only a few weeks.
  - Measure happiness immediately after an intervention (e.g., gratitude exercise), not months or years later.
- But people adapt to changes (hedonic adaptation):
  - New circumstances or activities may boost happiness briefly, then fade as we get used to them.
- Result: We know more about short-term boosts than about lasting change, and some findings may not hold long-term.

(For an exam answer, being able to clearly explain any three of the above, with a sentence of explanation for each, should be enough.)

Sonja Lyubomirsky – Strategies for Becoming Happier

Background Idea: Intentional Activities vs. Circumstances

- Lyubomirsky emphasizes that:
  - A large portion of happiness is influenced by what we deliberately do (our daily activities and mental habits), not just by fixed traits or external circumstances.
  - We adapt quickly to many external improvements (more money, a better house), so intentional activities are often more effective for lasting increases in happiness.

Below are key intentional strategies she recommends.

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1. Practicing Gratitude

What it is
- Regularly noticing and appreciating the positive aspects of one's life. - Examples: keeping a "gratitude journal," mentally listing things you're grateful for, writing thank-you letters.

Why it can increase happiness - Directs attention toward benefits, strengths, and kindness from others, countering the tendency to focus on problems. - Slows down hedonic adaptation by making you re-notice good things you'd otherwise take for granted. - Strengthens social bonds when gratitude is expressed to others.

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2. Performing Acts of Kindness

What it is
- Intentionally doing helpful or generous things for others. - Can be small (holding a door, complimenting someone) or larger (volunteering, helping a friend move).

Why it can increase happiness - Boosts positive emotions (warmth, meaning, pride in doing good). - Improves relationships and social support, which are strong predictors of happiness. - Shifts focus away from one's own worries and ruminations toward others' needs. - Works especially well when: - Acts feel authentic (not forced). - They are varied (not the same action over and over).

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3. Nurturing Social Relationships

What it is
- Investing time and effort in close relationships: friends, family, romantic partners. - Examples: spending quality time, actively listening, showing appreciation, resolving conflicts constructively.

Why it can increase happiness - Close relationships are among the strongest and most reliable predictors of life satisfaction. - Provide emotional support, a sense of belonging, and shared joy. - Positive interactions generate frequent positive emotions, which accumulate over time. - Includes both: - Being there for others. - Allowing others to be there for you.

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4. Cultivating Optimism (Positive Thinking About the Future)

What it is
- Deliberately developing a more hopeful, positive outlook about the future. - Examples: imagining your "best possible self," reframing setbacks as temporary and specific rather than permanent and global.

Why it can increase happiness - Increases positive expectations, which can themselves be enjoyable. - Encourages goal-directed behavior (if you believe goals are achievable, you're more likely to act). - Helps buffer against stress and depression by challenging catastrophic thinking. - Must remain realistic; overly unrealistic optimism can backfire.

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5. Savoring Positive Experiences

What it is
- Consciously attending to and prolonging enjoyment of positive moments. - Examples: fully focusing on a meal, lingering on pleasant memories, sharing good news, slowing down to take in a beautiful view.

Why it can increase happiness - Intensifies and lengthens positive emotions you are already having. - Counters the tendency to "rush through" good experiences without really noticing them. - Can be done both: - In the moment (e.g., paying attention during a joyful event). - Afterward (reminiscing, sharing stories).

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6. Committing to Meaningful Goals

What it is
- Setting, pursuing, and committing to personally meaningful and realistic goals. - Especially intrinsic goals (growth, relationships, contribution) rather than purely extrinsic ones (status, image).

Why it can increase happiness - Provides a sense of purpose and direction rather than drifting. - Creates opportunities for mastery, progress, and flow. - Even before goals are reached, working toward them can be fulfilling. - Helps organize life in ways that support long-term well-being rather than short-term impulses.

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7. Learning to Forgive

What it is
- Letting go of chronic resentment and desire for revenge toward those who have wronged you (without necessarily excusing the behavior or forgetting it).

Why it can increase happiness - Reduces anger, bitterness, and rumination, which are emotionally draining. - Improves mental and physical health (less stress, better sleep). - Can repair or improve relationships when appropriate.

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8. Taking Care of Your Body (Exercise, Meditation, Acting "As If" Happy)

What it is
- Engaging in regular physical activity, relaxation, and healthy habits. - Examples: exercising, meditating, practicing mindfulness, getting enough sleep, smiling and behaving energetically (acting like a happy person).

Why it can increase happiness - Physical activity boosts mood-related chemicals in the brain and reduces stress. - Meditation and mindfulness reduce anxiety and rumination, increasing calm and contentment. - "Acting as if" happy can sometimes create a feedback loop: smiling and engaging socially can actually make you feel better.

Important Meta-Principles for Using These Strategies

Lyubomirsky emphasizes that for activities to produce lasting gains:

- Person–activity fit: Choose strategies that suit your personality, values, and lifestyle.
- Effort and practice: Benefits come from regular, sustained practice, not one-off actions.
- Variety and timing: Vary how and when you use strategies to avoid adaptation and boredom.
- Mindful engagement: Activities should be done deliberately and sincerely, not mechanically.

What to Be Ready to Do on the Exam

1. Limitations
   - Be prepared to list and clearly explain at least three limitations of the scientific literature on happiness (e.g., self-report bias, correlational designs, non-representative samples, short-term focus and adaptation).
2. Strategies for becoming happier
   - Be prepared to describe at least four specific strategies Lyubomirsky recommends (e.g., gratitude, acts of kindness, nurturing relationships, optimism, savoring, committing to meaningful goals, forgiveness, taking care of your body).
   - For each: briefly state what the strategy involves and why it is thought to increase happiness.