

Increasing happiness in lasting ways

Christopher Peterson and Nansook Park offer an optimistic view of the opportunities

There are good reasons to pursue happiness, but psychologists have been sceptical that happiness can be lastingly increased. What arguments have been advanced to explain why happiness cannot be increased for individuals or for groups of individuals, like the citizens in a given nation? What are the counter-arguments? With actual evidence that the happiness of both individuals and groups can and does increase, this article suggests that the pursuit of happiness is an achievable goal; though requiring lifestyle changes for individuals and economic and political changes for nations.

question

Why have psychologists advanced the unhappy conclusion that happiness cannot be increased, and why are they wrong?

resources

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Happiness is desirable in and of itself. It is also desirable because of its demonstrated benefits for the individual – better social relationships, academic and occupational success, good health, and even long life (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Given that happiness has so many valuable consequences, can we deliberately boost it in a lasting way? There is a great deal of pessimism here, and psychologists over the years have pointed to several reasons why happiness cannot be increased.

Like trying to be taller?

There are several good reasons for thinking happiness cannot be increased, in the long-term. First, adaptation to pleasure is an unfortunately familiar experience. We all know that new jobs, new cars, new houses or new loves – no matter how exhilarating they may be in the first place – eventually lose their magic. Undaunted, we seek a new source of pleasure, hoping against all past experience that *this* one will last for ever. It never works. Adaptation to pleasure is so widespread that theorists have proposed that we live on a *hedonic treadmill*, meaning that we continually adapt to improving circumstances to the point that we always return to a point of relative neutrality, and often quite quickly (Brickman & Campbell, 1971).

Second, happiness – more specifically positive mood – is influenced by genetics, leading theorists to propose a genetically determined *set-point* for happiness above which one cannot rise. For example,

Lykken and Tellegen (1996) did a twin study of happiness and found evidence for substantial heritability. In presenting their findings, they addressed the possibility of boosting happiness and offered the dour conclusion that ‘Trying to be happier is as futile as trying to be taller’ (p.189).

Third, happiness is inherently relative. The typical way that researchers ascertain happiness is by asking someone to rate their own happiness, satisfaction or well-being on a numerical scale. Remember the old vaudeville joke: ‘How’s your wife?’ ‘Compared to what?’ Happiness is a comparative judgement anchored in the individual’s experience – in particular, whatever is salient at the time the judgement is made.

Here is a study that should give pause to all of us who use self-report rating scales to study happiness (Strack et al., 1988). Young adults were asked to rate how satisfied they were with their lives, and then they were asked to rate how frequently they dated. A correlation was computed between these two ratings, and it was minimal in size. Other young adults were asked to make the same ratings except in the opposite order, and a substantial correlation was found. If people are reminded that they date frequently or infrequently – presumably a ‘fact’ that informs how happy one should be – then the ensuing judgement of happiness is influenced by this now salient information.

When asking research participants to report on their happiness, researchers usually provide at best a vague frame (‘In general...’). Judgements are still relative, and people presumably make a comparison between what they believe about themselves and what they believe about other people who are in their immediate vicinity or who are otherwise relevant. This may explain a pervasive finding, that most people rate themselves as somewhat above the midpoint of a happiness scale, whether they are multimillionaires in the United States (Diener et al., 1985) or homeless prostitutes in Calcutta (Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2001). These findings are usually

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presented as showing that 'most people are happy', but another way to describe them is to say that 'most people judge themselves to be happier than they think other people are' (cf. Diener & Diener, 1998).

Fourth, where the data exist, the average happiness of people in given nations appears remarkably constant over recent decades. There are differences across nations in terms of the average happiness of citizens, with rich nations typically having happier residents than poor nations. But the average happiness apparently stays much the same in a given nation, despite sometimes dramatic changes in affluence.

Consider the United States, where citizens today have much more economic power and many more material comforts than their counterparts a generation ago (Myers, 1993). But on average, Americans have not become any happier, a finding that has been described as a paradox (Easterbrook, 2003). But there may be no paradox at all if happiness ratings are viewed as relative judgements. When reporting on their own happiness, people are probably not thinking about the earlier lives of their parents or grandparents, or even their own earlier life.

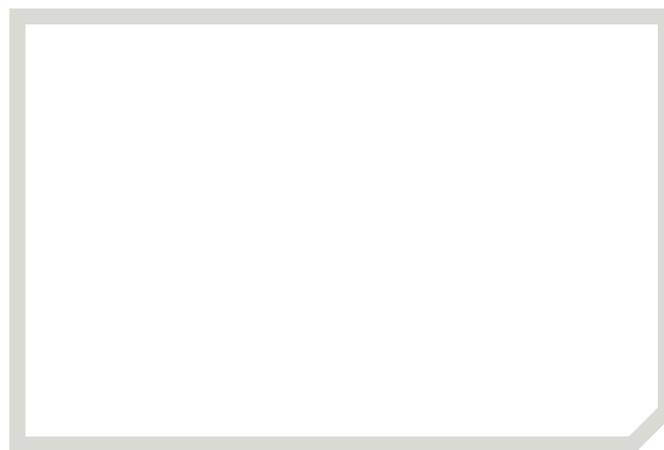
Rejoinder: Reasons for believing that happiness can be increased

So, there exists a strong case – indeed, several strong cases – for concluding that happiness cannot be increased. Due to the spin of the genetic roulette wheel or the happenstance of where we were born, we are happy or not, and that is the way it is. We are ordained to go through life, skipping or trudging as the case may be.

Are we therefore done with this essay? Not at all, because the case for believing that happiness cannot be increased is not nearly as strong as we have made it seem.

For starters, 'influenced by genetics' does not mean immutable, and it certainly

does not mean that our environment or our own actions are irrelevant. IQ is substantially influenced by genetics, much more so than happiness according to the relevant twin research, but that does not imply that education is futile or that we can ignore the dangers of prenatal trauma or infant malnutrition. Virtually everything



Is it worth trying to boost our happiness? Will it last?

about people is influenced by genetics, but the rest of the sentence is that virtually everything about people is also influenced by socialisation and life experience. Nature versus nurture arguments are profoundly false. We need to think instead of nature and nurture working together in complex ways.

Of course, we all adapt to pleasure, but we also adapt to our adaptation. A bowl of chocolate ice cream tastes wonderful. Five minutes later, a second bowl probably does not taste as good. But five days later, or five weeks later, or five months later, chocolate ice cream again tastes wonderful. Ditto for the other sources of pleasure in our lives.

Furthermore, happiness is not identical to sensory pleasure, and it is for such pleasure that we have the best evidence for (temporary) adaptation. It is not obvious

that we so readily adapt to higher pleasures like those afforded by great art, music or natural beauty. And although pleasure is an important contributor to happiness, so too is being highly engaged in what one does, seeing meaning and purpose in one's life, and having good relationships with one's friends and family members (Peterson et

al., 2007). Do we adapt to these important contributors to happiness? Maybe some of us do some of the time, but only in the most metaphorical manner that strains what is meant by adaptation.

Acknowledging that self-reported happiness is a relative judgement does not mean that these reports are capricious or solipsistic. Indeed, self-reports of happiness are highly reliable and agree substantially with ratings by observers, diary methods and behavioural measures

such as frequency of smiling. Self-reports of happiness consistently predict objectively assessed life outcomes, like career success and longevity. And as noted, twin studies show that identical twins, even those raised apart, often agree about their respective levels of happiness, a finding that could not occur if happiness ratings reflected only the vagaries of the moment.

But perhaps the best argument for believing that happiness can be increased comes from research showing that happiness does increase. So, recent longitudinal studies by Diener et al. (2006) challenge the very idea of the hedonic treadmill. According to the hedonic treadmill, an individual's level of happiness should be relentlessly constant across the lifespan, showing only momentary ups and

downs. This is the case for some people, but for others, happiness does change in response to important life events, and it stays changed. Unemployment, divorce or disability can lastingly decrease happiness, even when someone finds a new and better job, a new and better spouse or a new and better set of abilities. Other events – like a good marriage – can lastingly

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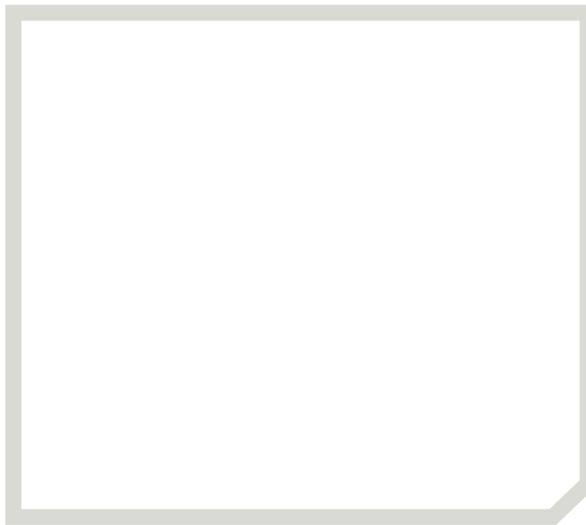
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increase happiness. One's set-point (see box) can apparently be reset, but it is not much of a set-point if this is so.

Perhaps because it was so widely believed among psychologists that happiness could not be increased, there have been relatively few attempts to devise and test interventions to increase it. However, such interventions indeed work. Decades ago, Michael Fordyce (1977, 1983) developed a *Personal Happiness Program* and showed that it boosted the long-term satisfaction of college students. Fordyce surveyed the research literature on happiness and identified predictors presumably under the short-term control of ordinary people: for example, keeping busy; socialising with others; doing meaningful work; and making the pursuit of happiness a priority. This information was conveyed to individuals along with suggested behavioural and cognitive exercises. In seven studies that included no-treatment comparison groups, Fordyce found that self-reported happiness increased and feelings of depression decreased. Follow-up was as long as 18 months. Fordyce believed that mere exposure to what he called 'happiness principles' drove these effects, but we suspect that the exercises were crucial.

More recently, we have similarly shown that simple exercises can increase well-being as well as alleviate depression (Seligman et al., 2005). For example, we asked adults to count their blessings:



Every night for one week, set aside 10 minutes before you go to bed. Use that time to write down three things that went really well on that day and why they went well. You may use a journal or your computer to write about the events, but it is important that you have a physical record of what you wrote. It is not enough to do this exercise in your head. The three things you list can be relatively small in importance or relatively large in importance. Next to each positive event in your list, answer the question, 'Why did this good thing happen?'

"happiness can and does increase in a lasting way, for individuals and for nations"

Relative to a comparison group, happiness increased, and depression decreased. Results were maintained through six months of follow-up.

We asked other adults to use their strengths of character in novel ways. They took our character strength survey in order to identify their signature strengths of character (e.g. curiosity, humour, kindness). Then we

asked them to use these strengths in their daily life:

Every day for the next seven days use one of your top five strengths in a way that you have not before. You might use your strength in a new setting or with a new person. It's your choice.

Again, relative to a comparison group, happiness increased, and depression decreased through six months of follow-up.

Neither of these techniques is akin to a crash diet or an antibiotic. To the degree that they had lasting effects, it was because people integrated them into their regular routines. Counting blessings for a week will make a person happier for that week, but only if the person becomes habitually grateful will there be a more enduring effect. In our research, we found – not surprisingly – that the people who showed lasting benefits were those who continued to use the exercises.

Findings that happiness can change for individuals need not mean that the happiness levels of given societies can change. Perhaps individual-level changes are idiosyncratic, meaning that the relative gains and losses of different individuals within a given nation cancel each other out, resulting in no discernible shifts for a society in the aggregate. As we have described, research to date has supported this view – that the average life satisfaction of people in a given nation is fixed – but now this conclusion has been challenged as well.

Drawing on a unique resource – the World Values Survey – we recently published a paper showing that the happiness and life satisfaction of nations have increased in dozens of nations around the world over the past few decades (Inglehart et al., 2008). The World Values Survey is an ambitious project that periodically surveys people around the world with respect to their attitudes, beliefs and values. Questions range from the mundane ('Is throwing away litter ever justified?') to the sacred ('How often do you think about the meaning and purpose of life?'). It also asks respondents about their life satisfaction and their happiness.

The World Values Survey stands apart from similar endeavours because of the large number of nations included – dozens of different countries containing 85 per cent of the world's population – and because respondents in each nation are representative samples. That is, they

Origins

Happiness – An interesting etymological fact with psychological import is that the English word for happiness comes from an older word – hap – that meant chance or fortune, as in happenstance or haphazard (McMahon, 2006). Along these lines, the Chinese character signifying happiness is the same character that indicates luck, meaning that upon a time, West and East, happiness was seen as something that simply 'happened' to a person or not.

Set-point – The idea of a set-point was borrowed by happiness theorists from the biological realm, along with the assumption that a set-point is necessarily fixed. It has long been argued that our weight has a biological set-point and that it is futile to diet. However, the evidence shows that diets are difficult but not futile. People can and do lose weight if they change how they live and sustain these changes. Set-points, even biological ones, are at best described as ranges.

represent the range of individuals within a nation across important contrasts like age, gender, education, occupation, and the like. Most samples studied by social scientists and certainly psychologists are convenience samples, recruited by the researcher from available individuals: students in a college course, surfers on the internet, children at a local daycare centre, and so on. The hope in each case is that the convenience sample somewhat resembles the larger population to which one wishes to generalise results, but this is usually an ideal more than an actuality. Accordingly, findings from the World Values Survey are to be taken very seriously.

According to our findings, during the past two decades, both life satisfaction and happiness have increased in the majority of the 52 nations for which there were substantial data. Life satisfaction rose in 63 per cent of these societies, and happiness increased in 87 per cent of them.

What was responsible for these changes? According to our internal analyses of the data, increased perceptions of choice and control foreshadowed increased well-being. Choice and control were in turn foreshadowed by increased

economic growth and democratisation of a nation.

These are dramatic patterns, and one should ask why so many social scientists for so long believed that the happiness and life satisfaction of nations do not change. Part of the reason is that the most complete data over time – other than the World Values Survey – have come from the US, and mean scores of US residents have indeed been rather flat for decades. Why that is the case is an interesting question, but in any event, the US appears to be a happiness anomaly.

Conclusions

Contrary to long-standing belief, happiness can and does increase in a lasting way, for individuals and for nations. At neither level is change simple,

requiring lifestyle changes for individuals and economic and political changes for nations. We should beware glib advice of the 'five easy steps' variety about how to achieve and sustain happiness (Park & Peterson, in press). Happiness has desirable consequences, but at present we do not know whether deliberately cultivated happiness pays the same dividends as the naturally occurring variety. Nor do we know what it means that so many of us now live in a happier world. Will it as a result be a better world – more tolerant, more peaceful, more creative and more healthy? Will national and global changes in happiness someday produce the sorts of outcomes found at the individual level? Pessimists will say no way. We prefer to wait and see, remembering that pessimists have been wrong before about happiness.



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