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## **Measuring Happiness: Examining Definitions and Instruments**

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## **Measuring Happiness: Examining Definitions and Instruments**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores and examines the literature on happiness. Specifically, it reviews the literature on happiness relating to the common constructs used to define and explain the concept of happiness, including the most common scales and instruments utilized to measure this concept. Happiness is defined and explained within the context of life satisfaction and subjective well-being (SWB), which involves a person's evaluation of how satisfied and appreciative he/she is with his/her life. Happiness simply refers to the holistic appreciation and enjoyment of a person's life. As such, the definition of happiness as it relates to life satisfaction and SWB are discussed. Some of the extensively used instruments and scales to measure happiness include the Single-Item Measurement of Happiness, Subjective Happiness Scale, Satisfaction with Life Scale, Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index, and Oxford Happiness Questionnaire.

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**Keywords:** Happiness, subjective well-being, life satisfaction

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### Introduction

The concept of happiness can be traced far back to the work of Aristotle and his ideas of the good life. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines “happiness as a sort of living and faring well” (Aristotle, trans. 2009, 1098b22). He suggests that achieving *Eudaimonia*, which is living life in a fulfilling and meaningful way, is the ultimate goal of individuals (Deici & Ryan, 2008). Essentially, unlike other aspects of life, the pursuit of happiness is an end in itself (Aristotle, trans. 2009, 1097b21), and thus represents the ultimate goal for individuals.

From an ethical perspective, the root of happiness involves two pathways consisting of the pursuit of pleasure and meaning in one’s life (Wang & Wong, 2013). The pursuit of pleasure may include short-term or immediate fulfillment of one’s desires, known as hedonism (Kahnemen, Diener, & Schwartz, 1999), whereas eudaimonism is the pursuit of meaning or potential (Aristotle, trans. 2009; Waterman, 1993). Although hedonism and eudaimonism may occur simultaneously and overlap with one another (Compton, 1996; King & Napa, 1998), each component influences individual life experiences and perceptions in varying degrees. While hedonism is associated with relaxation and escape, eudaimonism is correlated with activities involving developmental growth (Waterman, 1993; King & Napa, 1998). Despite the correlational differences, the short-term affects of hedonism may be overshadowed by the pursuit of meaning, which is critical for the promotion of happiness and well-being for individuals (Petersen, Park, & Seligman, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Wang & Wong, 2013).

From the Netherlands to Kuwait, from Great Britain to Bhutan, from China to the United States, the concept of happiness has continued to grow into a major research field that has attracted international attention. In the last four decades, Abdel-Khalek (2006) notes, “the research activity on happiness has been prolific” (p. 140). The World Database of Hap-

piness, which catalogues studies on happiness, demonstrates that more than 10,000 scholars have published over 7,800 articles on the study of happiness from 1975 to 2010 (Veenhoven, 2014). Specifically, most of the studies examined happiness in the context of subjective well-being (SWB) and life satisfaction (Balatsky & Diener, 1993; Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003; Headey & Wearing, 1989; Knight, Song, & Gunatilaka, 2009; Oishi & Diener, 2001). Moreover, several factors, such as life satisfaction and the presence of a positive mood as well as a lack of a negative mood, often influences happiness and well-being (Diener & Lucas, 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2001). As such, it is important to explore relevant literature to examine the constructs of happiness, in particular life satisfaction, SWB, and quality of life. This is because knowledge gained from happiness studies may serve to inform and influence policies and programs at all levels of society, including the private and public sectors, so as to improve the well-being of people.

From this backdrop, the purpose of this paper is to explore and examine the literature on happiness relating to the common constructs used to define and explain the concept of happiness. In general, happiness has been associated with life satisfaction (Veenhoven, 1994) and well-being (Raibley, 2012; Simsek, 2009). Therefore, the definition of happiness as it relates to life satisfaction and well-being are considered. Additionally, the instruments used to index the indicators of happiness are explored. As such, this paper aims to answer these questions: (1) how is happiness defined and explained?; (2) what are the most common constructs used to describe and explain happiness?; (3) how is happiness measured?; and (4) what instruments are used to measure happiness?

### Happiness Constructs

Happiness, as a subjective construct, has differing meanings. In its simplest form, happiness is defined as a positive emotional well-being and is

used interchangeably to describe one's SWB (Diener et al., 2003). According to Diener (2000), SWB relates to people's evaluations of their lives. In essence, happiness is based on a subjective evaluation of one's life in the context of his/her feelings and emotional outcome. As such, the concept of happiness in relation to SWB include life satisfaction (Simsek, 2009) and quality of life (Diener, 2000; Shin & Johnson, 1978). This being said, the following sections discusses these often interchangeable and analogous constructs of happiness.

First, SWB can be described as a cognitive dimension that consists of positive affect and lack of negative affect, coupled with life satisfaction (Simsek, 2009). The affective dimensions of SWB specifically refer to the individual's positive and negative moods in the context of their immediate experience. In essence, such cognitive dimensions of SWB relate to individual life satisfaction and the ability to judge one's own life (Simsek, 2009). As a result, Diener (2000) noted the abundance of pleasurable feelings and the lack of negative emotions contribute to an individual's well-being. However, feelings of hopelessness, depression, and negative self-evaluations are negative affects that influence life satisfaction and may lead to poor assessments of an individual's quality of life (Frisch, Cornell, Villanueva, & Retzlaff, 1992). Moreover, although considered a component of life satisfaction, quality of life is an individual's personal assessment used to determine whether their life is worthwhile (Diener, 2000; Shin & Johnson, 1978). As such, quality of life plays a crucial role in life satisfaction largely because it may influence one's evaluation of his/her life in relation to happiness.

When measuring quality of life, it is important to keep in mind assessments are conducted through an internalized self-evaluation. More specifically, quality of life is a subjective measurement used to determine whether an individual meets their needs and goals in life (Frisch et al., 1992). Similarly, Shin & Johnson (1978) suggests quality of life is

a subjective measure and may be measured through happiness. Although quality of life is typically measured through an individual's perceived values and subjective assessments related to life (Diener, 2000; Frisch et al., 1992; Shin & Johnson, 1978), Allardt (1976) suggests the need to consider objective measures of quality of life to determine the materialistic living of an individual. Despite his suggestion, recent research continues to show the need to look beyond material and economic wealth to determine the richness of quality of life related to life satisfaction, and thus happiness (Diener, Ng, Harter, & Arora, 2010; Diener & Suh, 1997). More importantly, quality of life is viewed as a multidimensional concept that looks beyond monetary wealth and is affected by the place and social values in which the individual belongs (Das, 2008; Rezvani, Mansourian, & Sattari, 2012). These places and values are often influenced by the positive and negative dimensions in one's life, which includes the ability to meet individual life goals, needs, and expectations (Diener, 2000). Through these dimensions, an individual's journey to happiness is often influenced.

Further, SWB represents a common construct of happiness. In particular, the positive and negative dimensions relating to cross-cultural aspects of happiness and SWB are explored by Diener, Oishi and Ryan (2013). According to Diener et al. (2013), a substantial variation is often found when reporting perceptions of well-being and life satisfaction among Western cultures. For example, low-income respondents in North America reported higher levels of negative affect than low income respondents in Denmark despite having greater access to goods and services, such as food, health care, and shelter (Biswas-Diener, Vitterso & Diener, 2010). Additionally, monetary acquisition has been shown to be an important goal across the globe, but is particularly important when gauging life satisfaction in Western cultures (Diener et al., 2013).

Along with understanding the importance of monetary gains in Western cultures, it is important

to acknowledge the cross-cultural variation of the conceptualization of happiness. More specifically, the validity of cultural comparisons of happiness may be dependent on a culture's conceptualization of SWB (Biswas-Diener et al., 2010; Diener et al., 2013). Among different nations, SWB is broadly expressed as the cultural view of life satisfaction and levels of positive and negative affect (Biswas-Diener, et al., 2010; Diener et al., 2013). While Biswas-Diener et al. (2010) and Diener et al. (2013) suggests additional studies of cross-cultural aspects relating to happiness is needed, several themes are apparent, such as a strong relationship between social-ties and positive affect in cultures less reliant on the use of money. Within these cultures, increased levels of SWB is found to be positively correlated with positive affect and social relationships (Diener et al., 2013). Also, the most desirable conditions to justify high levels of positive affect are found amongst wealthy countries with stable governments, sufficient infrastructure, and high levels of social services to their inhabitants (Biswas-Diener, Vitterso & Diener, 2010; Tov, Diener, Ng, Kesebir, & Harter, 2009). Through the diverse conceptualizations and values related to happiness, it is important to keep in mind the various affects related to the concept.

From this backdrop, happiness simply refers to the long-term psychological condition – “not the acute emotion of feeling happy, but rather whatever it is that concerns us when we talk of someone's being happy these days” (Haybron, 2003, p.306). In this context, happiness signifies one's overall appreciation of life (Veenhoven, 2008). In essence, happiness is based on how much an individual is satisfied with the life he/she is living. According to Tatarkiewicz (1976), “happiness requires total satisfaction that is satisfaction with life as a whole” (p. 8). To assess our understanding of happiness within the context on life satisfaction as reflected in SWB, a variety of instruments and scales may be utilized.

### Measuring Happiness

The reviewed literature on happiness revealed commonly used scales and instruments developed to measure happiness to foster a better understanding of research related to life satisfaction and well-being. Some of the extensively used instruments and scales to measure happiness includes the Single-Item Measurement of Happiness (Abdel-Khalek, 2006); Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999); Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener et al., 1985); Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (Hills & Argyle, 2002); and Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index (Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2010). Due to time constraints, the indepth analysis of these instruments and scales is beyond the reach of this article; however, a brief description of the instruments and scales are presented below.

A commonly utilized measurement of happiness is a Single-Item Measurement of Happiness scale. The scale typically asks a single question relating to an individual's perceived happiness. This type of instrument of measurement dates back to Bradburn's (1969) Global Happiness Item, which was designed to rate happiness using responses of “not too happy,” “pretty happy,” and “very happy” to the question of “Taken all together, how would you say things are these days?” (p. 269). In addition, Andrews and Withey (1976) asked respondents, “How do you feel about your life as a whole?” Respondents were provided with a seven-point response scale ranging from delighted to terrible.

Similarly, Abdel-Khalek (2004; 2006) measures happiness using a single item question, which asks, “Do you feel happy in general?” which is appended to an 11-point scale. Participants are instructed to circle a number between 0 (no) and 10 (always) in assessing their global estimation and general feelings. Most importantly, Abdel-Khalek's single item scale is found to be significantly and positively correlated with the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (Hill & Argyle, 2002) as well as the

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). More specifically, the mean Pearson correlation coefficients of 0.63 and 0.58 are statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ).

In addition to the Single-Item Measurement of Happiness scale, a widely used four-item Subjective Happiness Scale was developed by Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999) to examine global subjective happiness. Subjects are asked to self-report on four questions using a seven-point Likert scale. The survey consists of general questions related to one's perceived happiness in relation to others. The construct is found to be internally consistent with Cronbach's alphas ranging from 0.79 to 0.94 ( $M = 0.86$ ). Test-retest reliability results are significant at the  $p < 0.0001$  level. Substantial correlations are found between the scale and five other happiness measures including the widely used SWLS, with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.52 to 0.72 ( $M = 0.62$ ) and are considered significant at the  $p < 0.0001$  level.

Another measurement of happiness is based on life satisfaction. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) is "a multi-item scale to measure life satisfaction as a cognitive-judgmental process" (Diener et al., 1985, p. 71). The SWLS asks subjects to respond to five statements using a seven-point Likert scale that ranges from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The five statements include: (1) "in most ways my life is close to my ideal"; (2) "the conditions of my life are excellent"; (3) "I am satisfied with my life"; (4) "so far I have gotten the important things I want in life"; and (5) "if I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing." The Cronbach's alpha of the scale is 0.87 and the test-retest correlation coefficient is 0.82. The scale is found to have moderately strong correlations with nine other measures of happiness and the correlation coefficients vary from 0.47 to 0.75.

Furthermore, the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire, created by Hills and Argyle (2002), is derived from the Oxford Happiness Inventory, which

follows the design and format of the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Hock, & Erbaugh, 1961). The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire is used primarily by the department of psychology at the University of Oxford in Great Britain (Hills & Argyle, 2002). The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire consists of 29 statements using a six-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" (Hills & Argyle, 2002). Respondents are asked to assess statements, such as "Life is good," "I laugh a lot," and "I find beauty in some things." The construct reliability of the scale is found to have a high value of 0.91.

More recently, Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index (GNHI) serves as an indication of the overall happiness and well-being of the country's population. Within Bhutan, the GNHI has replaced the country's Gross Domestic Product as the measure of the quality of life among citizens. The GNHI is used as a holistic measurement encompassing the social and economic factors of the nation. The GNHI consists of nine key domains based on normative and statistical grounds, which includes psychological well-being, standard of living, good governance, health, education, community vitality, cultural diversity and resilience, time use, and ecological diversity and resilience (Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2010). Within each domain, two to four indicators have been formulated to establish 33 items related to the GNHI. More importantly, the GNHI looks beyond monetary benefits and informs national policies related to further improving the quality of life for the people.

The happiness literature reviewed suggests different instruments are used to measure happiness within the context of one's life satisfaction based on SWB. Because happiness is described as the subjective evaluation of how much an individual is satisfied with the life he/she is living, it can be measured by using different types of questioning techniques, as demonstrated by the instruments and scales presented earlier in this paper (Abdel-Khalek, 2006;

Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2010; Diener et al., 1985; Hills & Argyle, 2002; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999; Veenhoven, 2008). Although self-reports of happiness may be fairly valid, they may not be precise due to bias and other factors, including subjectivity, which prevents the accuracy of interpretation for one's subjective responses to various scales (Veenhoven, 2008). As such, one needs to use caution when interpreting the findings of happiness studies.

### Conclusion

The literature presented in this paper attempts to answer the previously stated research questions: (1) how is happiness defined and explained?; and (2) what are the most common constructs used to describe and explain happiness? To this effect, happiness is defined as the holistic appreciation and enjoyment of an individual's life (Diener & Lucas, 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Tatarkiewicz, 1976). This definition reflects Aristotle's suggestion that achieving *Eudaimonia*, which is living life in a fulfilling and meaningful way, is the ultimate goal of individuals (Deci & Ryan, 2008). As such, the literature defines happiness in the context of life satisfaction and on SWB, which involves people's self-evaluation of how satisfied they are with their lives (Diener, 2000; Frisch et al., 1992; Shin & Johnson, 1978).

Further, this paper answered the previously stated research questions: (3) how is happiness measured?; and (4) what instruments are used to measure happiness? Happiness is subjectively measured within the context of life satisfaction based on SWB (Abdel-Khalek, 2006; Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2010; Diener et al., 1985; Hills & Argyle, 2002; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999; Veenhoven, 2008). As such, to define and describe happiness within the context of life satisfaction as reflected in SWB, a variety of instruments and scales may be utilized to measure happiness. Some of the extensively used instruments and scales to measure happiness include the Single-Item Measurement of Happiness

(Abdel-Khalek, 2006); Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999); Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener et al., 1985); Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (Hills & Argyle, 2002); and Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index (Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2010).

Now, based on the review of the happiness literature, future studies may explore the social and environmental factors that may contribute to happiness through social ties and social cohesion within communities to continue the growth of happiness research. Such investigations may serve to fill the knowledge gap that exists due to the limited number of studies examining the contribution of social ties and social cohesion to happiness. According to Luby, Autry, & Anderson (2012), social ties may positively influence people's overall well-being and is linked to improved quality of life. Moreover, knowledge gained from happiness studies may serve to inform and influence policies at the local, regional, and national levels of government. As the Bhutan National Happiness Index indicates, such national policies are within reach and may be implemented to improve the lives of people irrespective of material possession or socio-economic status (Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2010).

In sum, the consideration of cross-cultural perspectives must be used when evaluating the validity and reliability of measurements, indexes, and scales utilized for the assessment of happiness. Although the happiness instruments/scales presented in this article are applicable to Western populations, their validity and reliability may be in question for non-Western nations. This is largely due to the definition of happiness as a subjective measurement, which may be influenced by cultural contexts. From this perspective, future research may seek to acknowledge the scope of diversity within the study of happiness by incorporating cross-cultural perspectives as well as validate such instruments across cultures.

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