

## The Problem with Happiness

Since humans began to experience happiness and how great it is to have, an obvious problem emerged – how to get more of it. This problem has persisted despite philosophers, theologians and general busy bodies providing ample instruction on how to attain true happiness. History is replete with apparently unsuccessful advisors on the subject of happiness (plenty of people are still not happy), but that has not stopped more and more people from suggesting that they have finally discovered what we have all been looking for – the key to true happiness. In this essay, we investigate what happiness science, in the form of positive psychology, has to say about becoming happier, and if we should bother listening.

The majority of scientific work conducted on happiness to date has been by the recently formed field of Positive Psychology, which aims to use the same methods as regular psychological science to investigate how to increase mental well-being, although the targets are predominantly people who are already functioning well, not the depressed or mentally ill. The field studies aspects of happiness, such as positive emotions, full engagement in activities, virtuous personal characteristics, and paths to fulfilment and subjective meaning in life.

In the early days of psychology, William James studied how mystical and transcendent experience helped people live happier lives, and Freud's stated goal was to turn "hysterical misery into ordinary human unhappiness". But it is Abraham Maslow who is credited with coining the term positive psychology in the 1950's, when writing about "self-actualisation". In the 1960's Maslow and Carl Rogers developed Humanistic Psychology, which set out to foster healthy growth, creativity and meaning in people's lives.

Positive Psychology as a discrete discipline was founded in 1997 by Martin Seligman, and when elected in 1998 as president of the American Psychological Association, he declared that positive psychology would be the focus for his tenure of office. Shortly after, Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi co-edited the positive-psychology-focused millennium edition of the *American Psychologist*. Since this special issue, positive psychology's momentum has increased dramatically with hundreds of academic papers, full-capacity undergraduate courses, and the availability of higher Masters and PhD degrees. All this attention has helped positive psychologists to attract large amounts of funding from government and beneficent organisations, eager to help unlock the mysteries of happiness and well-being.

Despite its high-pedigree ancestry, positive psychology has largely ignored other disciplines, including philosophy. Positive psychology has also overlooked some of the earlier psychological work. For example, the field has passed over Harold Dearden's pioneering work, *The Science of Happiness* (1925). The book's central claim is that a scientific understanding of psychology reveals certain techniques that, if regularly practised, will enable us to become more happy, healthy and efficient. His book is filled with scientifically supported gems of advice such as exchanging your caffeinated or

alcoholic bedtime beverage for a hot milk or water so as to ensure a sounder slumber and, subsequently, a sunnier outlook for the next day.

Not only has positive psychology overlooked works such as these, it's also not clear that the science of happiness has revealed anything more effective than the techniques that Dearden advised for actually making people happier in the long run. The main output of positive psychology to date has been various "interventions". A direct mirror of Dearden's "techniques", interventions are various non-pharmaceutical activities that are not harmful, make intuitive sense, and are designed to make anyone that performs them become happier. Some of these interventions, such as writing a letter of heart-felt gratitude to someone who was kind to you, can cause remarkable increases in self-reported happiness in the short run. The challenge for positive psychology, though, is to produce sustained increases in happiness in the *long run*.

The best result a positive psychology intervention has managed to produce so far is a statistically significant steady increase in self-reported happiness over 6 months, for the 59 participants that stuck with the intervention for a week or more. The intervention simply requires that participants note down three things that went well during the day and what caused them to go well. The study was led by Martin Seligman, who admitted that "Six months is far from 'happily ever after'," and then optimistically followed with, "but our results suggest that lasting increased happiness might be possible."

Another study, this one led by Sonja Lyubomirsky and Kennon Sheldon, spanned six months and also found that self-reported happiness continued to increase in most participants over the testing period, but only in those who consistently put effort into their set intervention (making good progress on self-set goals in an important domain of life). Lyubomirsky uses this result, combined with her theory that constant effort of the right kind can continue to make people happier, to support her claim that "maintained happiness gains are possible."

Lyubomirsky and Seligman may end up being right, but until studies begin to move from the six month mark to the six year (at least) mark, then predicting maintained gains in happiness in the long run seems premature at best. Optimism (a trait nearly always found in happy people) seems to be rampant in the field of positive psychology, especially about its own future success in being able to create interventions that will yield sustainable increases in happiness. We contend that, based on the research to date, this unbridled optimism is unfounded. Fortunately for positive psychologists, only time and more funding will tell if there are any interventions that will continually increase happiness over a lifetime.

One phenomenon that positive psychologists are up against is the apparent resistance of happiness to long term change, usually referred to as adaptation. Scores of studies show that people tend to adapt to their previous levels of well-being (their so-called set-point), regardless of the event experienced. Even obviously life-changing events such as getting divorced, winning the lottery, and becoming a paraplegic have been shown to have little or no effect on self-reports of happiness after a couple of years. The resistance of self-reported happiness to change combined with the well-founded view

that happiness is at least 50% genetic has led countless researchers, but not many positive psychologists, to endorse a strong version of the happiness set-point view – that we can't change people's happiness so we shouldn't try. Positive psychologists tend to acknowledge a much weaker version of the happiness set-point view and often point out that even if genetics determines about half of our happiness, the rest is caused by factors that we can control to some extent; our circumstances (about 10%) and our intentional activities, such as the way we choose to think about things (about 40%).

But, for the sake of argument, let's imagine that a lifetime of recording three things that went well and why they did so actually does produce continual increases in self-reported happiness for someone. What, if anything, would this result really mean? To answer this question, we first need to understand what positive psychologists mean by happiness and the effectiveness of their tools for measuring happiness – both of which are problematic.

In general, what positive psychologists mean by "happiness" is a subjective sense of well-being and that life is worthwhile. Seligman and his colleagues, aware that happiness is a "scientifically unwieldy term", break it down into four "better-defined routes to happiness". Their conception of happiness changes from study to study, but it often includes positive emotion (experiencing and savouring pleasures), engagement (losing the self during engaging activities), meaning (performing meaningful activities), and positive relationships (positive communities and intuitions). They have suggested that only a life with all four of their forms of happiness will be one that is generally happy, although they have also noted that positive emotion is less important than the other three routes to happiness. These claims are made on the basis of correlations between people's self-reported general happiness and their self-reported amount of positive emotions, engagement, meaning, and positive relationships in their life.

The circularity of the justification is evident. Despite wanting to avoid direct use of the term happiness because of its inherent inaptness for scientific enquiry, correlations with results from simple questions, such as: "All things considered, how happy are you these days?" and "How satisfied are you with your life?", provide the main justification for psychological measures of happiness and "better-defined routes to happiness".

Other justifications for psychological measures of happiness also exist, albeit to a lesser extent, such as correlations with behavioural and neuroscientific results from the same participants. Despite being significant, however, the correlations are small. The highest significant correlation between neuroscientific and self-reported measures of happiness, for example, is 0.22 (from work by Carol Ryff and colleagues). Roughly speaking, this means that people who report themselves as being happy are usually also deemed "happy" by the best brain-scan measure, but that using the brain-scan measure to predict *how* happy the people will rate themselves will be accurate only about a quarter of the time. This strength of correlation is comparable to correlations between self-reports of happiness and more objective reports, of health and productivity at work. Clearly health and productivity at work are not happiness, and significant but small correlations, such as 0.22, leave a lot of the variation between the two measures

unexplained. Unfortunately, then, all measures of happiness remain a loosely connected patchwork quilt, flapping in the breeze of reason, waiting to be tied down.

Compounding the inadequate theoretical grounding of many psychological measures of happiness is the fact that self-reports of happiness have been shown to be highly susceptible to a range of biases. For example, if people find a small amount of money or help a stranger before answering the questions, they tend to report themselves as being happier *with their whole lives*. And if people are answering the questions while it's raining or while in a room of well-dressed good-looking actors pretending to be other participants, then they tend to report themselves as being less happy *with their whole lives*. There are also various cultural variations; participants from collectivist cultures rate their life satisfaction more on the quality of their relationships than individualist cultures do. Yet more troubling than all of these biases, one study found that about a third of participants couldn't even give the same answer to two instances of the same happiness related question in the same survey!

The inaccuracy of self-reported happiness caused by such biases, combined with the arbitrariness of specific happiness-related questions and limited response scale options, means that we cannot be too sure how happy the person who reports continually increasing happiness really is. Indeed, it's hard to say if their total happiness score actually reflects anything of great importance to their well-being, or how happy they are, or even how happy they think they are!

At the root of these problems are the enigmas of defining happiness and of discerning what it is that really makes a life go well for someone – topics that positive psychologists have not adequately addressed to date. And this is despite the fact that Ed Diener sees positive psychology as “the endeavour by scientists to answer the classic question posed by philosophers: What is the good life?” What is rarely mentioned by positive psychologists is that, depending on how the specific happiness questions are worded, they can adopt what philosophers see as radically divergent conceptions of happiness – from hedonistic to eudaimonistic (“flourishing”) accounts. Furthermore, this divergence is very important to philosophers because some will place little or no ultimate value (for an individual's well-being) on some of these conceptions of happiness. Serious philosophers have been pondering these puzzles for a long time and may well find it irksome that positive psychologists have rushed directly to what should be a subsequent problem – how to help people become happier – before fully considering exactly what happiness is.

But, perhaps in their enthusiasm for an easily measurable conception of happiness, positive psychologists have come up with the best measure of happiness there will ever be – simple questions like: “how happy are you?” Sonja Lyubomirsky and many other positive psychologists think that happiness is inherently subjective. If they are right, then answering very simple questions directly about happiness may well be the best measure of happiness because self-reporting our happiness in response to these simple questions may be the only way to take into account our individually nuanced conception of what happiness means and our idiosyncratic method of assessing our own happiness.

If we take the subjectivity of answering these questions about happiness seriously, then longitudinal studies, in which the same participants are asked the same questions over a long period of time, are likely to produce the most informative results. Indeed, if this longitudinal methodology is coupled with insightful questions about possible determinants of happiness (such as using strengths, being hopeful, expressing gratitude, savouring pleasant events, etc.) as well as simple questions about happiness, then we might at least get ideas about what can make certain kinds of people happier. The International Wellbeing Study ([www.wellbeingstudy.com](http://www.wellbeingstudy.com)) – conducted by a team including the authors of this article – takes such an approach. This study looks in depth at the well-being of people from around the world, particularly psychological aspects that contribute to well-being, and how well-being changes over time.

Interestingly, hundreds of philosophers (with at least a degree in philosophy) are taking part in the International Wellbeing Study. Preliminary analysis on this group has revealed that philosophers are, on average, more autonomous, report higher purpose in life, and are both more curious and more mindful. However, philosophers also ruminate more, are not as satisfied with how they use their time, are lonelier, have less positive relationships, and report less well-being on most of the main well-being indicators, such as “happiness”. We doubt that philosophers would be too disappointed on hearing this, though, because they also think that happiness is not as important as most of the other participants. While some of these results might seem obvious, that is not a bad thing for the study. It’s good that the basic results match “common knowledge” because that allows us to be more confident about them and any subsequent causal conclusions that might follow when the longitudinal data is analysed.

So, should we be listening to what positive psychologists have to say about happiness? If you want to be happier, then perhaps, yes, you should pay attention, but be careful not to be sweet-talked into thinking that anyone actually holds to the key to true happiness *for you*. The conclusion that should be drawn from positive psychology is that some of the interventions proposed do have an impact on “happiness” (however conceived) for most, but that it’s not clear if those impacts will persist. As an analogy, most weight loss programmes, from fad diets to boot camps, do work. However only about 2% of these programmes work over two years or longer. In time, longitudinal studies will show if any interventions, or combination of interventions, will be able to *continually* increase happiness for individual participants, and further studies will reveal if any particular set of interventions can produce lasting increases in happiness for groups of similar people. Unfortunately, however, no solution appears to be on the horizon to the problem of ensuring that the happiness that they are measuring is a kind of happiness that we should care about deeply.