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FITTING IN AND GETTING HAPPY

*How Conformity to Societal Norms Affects
Subjective Well-being*

Actors
and Structures

campus

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1 Happiness as a Subject of Scientific Inquiry

1.1 Happiness: The Old New Concept

Happiness is at the same time one of the newest and the oldest of scientific concepts. In philosophy, interest in the phenomenon of happiness dates back thousands of years, whereas in behavioral and social sciences just several decades. Does it mean that philosophers got to know their subject of study better than social scientists did? Not necessarily. A brief look at the history of European philosophy suggests that different philosophical schools could never reach an agreement on what happiness is. For example, in the classical era of Greek philosophy there was a variety of different schools of thought. For hedonists, happiness consisted in the maximization of pleasure (McMahon, 2004; Sumner, 1996). By contrast, Aristotle postulated that happiness (or what he called *eudaimonia*), consisted in possessing some desirable quality—virtue or perfection (Nettle, 2005). Stoic philosophers, led by Cicero, went even further and postulated that virtuous people are happy even when they are scorned by others.

In the Christian Middle Age, virtue coupled with faith and devotion to God became critical ingredients of happiness. In fact, the concept of a happy life itself was replaced by a happy after-life, meaning that there is only one place where mere mortals can be eventually happy—Heaven (Tatarkiewicz, 1976). In the nineteenth century, the pendulum swung back in the other direction. Utilitarian philosophers brought back the idea of pleasure as the major way to happiness. For example, Jeremy Bentham put forward the idea of the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people (Bentham, 1907 [1789]). Maximization of the happiness of the people was seen as the basis of legislation and morality. This trend has been thriving in the contemporary era as well. Today, happiness is more about good feelings than it is about good deeds (Kesebir & Diener, 2008; McMahon, 2006). Happiness is seen as a precious good in itself, which is worth pursu-

ing. The idea of the pursuit of happiness found its way into the American Declaration of Independence, lists of national accounts indicators (Marks, Abdallah, Simms, & Thompson, 2006), national social policies (Priesner, 2001), and ultimately, social science journals.

Why did it take social scientists so long to recognize happiness as a subject of scientific study? Science values precision of definitions and measurements. For a long time, happiness has been considered as something fuzzy and immeasurable, that is to say, unscientific (Frey & Stutzer, 2002a). In addition, different social science disciplines had other reasons to ignore happiness as a subject of study. Sociologists have been always more interested in objective conditions of people's life leaving the study of individuals' appraisal of these conditions to psychologists (Veenhoven, 2008). Psychologists, in their turn, preferred studying negative phenomena such as depression or anxiety to positive ones (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). For instance, for one psychological article concerned with positive states, there were 17 articles published on negative states throughout the 1980s (Myers & Diener, 1995). Finally, economists who based their micro-economic theories on people's utility at the same time assumed that no direct measurement of utility is needed to understand individuals' behavior and preferences, and were therefore not interested in studying happiness either (Frey & Stutzer, 2005).

The last quarter of the twentieth century heralded a change in the place happiness research occupied in social sciences. Sociologists grew interested in people's subjective experience and evaluations (Veenhoven, 2008). Economists, increasingly disappointed in classic models of *homo economicus*, turned toward the study of individual subjective experiences and discovered that happiness can be a reliable proxy measurement of people's utility (Frey & Stutzer, 2002a). And finally, psychologists started studying pre-conditions of human flourishing instead of human misery (Ryff, 1989).

What triggered this change? Several major social trends in post-industrial Western societies might have shifted social scientists' attention to studies of human happiness. The first trend is related to the unprecedentedly high affluence, absence of war, and economic security that has reigned in Europe and North America since the 1950s. Most Western Europeans and North Americans born post-war, were exempt from experiencing economic hardship, scarcity, or war. Abraham Maslow (1943) would have described this development as a transition from basic needs satisfaction to the pursuit of goals related to the gratification of higher-order needs such

as personal flourishing and self-actualization (also see Inglehart, 1971; Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Welzel & Inglehart, 2010). Hence, an increasing number of studies concerned with human potential, agency, self-development, and general positivity (e.g., Seligman, 2002) might be a reflection of this general trend.

Second, economic development brought about individualization of societies with an emphasis on post-materialistic values: respect for individual differences, freedom from prejudices, and individual rights for happiness and personal development (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Welzel & Inglehart, 2010). This major trend toward the importance of individuals' strivings and subjective views led social scientists to discover the power of subjective evaluations of objective circumstances in influencing people's behavior. Sociologists noticed that sometimes individuals felt good in objectively bad conditions and their subjective evaluations had substantial consequences for their behavior and health (Lucas, Dyrenforth, & Diener, 2008; Veenhoven, 2008). As a consequence, many old social science concepts were "upgraded" to satisfy this subjectivism trend: subjective SES (Kraus, Adler, & Chen, 2012), subjective age (Montepare, 2009), subjective health (Johnston, Propper, & Shields, 2007), and subjective well-being (Diener, et al., 1999), to name a few.

Third, psychologists studying emotions discovered that positive emotions are not only good because they feel good but because they are related to a wide range of positive outcomes for individuals and society as a whole (for a review, see Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Happy individuals cooperate and help others more often than unhappy individuals (Dulin & Hill, 2003), positive emotions broaden individuals' attention and cognitive repertoire (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005), promote resource building and involvement with approach goals (Elliot & Thrash, 2002). Finally, happy people are healthier, they recover from severe illnesses faster and live longer than their less happy counterparts (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001; Devins, Mann, Mandin, & Leonard, 1990; Levy, Lee, Bagley, & Lippman, 1988; Ostir, Markides, Black, & Goodwin, 2000). Taken together, these socio-economic and cultural trends in the Western world as well as psychological research about the benefits of positive affect raised public and academic interest in happiness studies and made them worthwhile in the eyes of lay people, social and behavioral scientists, and policy makers.

Nowadays, the research activity on happiness and life satisfaction is prolific. According to the Social Science Citation Index, approximately 14,000 academic papers with keywords happiness, life satisfaction, or subjective well-being have been published within the last decade; several international interdisciplinary organizations have been created and successfully publish their specialty journals (Journal of Happiness Studies or Journal of Positive Psychology, to name a few). Subjective well-being has become a truly interdisciplinary field that brings together economists, sociologists, and psychologists.

1.2 Happiness, Life Satisfaction and Subjective Well-being

In part due to its interdisciplinary nature but also because of its relatively young age, happiness research is often criticized for vagueness and inconsistency in terminology and definitions. For example, the first empirical papers about happiness in 1970s referred to it as “avowed happiness”, “self-evaluative happiness”, or just “well-being” (Andrews & Whitey, 1976; Brenner, 1975; Wilson, 1967). The terms and definitions used nowadays are subject to a similar diversity ranging from subjective happiness to emotional well-being to life satisfaction (Diener, et al., 1999; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999).

In the 1980, in an attempt to systemize the field of happiness research, psychologist Ed Diener pioneered the term of subjective well-being (SWB) as “a general area of scientific interest, rather than a single specific construct” (Diener, 1984; Diener, et al., 1999, p. 277). Hence, SWB was designed as a research domain, uniting a very broad category of concepts. Diener himself as well as most contemporary researchers focused on two of them—life satisfaction (cognitive evaluation of life) and affect balance (affective evaluation of life).

The cognitive evaluation—life satisfaction—is based on the respondent’s judgment about what constitutes a good life and how far his/her own life is from this standard. For example, McDowell and Newell (1987, p. 204) define life satisfaction as a “personal assessment of one’s condition compared to an external reference standard or to one’s aspirations”. Similarly, Shin and Johnson (1978, p. 478) describe life satisfaction as a “global assessment of a person’s quality of life according to his chosen criteria”.