

Happiness: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

Surprisingly, only two effects of happiness were the topic of studies in this current literature including well-being and happiness at work. Happiness has surprisingly rarely occurred as a research topic in this current literature. Most of the studies have been focused on predictors including demographic variables and attitudes. The demographic variables include older age, higher education, greater income, greater social capital and closeness to family and friends. The attitudes include leisure attitude, inquisitiveness, moral values, life satisfaction and uncertainty. Only one potential underlying biological mechanism for happiness could be found in this current literature. In an fMRI study happiness was correlated with activation of the limbic- thalamic -cortical pathway. Several methodological limitations can be cited for this literature including a limited number of studies on happiness, design problems, and the almost exclusive focus on predictor variables. The current literature on happiness is also lacking studies on the effects of happiness as well as the risks for losing happiness.

1. Introduction

Happiness has been defined as a complex mental state of well-being that includes positive emotions, contentment, and a sense of life satisfaction. It is often associated with positive life experiences such as achieving goals, spending time with loved ones and engaging in enjoyable activities, although happiness can also arise spontaneously without any apparent external cause. Happiness has often been considered a synonym of “well-being”, a state characterized by a high level of life satisfaction, more positive emotions and less negative emotions. The pursuit of happiness has been a central theme in philosophy and psychology for centuries. Happiness is typically measured by self-report surveys.

The research for this narrative review involved entering the term happiness and the years 2020 to 2026 in PubMed and PsycINFO. Exclusion criteria included case studies and non-English language papers. This narrative review includes 21 papers on happiness. The papers can be categorized as definitions of happiness/unhappiness (2 papers), effects of happiness (2 papers), predictors of happiness (16 papers), and a potential underlying biological mechanism for happiness (1 paper). These sections are followed by a discussion on methodological limitations of this current literature.

2. Definitions and Development of Happiness/Unhappiness

In a paper entitled “Two sides of the same coin or two different currencies? Representations of happiness and unhappiness among Finnish women”, word associations with happiness and unhappiness were explored [1]. The word associations with these concepts were produced by 16 to 18 and 29 to 34-year-old women from Finland, the country that the United Nations World Happiness Report has ranked the happiest in the world. Correspondence analysis and hierarchical cluster analysis showed that participants in both age groups shared 3 clusters of words associated with happiness. They included tangible happiness, affective happiness and serene happiness. More differences were noted in the associations with unhappiness for which the groups shared 2 clusters called loss and everyday problems. A distinct third cluster called “affective unhappiness” emerged for the younger women whereas the older women talked about two clusters including dejection and apprehension.

Although the early development of happiness does not appear in this literature, across many studies subjective well-being has followed a U-shape in age declining until people reach middle age only to rebound in later age [2]. A new development relates to the deterioration of young people's mental health suggesting that there is a decrease in ill- being by age. These data were derived from

44 countries including the United States and the United Kingdom within the period of 2020- 2025.

3. Effects of Happiness

Surprisingly, only two effects of happiness were the topic of studies in this current literature (see table 1). They included well-being and happiness at work.

In a study entitled “Does valuing happiness lead to well-being?”, Dutch adults (N = 8331) were surveyed [3]. Happiness and **well-being** (defined as life satisfaction, more positive affect and less negative affect) had a contemporaneous relationship, but happiness did not lead to later well-being. This finding suggests that happiness also didn’t persist.

Happiness at work in Indonesians (N=105, 35 males and 70 females) actually led to the development of the Happiness at Work Scale [4]. The scale has been considered reliable and valid, although it hasn’t reappeared in this current literature as if “happiness at work” was no longer a variable of interest. This may relate to the prevalence of online work following COVID, making happiness at work no longer an issue.

4. Predictors of Happiness

Happiness has surprisingly rarely occurred as a research topic in this current literature, possibly because psychological research has typically focused on problems. Although, the literature on unhappiness is even more limited. Most of the studies have been focused on predictors of happiness (see table 2). These include demographic variables and attitudes. The demographic predictor variables include older age, higher education, greater income, greater social capital and closeness to family and friends. The attitudes include leisure attitude, inquisitiveness, moral values, life satisfaction and uncertainty.

In a paper entitled “Learning from **older adults**”, the older adults were said to be happier because their careers were compatible with their goals [5]. Young folks instead had conflicting goals, for example, education and career aspirations.

Higher education has been a predictor of happiness in at least three studies. In one study, happiness was not only related to higher education, but also to better health [6]. In another study on happiness and education, income was also considered a predictor [7]. These data are based on the China Migrants Dynamic Survey (N= 137,186). Even **digital literacy** has had a positive effect on happiness, particularly in less educated, older adults living in rural regions where digital learning might be the only option [8].

Happiness has also been associated with **income** in samples from four different studies from different countries [9]. The correlation between happiness and income was greater when income inequality was greater. Variability on income would be necessary for a correlation.

In another study, income, education and life expectancy were effective in reducing sadness, worry and unhappiness in as many as 29 countries [10]. In contrast, anti- depressants were surprisingly not effective.

Even **subjective income** has been associated with happiness in Korean adults (N=4890) [11]. Other variables that were related to happiness in this study were age, education, marital status, social capital, the happiness of close people, and belonging. Unfortunately, in this unusual multi-variable study in this literature, regression analysis or structural equation modeling wasn’t used to determine the relative contributions of these demographic and relationship variables to happiness.

In a paper entitled “Sources of happiness according to life periods”, happiness at all ages involved **closeness to family and friends** (N=129) [12]. Adults also reported social peace and traveling as sources of happiness. Children also reported happiness from playing games, getting gifts and having surprises. And adolescents reported eating favorite things and autonomy as making them happy. These age/developmental differences in happiness sources were not surprising.

Closeness to friends was also a predictor in a study from India (N=342) [13]. As many as 57% of this sample were happy. The predictors for happiness explained 53% of the variance, including the number of close friends, stress during the last six months, physical activity, and family income. Although 57% is a relatively high variance figure, the 43% of unexplained variance suggests that more measures were needed in this study.

Different attitudes have also been associated with happiness in this current literature. They include **leisure attitude**, inquisitiveness, moral values and life satisfaction. In a study, entitled “Golden years happiness: analyzing nostalgic aspect of leisure”, retirees were interviewed about happiness (N= 201) [14]. Leisure attitude led to leisure nostalgia (a sentimental longing for past leisure experiences), which in turn led to happiness. The opposite effect might be expected, as in yearning for the past. These retirees may have been “faking good” or giving socially desirable responses to the researchers because they were grateful for participating in the research. Surprisingly, in this “golden opportunity” to study retirees, the researchers focused on only 3 variables, as if planning to conduct a mediation analysis.

Inquisitiveness (curiosity and acceptance for something or someone different) is another attitude that has been associated with happiness (N=400 Japanese adults) [15]. This result could be labeled “variety is the spice of life”. Certainly, a continuum of different degrees of inquisitiveness would be noted across individuals in this sample.

In a paper entitled “The most essential **moral values** enhance happiness”, 8 moral values were said to occur in various cultures throughout history. These values include altruism, empathy,

gratitude, humility, justice, prudence (the quality of showing care), fortitude and temperance. These values were labeled “moral bio enhancement” by the authors. Interestingly, all of these values involve positive attitudes toward others versus being self-oriented.

Life satisfaction has surprisingly led to happiness in a sample of homeless adults who are generally considered to be living in unsatisfactory circumstances [16]. In this qualitative interview study, as many as 64% of homeless individuals suggested that they were happy. Reporting life satisfaction led to a 4.5-fold increase for the likeliness of being happy. The themes that emerged in these interviews were material aspects, affective situations, daily life concerns, and self-esteem. These “homelessness” themes are not surprising and are likely related to the interviewers’ interview questions.

Homeless adults have also been notably unhappy in Leon Nicaragua [17]. In this sample (N= 41), very low levels of happiness were reported, although future expectations were positive. The participants blamed themselves and family relationship problems for their unhappiness. That one sample was happy being homeless and another sample unhappy may relate to family and income differences and whether the happy sample was homeless by choice and the unhappy sample was forced into homelessness.

Other lifestyle variables that appeared in a study on Japanese adolescents (N= 64,329, mean age = 16 years old) included skipping breakfast, poor sleep quality, and excessive internet usage [18]. In this sample 10% reported being unhappy. Being male and skipping breakfast, poor quality of sleep, and excessive internet usage were predictors of unhappiness.

Uncertainty was another variable that predicted unhappiness in this current literature. In this study, a lottery task was given that elicited uncertainty [19]. In this sample uncertainty increased curiosity but decreased happiness.

5. A Potential Underlying Biological Mechanism for Happiness
Only one potential underlying biological mechanism for happiness

could be found in this current literature. In an fMRI study (N = 182 fMRIs), happiness was correlated with activation of the limbic-thalamic -cortical pathway [20]. These data were not surprising given that this pathway has been associated with emotional regulation and happiness in previous research.

6. Methodological Problems with this Literature
Several methodological limitations can be cited for this literature. They involve the limited number of studies on happiness, design problems, and the almost exclusive focus on predictor variables. This literature is also lacking studies on the effects of happiness as well as the risks for losing happiness.

The limited number of studies in this current literature on happiness likely relates to psychology researchers' focus on negative problems. The design problems are typical of many psychology studies, including their being cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, self-report surveys with reliability problems, a focus on single variables, and the lack of data analysis such as regressions and structural equation modeling for the occasional multi-variable studies.

Most of the studies are focused on predictor variables. The predictor variables are mostly demographics including age, education, income, but surprisingly no comparisons across gender or ethnicity. And virtually no cross-cultural comparisons have appeared in this current literature on happiness.

Other missing predictor variables include personality type such as extraversion versus introversion, having close friendships, having a successful career, and being healthy. Virtually no developmental studies tracing the development of happiness across different ages have appeared in this literature. Although positive effects would be expected for happiness such as positive relationships, successful careers, health and longevity, these are missing in this literature. Also, there are virtually no risk studies such as the loss of friends, the loss of a job, rejection, and unhappiness related to adverse childhood events. Despite these limitations, this literature has been informative and is suggestive of future research [21].

Effects	First Authors
Well-being	Huang
Happiness at work	Fitriana

Table 1: Effects of Happiness (and First authors)

Predictors	First Authors
Older adults	Wong
Higher education	Tan, Yang
Digital literacy	Ding
Income	Oishi
Subjective income	Lee
Closeness to family and friends	Baytemir, Kumar

Leisure attitude	Missing author
Inquisitiveness	Hirose
Moral values	Bioethe
Life satisfaction	Cano-Gonzalez
Uncertainty	Lieshout

Table 2: Predictors of Happiness (and First Authors)

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