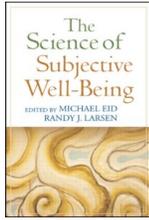


Happiness Comes of Age

A review of



The Science of Subjective Well-Being

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The study of subjective well-being in psychology can be traced to the publication of Diener's 1984 Psychological Bulletin article Subjective Well-Being. Since that time, well-being has become a popular and influential field of study in psychology, culminating in the birth of the Positive Psychology movement. The Science of Subjective Well-Being is both a tribute to Diener's contributions to the study of well-being and a well-researched and informative guide to the major research developments that have occurred in the field since the publication of Diener's article. This review highlights those major developments in the context of subjective well-being research over the past 25 years, and also addresses a few other developments that are not reviewed directly in the volume.

In 1999, Martin Seligman delivered the presidential address in Boston at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association. This address heralded the new Positive Psychology—a psychology of human strength and potential. Positive Psychology was to address many of the same issues with which the earlier Humanistic psychologists had been concerned: goal-setting and goal-striving; self-actualization; finding meaning and fulfillment in life; and most importantly, happiness and well-being. Unlike the Humanistic movement, however, Positive Psychology was to rest on a solid empirical foundation—an empirical foundation that can be traced directly to the seminal 1984 Psychological Bulletin paper, *Subjective Well-Being*, by Ed Diener.

The Science of Subjective Well-Being is part tribute to Ed Diener's contributions to this rapidly developing and promising field and part survey of progress in subjective well-being research and Positive Psychology more generally since the publication of Diener's 1984 article. The book is edited by Michael Eid and Randy Larsen, both former students of Diener and major

contributors to emotion science and well-being research in their own right. Other well-known researchers who contributed to the book include Richard Lucas and Robert Emmons, who are also both former Diener students, as well as Barbara Fredrickson, John Cacioppo, and evolutionary psychologist David Buss. The book is a valuable overview of the current state of research in happiness, positive emotion, and well-being, and a worthy tribute to a groundbreaking researcher.

The book is organized into five sections, each sure to appeal to researchers with different interests and motivations for perusing the volume. However, many of the interdisciplinary themes woven throughout the volume are introduced in the first section, which includes chapters on the philosophy, sociology, history, and evolution of happiness. In this review, I will focus on three of those themes, using them as frameworks to discuss the empirical research addressed by later chapters that fall within their respective domains. I will conclude by addressing some additional developments in the scientific study of well-being that are not reviewed in the volume.

One point of clarification: happiness and well-being are terms often used interchangeably (for a good discussion of how they should be distinguished, see Haybron, 2008). Here, I use happiness to indicate a specific component of well-being that has a positive emotional component. Well-being may include a more general cognitive evaluation and/or other more objective measures, such as health and financial stability. In a fitting introduction, philosopher Daniel Haybron discusses the various philosophical approaches to understanding happiness, from Aristotle's virtue theory and the concept of *eudaimonia* to hedonic and utilitarian

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perspectives on the balance of pleasures and pains. Haybron's analysis raises the crucial issue that whether we are happy or not depends in large part on what happiness is. While there may still be some contention among philosophers on this point—and while historian Darrin McMahon (Chapter 5) illustrates that our concept of happiness has surely changed over time—there is clearly some consensus among well-being researchers. As defined by contributors Shigehiro Oishi and Minkyung Koo: “Happiness is a latent construct best indicated by a general sense of life satisfaction” (p. 291). Of course, latent constructs are inherently difficult to measure, and befittingly, the second section of the volume pertains to measurement issues in well-being research. Likewise, such a definition only encourages us to ask what life satisfaction is rather than what happiness is. Luckily, that can be done a bit more easily with the psychometrically sound and well-validated Satisfaction with Life Scale (Pavot, Chapter 7; see Pavot & Diener, 2008, for a review).

Researchers typically include an emotional component in the definition of happiness, which is not addressed by general life satisfaction. A clear finding to emerge is that happiness seems to be associated with the lack of negative affect and the presence of positive affect. Interestingly, a great deal of research indicates positive and negative affect are to some degree independent of one another (Schimmack, Chapter 6).

Of course, a definition of happiness only leads to more complex questions about happiness. Most important, what are its causes and consequences? Sociologist Ruut Veenhoven analyzes the various social, political, and economic forces that contribute to well-being, drawing on longitudinal and cross-national data samples. Veenhoven focuses on two essentially social aspects of well-being that are echoed throughout the volume: social support and the social context of happiness. Since Robert Putnam's (2000) landmark book *Bowling Alone*, there has been an increasing emphasis on the contributions of social support and social connectedness to well-being. Relatedly, Cacioppo and colleagues (Chapter 10) discuss the Chicago Health, Aging, and Social Relations study, which demonstrates that well-being is both a consequence and a cause of strong social bonds.

Veenhoven also discusses well-being in the social context, a concern that gets to the heart of the earliest and some of the most important well-being research. One of the first findings to spur research on happiness and well-being was actually made by an economist. In 1973, Richard Easterlin showed that within a period of time in which absolute income had increased dramatically in the United States, self-reported happiness had increased little, if at all. This finding challenged economic assumptions that material wealth was a proxy for well-being, and invited psychological inquiry into the nature of the mechanisms of well-being.

One of the most consistent explanations to emerge for the so-called Easterlin effect concerns the relative nature of well-being: to the extent that the material wealth of all is increased, then the baseline comparison remains unchanged, and there should be no overall change in subjective well-being. Such relativity can be deleterious, however, when material wealth is increased for some, but not all. It can also engender a material arms race that is impossible to win.

Although the original findings supporting the Easterlin effect are under fire in the economics literature (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2008), similar context effects are ubiquitous in psychology: how intelligent, smart, and happy people report themselves to be depends on the context of comparison (see Mussweiler, 2003, for a review). The stark importance of context to well-being is apparent in research reviewed by Biswas-Diener (Chapter 15) showing that in many ways (though not all) slum-dwellers in Calcutta report surprisingly high levels of well-being, particularly compared to homeless individuals in America. Biswas-Diener provides an enlightening view into the intricate relationship between wealth and well-being. Fujita (Chapter 12) offers a detailed treatment of well-being in the context of social comparison.

Many of the book's themes concern the relationship between the objective and social context of well-being to the subjective and psychological determinants of well-being. Evolutionary psychologist David Buss (Chapter 4) goes one level deeper in probing the biological origins of well-being. Buss asks the reader to contemplate the adaptive significance of happiness, and to consider the logical possibility that we are not, in fact, designed to be happy. An adaptive analysis of emotions indicates that negative emotion is a cue that there is a problem in the environment or in the match between the organism's desired goal-state and the state of the environment. Positive emotion results when behavioral goals are met and when subjective feedback from the environment indicates successful progress toward desired end-states. Interestingly, such perspectives are reflected in social-cognitive theories of behavioral self-regulation (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1990). The environment in which we evolved was an environment likely filled with constant danger and threats from a variety of physical, environmental and social forces. Historically, then, it is unlikely that happiness has been the primary component of our emotional repertoire. Yet, happiness seems to facilitate evolutionarily adaptive behavior. According to the broaden-and-build model of positive emotion (Fredrickson, Chapter 22), positive emotion encourages leisure and play activities that may result in finer-tuned behavioral responses in times of threat. For instance, young boys engage in roughhouse play, perhaps honing their mate competition skill for later years.

An evolutionary analysis is particularly useful considering that an understanding of the adaptive function of happiness may shed light on the psychological

mechanisms that promote well-being. For instance, an evolutionary analysis predicts that we should be particularly sensitive to negative information in the environment, given that negatively valenced stimuli are more likely to represent imminent threat. Such negativity bias is well documented in the psychological literature (see Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001, for a review); furthermore, it has been observed at very early levels of processing in the brain (e.g., Ito, Larsen, Smith, & Cacioppo, 1998). In light of control-process theories of emotion, then, attention to negative information should be particularly likely in a negative emotional state, since negative emotions signal a problem in the environment. In a standout chapter (11), Robinson and Compton review evidence that emotional states bias attention and memory and thus have consequences for our emotional states. For instance, participants in a negative mood are more likely to attend to negative information, even when positive information is available in the environment (Tamir & Robinson, 2007). Such biases may serve to enhance or prolong negative emotional states. Through an analysis of basic cognitive processes, then, an evolutionary perspective on well-being can offer insight into affective disorders, such as depression, and an evolutionarily-informed analysis of affective disorders may lead to better treatments aimed at maximizing happiness and well-being through basic cognitive interventions.

One area of psychology in which the book lacks contribution is from the work of Richard Davidson, whose research has pioneered an understanding of the biological bases of well-being. In 1992, Davidson trekked into the Himalayas with electroencephalographic (EEG) recording equipment in order to record brainwaves from meditating Buddhist monks. That initial work opened up a new world of dialogue between Eastern and Western approaches to well-being (Davidson, 2002; Ekman, Davidson, Ricard, & Wallace, 2005). One of the most consistent findings is that the left prefrontal cortex is more active in happy participants, and particularly so in trained monks, while the right prefrontal cortex is more active in depressed patients (see Davidson, 2004, for a review). Just as an evolutionary perspective on well-being sheds light on the basic cognitive mechanisms that underlie psychopathology, understanding the neural bases of well-being may also promote a more informed understanding of psychopathology.

Subjective well-being is inherently an interdisciplinary field of study, as indicated by contributions to the book from philosophy, sociology, and evolutionary psychology. However, one field that is conspicuously unrepresented is economics. Economics in many ways is a science of well-being, and in the early writings of Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, economics and psychology are closely

related in this regard. Although economics ultimately rejected subjective definitions of well-being in favor of more objective definitions (material gain, consumption), from its inception it is a field that has been concerned with how to make more people better off.

The lack of a contribution to the book from economics is surprising for three reasons: 1) as previously discussed, it was a finding in the economic literature (the Easterlin effect) that spurred interest in well-being in psychology and other disciplines; 2) the 2002 Nobel Prize winner in economics, Danny Kahneman, is a psychologist and a pioneer of well-being research at the interface of psychology and economics (see Kahneman, Diener, & Schwartz, 1999); 3) some economists have rediscovered happiness (not always to the delight of their colleagues), and are addressing the social economic conditions that facilitate well-being as assessed by subjective measures (see Bruni & Porta, 2006, for an overview).

In some ways, contributions from economics to the study of well-being are more important than those from any other field because economists influence public policy. To the extent that well-being is defined by material gain and consumption, public policy will likely encourage increased material gain and consumption, regardless of findings that indicate absolute levels of material well-being don't matter much beyond a certain level of personal sustainability (see Biswas-Diener, Chapter 15). Furthermore, we have reached a point at which our level of consumption is unsustainable, and is having a negative impact on our planet. A basic understanding of psychological adaptation shows that we adjust rather easily to increased levels of wealth and consumption (once again, beyond a certain point). Meanwhile, the planet has not adjusted well to our level of consumption, which is, to some degree, responsible for global climate change, dirty air and water, and an energy crisis that threatens our very way of life. It may well be that a reevaluation of our definition of well-being will be forced upon us, as our past pursuit of material gain may itself ensure our lack of ability to continue to pursue greater well-being along the same path in the future. In some ways of thinking, psychological and ecological well-being are necessarily inextricable (Brown & Kasser, 2005). Furthermore, some economists and psychologists are working together to create new measures, such as the Happy Planet Index, that take material, psychological, and ecological factors into an account of well-being. Such measures may one day allow us to increase the well-being of some without it coming at the expense of others.

Though the volume is clearly not exhaustive in its coverage of subjective well-being research, nor in its interdisciplinary approach to well-being, it does provide a clear and readable overview of the state of well-being research within mainstream experimental psychology. Diener's 1984 Psychological Bulletin article *Subjective Well-Being* is the landmark work to which much of the

research discussed in the volume can be traced, and the chapters are a fitting and laudable tribute to Diener's contributions to this new, exciting, and promising field.

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