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Chapter

The Pursuit of Happiness: Cultural and Psychological Considerations

Vanda Vitali and John A. Moran

Abstract

A scientist and art historian from Canada and France and a clinical psychologist from the United States, team to examine the notion of pursuit of happiness as one of the major social values in our western society. Building on robust body of social science research practice in cultural fields in different parts of the world and the clinical practice of over thirty years in the United States, the authors explore individual happiness as well as societal happiness and consider implications of pursuit of happiness for the future of individuals and societies in face of the current multiple crisis. Finally, they suggest replacing the value of happiness with a more balanced and sustainable value, such as contentment.

Keywords: pursuit of happiness, individual happiness, societal happiness, positive psychology, contentment

1. Introduction

Today in western culture, living human life in the way that makes one happy is considered a necessity and even a right - The Constitution of the United States enshrines as unalienable the right to the “pursuit of Happiness.”

The pursuit of happiness often, perhaps usually, leads to greater and greater desire to have more and more. The pursuit of happiness is our consumer society’s main driver/supporter. The film critic Rex Harrison quipped, “Someone who thinks that money cannot buy happiness doesn’t know where to shop.”

In this article, we examine through literature review and our own practice, first the notion of happiness through psychology lens as it pertains to individuals and how it influences the pursuit of happiness. We then look into societal happiness. Finally, we will consider how the pursuit of happiness, as a social value, may need to be reexamined and recalibrated in order for our society to be able to respond more successfully to individual and societal wellbeing.

2. Cultural and psychological considerations of pursuit of happiness

2.1 Pursuing happiness through psychology lens

As a profession, psychology is in the happiness business. Historically, psychology has focused on remediating illness and personal deficits. In 1998, psychology oriented
more directly on happiness following Martin Seligman, Ph.D.'s Presidential address to the American Psychological Association calling for broadening the profession from focusing on the remediation of disease to building adaptive strengths, an approach referred to as positive psychology. A Google search for the term “positive psychology” leads to 700+ million sites, and more than 18,000 publications have elaborated, delineated, and applied positive psychology concepts to a broad range of populations, life situations, and practices. In short, psychologists have been doing a lot of thinking, writing about what happiness is and how one promotes it.

Out of this work emerges positive psychology as an umbrella term which incorporates multiple conceptualizations of happiness. Seligman [1] defined positive psychology as, “the scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels that include the biological, personal, relational, institutional, cultural, and global dimensions of life.” To psychologists, happiness is a life marked by a preponderance of positive emotions [2] derived from positive events and influences in life, including [3]:

- Positive experiences (like happiness, joy, inspiration, and love)
- Positive states and traits (like gratitude, resilience, and compassion)
- Positive institutions (applying positive principles within entire organizations and institutions)

Although positive psychology is a relatively new area of inquiry, it emerges from long-standing traditions [4] such as:

- Utilitarianism – happiness for the greatest number of people
- Virtue philosophy
- Hedonistic and Eudaimonic philosophies

Multiple models have been proposed for understanding the genesis of happiness. Ryff [5] developed a model for Psychological Well-Being composed of six dimensions: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, and, self-acceptance.

Seligman and his colleagues [6] identified 6 virtues associated with well-being: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Each of the virtues is broken down into character strengths:

Wisdom and Knowledge (cognitive strengths)

- Curiosity
- Judgment and Open-mindedness
- Love of learning
- Creativity
- Perspective taking
Courage (emotional strengths)

- Honesty
- Bravery
- Perseverance
- Zest

Humanity (interpersonal strengths)

- Social intelligence
- Kindness
- Love

Justice (civic strengths)

- Fairness
- Teamwork
- Leadership

Temperance (protect against excess)

- Self-regulation
- Modesty and humility
- Prudence
- Forgiveness and mercy

Transcendence (providing meaning and connection)

- Appreciation of beauty
- Hope
- Gratitude
- Religiousness and spirituality
- Humor

In 2011 [4], Seligman proposed the PERMA model of happiness with happiness the product of factors including: pleasure (P), engagement (E), and meaning
(M)—while adding two additional pathways: positive relationships (R) and accomplishments (A).

Concrete interventions strategies have been developed for promoting psychological well-being [7] across a variety of domains. Typically, skills-building exercises are available to increase individuals’ ability to: (a) savor the present moment; (b) gratitude toward sources outside of one’s self for life’s positive elements; (c) kindness toward others; (d) empathy to deepen relationships through a sense of understanding; (e) optimism; (f) focusing on one’s and others’ strengths rather than deficits; and (g) meaning-oriented activities by focusing on one’s values, goals, and life as a whole. Additionally, positive mental health draws from the literature in associated domains such as mindfulness, stress management and relaxation, cognitive behavior therapy, emotion focused therapy, dialectical behavior therapy and emotional intelligence to sharpen adaptive skills in the pursuit of goals aligned with positive psychology.

Cultural studies confirm the importance of the indigenous and institutional roots of positive psychology [8] and demonstrate that the values and virtues related to individual’s well-being in western societies differ from those of other cultures. For instance [9], American and Taiwanese preschoolers were asked to choose between an—excited‖ smiley face with a wide-open mouth and a—calm one with a smaller, single-line grin. European-American kids said the excited smile was happier, while Taiwanese kids chose the calm one. When they read a story about two kids—one splashed in the swimming pool while the other one floated in an inner tube, one rocketed high and fast on the swings while the other swung slowly—most Taiwanese children identified with the —calm‖ character, while most European-American children chose the excited character.

Positive psychology has examined, described, and confirmed the relationship of well-being to a variables including age, socioeconomic conditions, ethnicity, level of education and culture [10–12].

In short, in the last 25 years psychology has made science-based contributions to the study of human happiness. Psychology has gained wide acceptance as a source of valid and useful information, and psychological ideas, concepts, and practices are being utilized by an ever-broadening base of consumers. For example, in 2010 the psychology department at Yale offered a course titled “Psychology and the Good Life”. Within three days of opening registration, more than 1200 students requested the course (approximately one-third of the student body) making it the most popular course ever offered by the university [13].

Table 1.
United States happiness index 2013–2020,21 according to the World Happiness [14].
However, advances in the social sciences about what makes for a happy and satisfying life has not resulted in gains in the general population. Rather, the reverse appears to be the case. Indicators such as The World Happiness Index of the United Nations shows that happiness in the US has declined since 2013 [14]. See Table 1.

Indicators such as the rate of teen suicide [15], the divorce rate at over 50%, gun purchases, drug abuse, and escalated political polarization suggest that psychology’s emphasis on happiness as a process of engagement, meaning-making, relationship development and skills-utilization in the United States is losing ground to the pursuit of happiness along lines that are iatrogenic and self-destructive.

Most people if asked “what is happiness?” may agree with Seligman that it is to be found in combinations of: (1) pleasure and gratification, (2) embodiment of strengths and virtues, and (3) meaning and purpose [16], but likely, few would argue that the pursuit of happiness is a problem.

2.2 Societal happiness

What is societal happiness?

The Buddhist nation of Bhutan was the first society to determine policy based on the happiness of its citizens, with the king of Bhutan claiming in 1972 that Gross National Happiness (GNH) was a more important measure of progress than Gross National Product (GNP) [17]. Other societies such as the United Kingdom and New Zealand have since developed well-being programs measuring the nation’s well-being across several domains similar to Bhutan’s approach.

There is a broad agreement that ingredients for a national happiness include: income, freedom, healthy life expectancy, social support, trust and generosity. The World Happiness Report [18] produces annually the global ranking of countries based on these criteria. Scandinavian countries typically are at the top of the global happiness ranking while the war-torn nations such as Afghanistan or Sudan, tend to occupy lowest positions.

The World Happiness Report appears to assume that the pursuit of happiness on an individual level is parallel to national happiness. World Happiness Report rankings rely on measures of self-satisfaction and focuses on what happiness is, not how to achieve it. Parameters such as a good life expectancy, social support, and trust are all important in a society. Factors such as promoting curiosity and learning, which we know from psychology to be central to happiness processes, are not included in the World Index and not assessed as variables. Creating a happier society requires not just promoting what matters, but also promoting the capacities for discovering what matters.

Further, creating a happy society depends on creating the right institutions and processes for discovering the conditions which matter. With the identification and understanding of essential processes and experiences that make people happy, researchers need to pursue studies and society’s needs to create institutions that would focus less on happiness and more on what really matters to individuals and society. As a result of interdisciplinary scholarly work in social sciences examining public health and economics over the past decade, societal happiness has increasingly been considered important globally to public policy initiatives. Recently to this list have been added considerations of the social role and responsibilities of corporations in relation to societal happiness [19]. Within positive psychology, utilitarian approaches have examined institutions and business as a factor contributing to positive psychology.
2.3 Pursuing happiness in today’s society

We are witnessing the atomization of interests of our society with different groups competing to fulfill their need for happiness. Clashes among competing groups have escalated raising the baseline level of anger and aggression in our western society, particularly in the American society, and resulting in the erosion of trust in social institutions, the same institutions charged with providing support and ultimately happiness to individuals and society. Political scientists [20] foresee a future of endemic regime instability, frequent constitutional crisis, contested elections, periods of dysfunctional democracy followed by periods of authoritarian rule. Have we arrived at a period where anger and aggression are preventing societies in pursuing happiness?

Rampant consumerism across the developed world resulted in destruction of habitats, species and climate. With environmental crisis looming large, struggle for limited resources is becoming a reality. Conflict theory that explains political and economic events in terms of an ongoing struggle over finite resources is resurging. With the environmental crisis and the struggle for more and more limited resources comes more dissatisfaction, anger and ultimately unhappiness.

The question that social scientists and politicians now need to consider is whether the pursuit of happiness that our western society has been idealizing, is healthy and sustainable practice both for individuals and societies. And if it is not, how to modify the happiness paradigm or to replace it.

2.4 Happiness vs. contentment

Research into over 5000 years of human philosophy and 200 years of scientific research into the nature of the mind, reports two different strategies that emerged which humans have been using for thousands of years to find some form of well-being and happiness [21].

The first is the “more” approach, where people try to find more money, more power, more possessions, more validation, and more success from the world outside of them. While there's nothing wrong with pursuing temporary feeling of happiness though more and more acquisitions, the problem with the more strategy is that it is not sustainable. The more strategy costs considerable time, energy, and resources to maintain it. Aiming higher and higher by trying to be happy all the time is also not possible as such states are not enduring psychologically.

The second is the “enough” strategy, where focus is inward on finding happiness that’s inside people. The researchers report that in a thousand year of tradition the ancients did not use word happiness when describing wellness. More than ninety percent of the time, they used the word contentment and described it as a state where one feels a complete human being with no desires beyond themselves, the state of wholeness, regardless of what was happening externally. Instead of seeking external sources for happiness, which are outside of our control, contentment offers stability and strength.

Contemporary anthropological research, conducted in the Himalayas of Eastern Bhutan, in uncontacted villages revealed interesting findings regarding contentment. A five year study of identifying universal human emotions across cultures showed that the uncontacted population identified with high accuracy emotions, from joy to shame, from facial and vocal expressions. But there was one emotion that did not behave like all the others. That emotion was contentment and was identified as close
to “the knowledge of enough”, meaning that in the present, everything is perfect as it is, regardless of experiencing the outside. Further anthropological research by the same group indicated that many cultures revered contentment as one of the highest states to cultivate in life.

Contentment comes from our relationship to what is going on around us, rather than our reaction to it. It is a realization that we are whole and complete just as we are, despite the feelings of anger, sadness, joy, frustration, and excitement. It is a long-lasting feeling accompanied by peacefulness, gratitude and satisfaction. While happiness is a temporary feeling, contentment possesses the ability to last indefinitely [22]. If we can feel contentment even when our external environment is out of control, much as the political observers are describing our current world, why our society is not shifting our value system and pursuing contentment rather than happiness. Perhaps, because our materialistic values are so entrenched in the western society. But, with contentment comes purpose and resilience, and also significance and meaning in life.

3. Conclusions

Within the context of prevailing western capitalism, the concept of the pursuit of happiness appears to be a sacred cow – an idea held as being above criticism. We have examined how psychological approaches to happiness have distinguished multiple meanings of happiness, and sources of happiness arising from multiple domains, and across multiple structures. As it is used popularly, the notion of happiness is like a stereotype in that it oversimplifies a complex and nuanced phenomenon, and arrests further critical examination. We presented ideas and data demonstrating that to the extent that “more and more” is the principal happiness associated with consumerism, social difficulties will continue to incubate. Alternative approaches to happiness such as positive psychology and the introduction of other values, including those from different philosophies and practices, into our western culture are promising. Going forward, support for social science research stemming from positive psychology and related disciplines is needed. Perhaps more important, is accelerated growth of awareness among institutions and the business community about how serving communal wellbeing is inextricable from more immediate political, and financial concerns.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.
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