

The happiness is Unmeasurable

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Abstract. People have been investigating and pursuing the true meaning of happiness and been on a persistent quest for a happy life since the dawn of time. However, the answer to happiness is not a multiple-choice question but an open-ended test, so there is no standard answer or exact value. This paper will demonstrate that happiness is not measurable in terms of the conceptual construction of happiness test and the 'inconsistency' of the test results and will also focus on the future development of happiness measurements.

Keywords: happiness; happiness measurement happiness tests.

1. Introduction

Marcus Aurelius commented that, 'Very little is needed to make a happy life.' But what is the 'very little' that is required? Happiness is defined as an emotion of joy, gladness, satisfaction, and well-being. People have been investigating and pursuing the true meaning of happiness and been on a persistent quest for a happy life since the dawn of time. However, the answer to happiness is not a multiple-choice question but an open-ended test, so there is no standard answer or exact value. This paper will demonstrate that happiness is not measurable in terms of the conceptual construction of happiness test and the 'inconsistency' of the test results and will also focus on the future development of happiness measurements.

2. Inconsistency in the concept of happiness

Happiness, as a classic philosophical theme, has never been universally defined. Historically, the measurement of happiness can be divided into three phases: The first phase is before the eighteenth century when happiness was mainly considered and explored as a philosophical topic, such as Plato's theory of eudaemonism or Aristotle's theory of hedonism, where scholars focused on the connotation rather than the quantification of happiness. This time can be said to be the era before happiness measurement (Diener, 1984). The second phase, from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, saw scholars of economics and ethics begin to propose more definitive measures of happiness, such as utilitarian philosophers defining happiness as 'the sum of pleasures and pains' established in a 'mental calculus'. This view on the evaluation process is still dominant nowadays (Veenhoven, 2011). During this phase, there was no boom in quantitative happiness research because the calculations were too crude. The third phase began in the mid-twentieth century when psychologists started with people's subjective experience of happiness—subjective well-being—and kicked off quantitative happiness research with the emergence of several happiness measurement instruments (Helliwell et al., 2023). In this paradigm, happiness is as quantifiable as profits on a balance sheet. Research on the measurement of happiness consists of two main measurement orientations: cognitive, where satisfaction with life as a whole is assessed as the primary indicator, but satisfaction with a specific domain is also used as an indicator; and affective, where the amount of positive versus negative affect is measured as an indicator of happiness (Crocker & Near, 1998; Helliwell et al., 2023). However, the operational definition of happiness, which underpins all tests, has never been standardized, since different orientations relying on very different operational definitions. Furthermore, different people have their unique understandings of happiness, including but not limited to their different ages and diverse cultural backgrounds. At the group level, the influence of culture on the definition of happiness can be deeply significant. For example, studies have used multi-cultural latent class analysis to demonstrate that people in different cultures have significantly distinct understandings of

happiness, some of which are explained by differences in self-centeredness versus other-centeredness, individualism versus collectivism, and tolerant versus strict cultures (Eid & Diener, 2003). For example, each minority group living in China has its own unique cultural system. One cross-cultural study suggests that although most minorities are now proficient in Mandarin Chinese, they construct the concept of 'happiness' in a markedly different way, mainly due to religious beliefs and the environment in which they live (Markus & Kitayama, 1994; Liu & Gao, 2017). Because of the extreme 'subjectivity' of the concept of happiness, which results in 'inconsistencies' in the definition of happiness between individuals, a test instrument constructed using the conceptual criteria of 'others' does not yield accurate and reliable answers.

3. Inconsistency of test results

The pioneer of behavioral psychology, John Broadus Watson, once stated that human mental processes are like a black box that we can never open (Lebow, 2012). Although psychological measurement has evolved, we still cannot measure a person's mental activity directly. Only his or her outward behavior is observable, i.e., we can only infer a person's psychological traits from his or her responses to test items or, more nebulously, through brain scans. The measurement of psychological phenomena has long been required to be 'objective' and 'accurate', similar to the medical measurement of blood pressure. However, these so-called 'objective' indications of happiness do not represent the subject's true happiness level during a happiness measurement. The results are often inconsistent across different orientations of happiness measurement. There is no definitive answer to the question of which indicators are representative of happiness. For example, there are inconsistencies between the results of the Implicit and Explicit Happiness Measurement, where implicit happiness refers to automatic or unconscious processing, interpretation and evaluation of one's own life, reflecting that part of positive or negative experiences and traces of past experiences that cannot be accurately obtained through self-introspection. But this does have a potential impact on individuals' judgments and assessments of their own lives (Jang & Kim, 2009). Implicit levels of happiness are often tested by relying on the Implicit Association Test (IAT) paradigm, requiring subjects to unconsciously link and evaluate aspects of their lives in terms of two types of attributes (negative or positive) (Kim, 2004). This type of test is most commonly known for testing implicit racism, but has also been applied to the study of happiness. The results of external measurements of happiness, as questionnaires are commonly understood, are often independent of the results of the implicit testing and, in some contexts, are even significantly different (Walker & Schimmack, 2008). One of the explanations for this inconsistency is that both the explicit and implicit results of the happiness measure are influenced by cultural differences (Jang & Kim, 2009). Cross-cultural differences in subjective well-being have been demonstrated in one study, where they found that Far East Asians scored lower on self-reported questionnaire measures of life satisfaction than white Americans. No significant differences in Implicit Life Satisfaction (ILS) emerged between the two races (Diener & Oishi, 2005). The inconsistency of implicit vs explicit measures proves that the current measurements of happiness do not reflect people's true level of happiness, as we cannot be sure which indicator is the real answer.

Not only that, but in recent years there have been studies that have used altruistic behavior as a new indicator of happiness measurement, and while more altruistic behavior has contributed to improved affective indicators of happiness, there has been no significant increase in life satisfaction for the majority of subjects. There are also a growing number of cases where artificial intelligence has been used to test the happiness of internet users, but very often the online performance does not match real life (Helliwell et al., 2023).

Furthermore, happiness measures are subject to several 'internal' confounding variables, which result in tests that may yield 'results' but do not reflect the subject's true happiness level. For example, inaccurate intuitive theories are particularly significant in happiness tests because culture and personal experiences lead people to form beliefs and use them to shape their feelings about events (Buehler & McFarland, 2001). Moreover, these beliefs are dynamic and unpredictable. It has been

shown that people are influenced by these beliefs to recall past emotions and that unpredictable beliefs can lead to recall bias (Levine et al., 2012). Our inability to understand each individual's experience means that we do not know which pieces of memory individuals will rely on as a basis for happiness measurements or which beliefs they have processed. In addition, the self-report method, on which happiness measurements are largely based, is highly susceptible to social desirability effects, whereby subjects may intentionally or unintentionally adjust their behavior or responses to better match social expectations and the subject's expectations (Reisinger, 2022). For example, stable marital relationships are often seen as a positive event in line with social expectations, with the results of one survey showing that the majority of couples in a survey of marital satisfaction reported high levels of marital satisfaction, yet half of these couples later divorced (Argyle, 2013). Therefore, respondents' answers on marital satisfaction may not accurately reflect their level of happiness.

At the same time, sense-making can also influence the results of happiness tests, as a surprising positive event triggers four sequential processes: attention, reaction, interpretation and adaptation (Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). When people are affected by events, their first emotional reaction is followed by a quick and unconscious explanation of why the event occurred to make sense of it. This sense-making process allows otherwise unexpected events to be perceived as normal and inevitable, thus reducing people's assessment of past events in the happiness measurement. This aptly explains the happiness treadmill effect and demonstrates that happiness cannot be measured. This is because the outcome is modified by 'internal processing' due to the rationalization process for both affect and satisfaction. The exact amount of 'rationalization' is related to personality traits, gender and other factors (Diener et al., 2002). For instance, the results of a study that included 9570 subjects showed that although people's life satisfaction declined significantly after the devastating experience of losing a job, it tended to recover over time but was moderated by the level of conscientiousness, with those with high levels of conscientiousness having lower life satisfaction than those with low levels (Boyce et al., 2010). In addition, a study with 536 female subjects showed that women's assessments of life satisfaction differed significantly from men's and were significantly correlated with their current emotional state (Willroth et al., 2020). Finally, the self-report questionnaire method requires subjects to have strong self-reflection skills and to be able to assess their situation more objectively. Therefore, the different levels of individual self-awareness and self-perception may introduce a large margin of error in the measurement results. According to Sigmund Freud's theory of the subconscious, many repressed past experiences are not readily available through introspection. At this point, direct external measures show their weaknesses and seriously reduce the reliability and validity of happiness measurements (Schneider & Schimmack, 2009).

4. Conclusion

Happiness is an old but new concept. Old because it has been studied since ancient times and new because it is constantly being reinterpreted. Although there is no definitive answer to the happiness test for now, there has been a lot of hard work and research. Considerable limitations of the current methods of happiness measurement have been discovered, and obstacles to scientific progress have been identified. If we address these 'limitations' and 'obstacles', we will one day be able to reveal the truth about happiness and promote the betterment of science for the benefit of all humanity. Of course, this study has many limitations; for example, it does not discuss the cognitive neuroscience perspective on happiness measuring, such as the study of happiness brain circuits using fMRI; it does not discuss the physiological psychology perspective on happiness testing, for instance, the association between the level of neurotransmitters and happiness at the concentration of different amounts of substances; it does not discuss the evolutionary psychology perspective, including but not limited to happiness measuring at the genetic level. Happiness measurements from a behavioral perspective have also not been discussed, for example, studies that have used the number of smiles as an indicator of happiness; and studies that have used multiple indicators as a result of happiness meterage, for example, the World Happiness Report, which has fixed a combination of six indicators

as a basis for statistical ranking of happiness. We hope that in the future, we will be able to produce more comprehensive researches that will benefit more people and create a better world.

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