

Research Report

MOST PEOPLE ARE HAPPY

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Abstract—Myers and Diener (1995) asked "Who is happy?" but examined the question of who is more and who is less happy. In fact, most people report a positive level of subjective well-being (SWB), and say that they are satisfied with domains such as marriage, work, and leisure. People in disadvantaged groups on average report positive well-being, and measurement methods in addition to self-report indicate that most people's affect is primarily pleasant. Cross-national data suggest that there is a positive level of SWB throughout the world, with the possible exception of very poor societies. In 86% of the 43 nations for which nationally representative samples are available, the mean SWB response was above neutral. Several hypotheses to explain the positive levels of SWB are discussed.

Many thinkers characterize life as a tragedy. Sophocles (1959) wrote, "Not to be born surpasses thought and speech. The second best is to have seen the light and then to go back quickly whence we came" (p. 134). Many behavioral scientists also believe that humans are predominantly dissatisfied and unhappy. Extensive evidence, however, suggests otherwise.

Subjective well-being (SWB), referred to colloquially as "happiness," is a person's evaluation of his or her life. This evaluation is both cognitive (e.g., life satisfaction judgments) and affective (pleasant and unpleasant emotional reactions). Most life satisfaction scales have a neutral point at which the person reports equal amounts of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Above this point, response alternatives are labeled with varying degrees of satisfaction, and below this point, the options indicate dissatisfaction. For moods and emotions, the neutral point refers to that place at which the individual experiences equal amounts of pleasant and unpleasant affect. A positive hedonic level refers to experiencing positive affect more of the time than negative affect.

EVIDENCE FOR POSITIVE SWB

In every U.S. national survey, most people have reported a positive level of SWB. For example, Gurin, Veroff, and Feld (1960) found that 89% of Americans placed themselves in the "very happy" or "pretty happy" groups; only 11% said they were "not too happy." Andrews and Withey (1976) conducted nationally representative surveys and found that about 84% of respondents scored above neutral, with only about 5% scoring below neutral. In 1988, Andrews (1991) found that all socioeconomic groups, and both whites and African Americans, scored well above the neutral point on life satisfaction. Table 1 shows the results of SWB surveys in the United States from 1946 to

1989 (Veenhoven, 1993). The data reveal a positive level of global SWB throughout this period. Surveys also show that respondents say they are satisfied with specific domains such as health, finances, and friendships (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976).

Table 1 also presents SWB responses of the French and Japanese. In those countries, too, there was not a single year when scores dropped below the midpoint of the scale. Figure 1 provides a global perspective, presenting the results of almost 1,000 representative surveys of SWB summarized by Veenhoven (1993). When there was more than one survey in a nation, we computed the mean. Only in two poor nations, India and the Dominican Republic, did the mean report fall below the neutral point of the SWB scale. Veenhoven's rating scale extends from 0 (*most unhappy*) to 10 (*most happy*). Most nations were above the neutral point, including less westernized nations such as Brazil, Egypt, Japan, South Korea, Mexico, and Thailand; 86% of the nations fell in the positive range! Yet most people are not elated most of the time—they are just mildly happy (Diener, Fujita, & Sandvik, 1994).

The majority of disadvantaged individuals also report positive levels of well-being. For example, Andrews and Withey (1976) found that people in the lowest income group reported positive SWB. Persons with disabilities ranging from quadriplegia to blindness also report positive well-being (e.g., Cameron, Titus, Kostin, & Kostin, 1973; Chwalisz, Diener, & Gallagher, 1988). Allman (1990) showed that the positive reports of SWB by individuals who use wheelchairs are supported by other measures of well-being such as the reports of friends and a recall measure (disabled subjects recalled more positive than negative events in their lives). Silver (1982) found that respondents with spinal cord injuries were very unhappy immediately following their trauma, but by the 3rd week after their accidents, happiness was the strongest emotion for 58% of the subjects. Hellmich (1995) reported that of individuals with extreme quadriplegia, 93% report being glad to be alive, and 84% consider their life is average or above average.

Mehnert, Krauss, Nadler, and Boyd (1990) found that, overall, 68% of a stratified sample of disabled adults were somewhat to very satisfied. In every age and education group, and even in the unmarried and lowest income group, more than 50% of the respondents reported being satisfied. Wacker, Harper, Powell, and Healy (1983) assessed individuals with severe, multiple handicaps. The majority were unemployed, unmarried, and relatively uneducated. Nevertheless, 96% were satisfied with their living arrangements, 82% with their social lives, and 76% with their education. People with chronic mental problems also report positive levels of well-being on average (e.g., Delespaul & deVries, 1987). Jackson, Chatters, and Neighbors (1986) presented levels of well-being of African Americans from 1957 to 1980. Roughly 75% to 85% said they were at least "pretty happy," and approximately 80% to 90% reported that they were at least "somewhat satisfied."

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Subjective Well-Being

Table 1. Time trends in subjective well-being

Year	United States	Japan	France
1946	7.4	—	5.5
1947	7.4	—	—
1948	7.3	—	5.9
1952	7.6	—	—
1956	7.8	—	—
1957	7.9	—	—
1958	—	5.7	—
1959	—	6.0	—
1960	—	5.9	—
1961	—	5.9	—
1962	—	5.9	—
1963	7.7	6.1	—
1964	7.4	5.9	—
1965	7.0	5.8	6.3
1966	7.5	5.8	—
1967	—	5.9	—
1968	—	6.0	—
1969	—	5.9	—
1970	7.5	6.0	—
1971	7.2	5.7	—
1972	7.0	5.8	—
1973	7.0	5.9	6.2
1974	7.2	5.4	—
1975	7.4	5.7	6.3
1976	7.3	5.8	6.2
1977	—	6.0	6.5
1978	7.3	6.0	6.2
1979	—	6.1	6.6
1980	7.2	5.9	5.8
1981	—	5.9	5.9
1982	7.2	6.0	6.4
1983	7.2	6.0	6.3
1984	7.3	6.0	6.3
1985	7.2	6.2	6.4
1986	7.2	—	6.4
1987	7.2	5.9	5.7
1988	7.4	—	5.5
1989	7.3	—	6.2
1990	—	—	6.0
1991	—	—	6.0
1992	—	—	6.0

METHODOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS

Most surveys ask people on one occasion to report orally how happy or satisfied they are, often on a single-item scale. Might this measurement situation be biased toward positive responding? (For a more complete discussion of problems in measuring SWB, see Diener, 1994.) SWB scales show good levels of validity (e.g., Andrews & Withey, 1976; Diener, 1984) and correlate highly with non-self-report measures of SWB (Sandvik, Diener, & Seidlitz, 1993). Nevertheless, Kahneman, Fredrick-

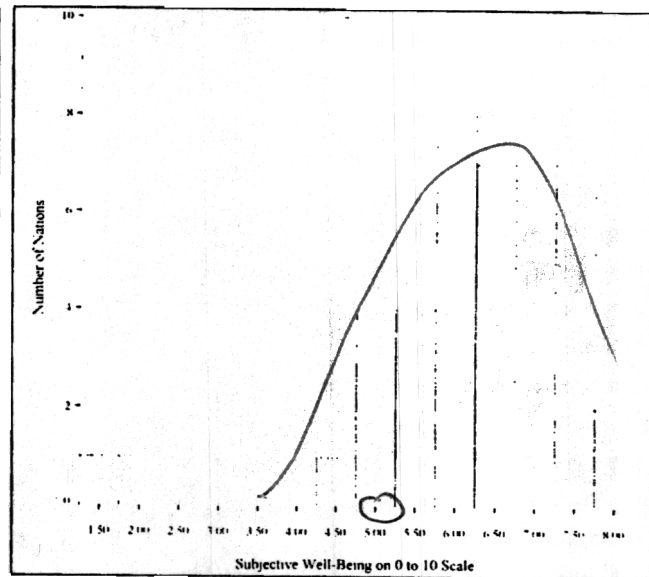


Fig. 1. Distribution of mean subjective well-being responses for 43 nations. The mean of the nations' means is 6.33 on a scale from 0 (*most unhappy*) to 10 (*most happy*).

son, Schreiber, and Redelmeier (1993) showed that global reports may not accurately reflect on-line experience, and Schwarz and Strack (1991) found that global reports are influenced by situational factors. Thus, it is important to review evidence that other methods of measurement also produce positive estimates of SWB.

There are several methods of measuring SWB that do not rely on global self-reports of well-being. These methods indicate that the high rates of positive well-being found with one-time self-report measures are not due to measurement artifacts. Table 2 presents data collected in our laboratory from five samples. In addition to collecting self-report data, we collected data from target respondents' family members and friends, who completed the scales as they thought the target respondents would. The studies also included an experience-sampling measure on which subjects reported their moods each day over a period of many weeks. Finally, in the memory balance measure, participants were asked to recall as many positive events and negative events from their lives as they could in separate timed periods (Seidlitz & Diener, 1993).

Table 2 shows the percentages of respondents who scored above the neutral point on each measure. As can be seen, most respondents in all samples and on all measures scored in the positive range. On the daily experience-sampling measure, the numbers shown are the percentages of individuals who reported more positive than negative affect on more than half of the days sampled. Experience sampling may be the best measure of long-term affect, and on this measure a very small number of respondents were unhappy. The memory balance figures refer to the percentage of individuals in each sample who could remember more positive than negative life events, and indicate that most people remembered more good than bad events in their lives. The data in Table 2 lead to the conclusion that whatever short-

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Table 2. Percentage of participants with positive subjective well-being in multimethod studies

Measure ^a	Student samples		Other samples		
	1986 (N = 130)	1991-1992 (N = 222)	Disabled (N = 58)	Elderly (N = 39)	Mixed adults (N = 109)
<i>One-time self-report</i>					
Delighted-Terrible (Above 4)	74	64	79	—	59
Satisfaction With Life Scale (Above 20)	78	63	72	64	65
Fordyce (Above 5)	93	87	93	85	—
Mood Adjectives (Above 0)	90	97	—	97	94
<i>Family members and friends</i>					
Satisfaction With Life Scale (Above 20)	85	84	66	67	—
Fordyce (Above 5)	98	97	93	87	—
Mood Adjectives (Above 0)	—	98	—	—	94
<i>Daily experience sampling</i> (More than 50% positive days)	92	98	95	78	—
<i>Memory balance</i> (Remembered more positive than negative days)	71	79	72	74	63

^aDelighted-Terrible (Andrews & Withey, 1976) is a 7-point scale, with a neutral midpoint of 4. The Satisfaction With Life Scale (Pavot & Diener, 1993) is a 5-item scale answered on a 1-to-7 format. Scores range from 5 to 35, with a neutral point of 20. The Fordyce score is from the Fordyce (1988) 60-s scale of happiness. Its neutral midpoint is 5. The Mood Adjectives score indicates intensity of response to mood adjectives; the table presents the percentages of people who showed on average more intense reports to positive mood words (e.g., *joyful*) than negative mood words (e.g., *sadness*).

comings self-reports may possess, they do not seem to lead to excessively high estimates of happiness compared with other methods.

In the experience-sampling method, participants are signaled at random moments during the day and are asked to record their mood. In two other studies (Thomas & Diener, 1990), college students who were "beeped" reported more positive affect than negative affect on about 80% of occasions. Similarly, Williams, Suls, Alliger, Learner, and Choi (1991) found that working mothers who were signaled at random times reported very high levels of positive affect and low levels of negative affect. Larson (1989) used the beeper methodology with American children; they reported predominantly positive affect about 52% of the time, neutral or mixed affect on about 29% of the occasions, and dominant negative affect 19% of the time.

Brandstatter (1991) drew his respondents in Europe from unemployed persons, soldiers, students, married couples, and members of charity organizations. Participants recorded a self-selected word that described their current mood when they were signaled. Joy and relaxation were reported 43% of the time, and sadness, anger, and fear were reported 22% of the time. On average, respondents reported positive emotions 68% of the time.

Diener, Larsen, and Emmons (1984) examined subjects' levels of mood in different situations. The moods ranged from slightly positive, when respondents were alone, to extremely positive, when participants were in social, recreational situations. Finally, Delespaul and deVries (1987) studied chronic mental patients living in the community and found that the average mood at the time these patients were signaled was above the neutral point of the scale. Thus, on-line experience-

sampling studies as well as other methods suggest levels of SWB that are as high as those obtained by global self-reports.

COGNITIVE EVIDENCE

Cognitions tend to be positive. Matlin and Stang (1978) reviewed a myriad of positive cognitive tendencies: People think positive thoughts more often than negative thoughts and are more likely to recall positive than negative material. People can use downward comparison (Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987) to boost their positive affect. There is strong evidence that most people believe they are better than average on most dimensions (e.g., Headey & Wearing, 1988; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Seidlitz (1993) found that most people can recall positive events from their lives more quickly than negative events. Optimistic cognitions can lead to increased SWB, and the average person appears to be prone to optimism (Tiger, 1979). Because cognition and emotion are so intimately intertwined, the strong evidence for a positive predilection in cognition supports the finding that most people experience predominantly positive affect.

ESTIMATES OF SWB

In order to determine whether the high well-being reported by most people is intuitively obvious, we surveyed several groups: working adults, undergraduate psychology majors, and clinical psychology graduate students. They estimated the rates of depression and life satisfaction in the United States and answered other questions related to SWB. The percentages in Tables 3 and 4 reveal that all groups underestimated levels of

Subjective Well-Being

Table 3. Means of percentage estimates of subjective well-being

Question	Respondent group			Correct response
	Working adults (N = 29)	Psychology majors (N = 44)	Clinical graduate students (N = 15)	
What percentage of Americans become clinically depressed in their lifetime?	49	50	24	8-18
What percentage of Americans report positive life satisfaction (above neutral)?	56	61	48	82-84
What percentage of chronic nonhospitalized mental patients report a positive hedonic balance (more positive affect than negative affect)?	33	34	24	57

life satisfaction and overestimated levels of depression. The unhappiness of unemployed men and chronic mental patient was overestimated. Thus, the high levels of well-being reported in this article are not widely recognized by laypersons or by students of psychology.

Indeed, it is so amazing to some people that quadriplegics and other people with severe disabilities could be happy that their self-reports are sometimes dismissed as unbelievable. It should be noted, however, that individuals who use wheelchairs are believed to be happy by their friends and family, can recall more good than bad events in their lives, are rated as happy by an interviewer, and report more positive than negative emotions in daily experience-sampling measures (Allman, 1990). Our personal experience as acquaintances of people with severe handicaps also indicates that they do indeed often find positive meaning and pleasures in life.

THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS

One hypothesis is that there is a positive baseline for affect in humans. Headey and Wearing (1992) proposed a theory in which people move back toward a personal base level of affect after positive or negative events move them away from this baseline. Although the set point varies depending on a person's

temperament and socialization, for most people it appears to be in the positive range. We speculate that the set point for affect may be positive rather than neutral or negative for several reasons. First, a positive set point gives negative events maximum informational value because they stand out as figure against a positive background (Schwartz & Garamoni, 1986). A system that is preset to be slightly positive allows threatening events to be noticed quickly.

Second, it is important for motivational reasons that people not be in a negative mood most of the time. Approach tendencies must prevail in behavior for people to obtain food, shelter, social support, sex, and so forth. Because positive moods energize approach tendencies, it is desirable that people on average be in a positive mood. Human approach tendencies are manifest in the rapid exploration and settlement of new frontiers and in the unremitting invention of new ideas and institutions throughout human history. Thus, not only might humans' large brains and opposable thumbs be responsible for the rapid spread of humanity across the globe, but positive emotions might also be an important factor. Finally, a positive set point may motivate human sociability, drive-free exploration, and creativity, and produce a strong immune response to infections.

Other explanations for the widespread levels of positive affect exist. For example, people in the West may be socialized to be happy. Another explanation for the predominance of positive affect is that people are motivated to attain positive states

Table 4. Percentage of respondents who estimated incorrectly that predominantly happy groups are mostly unhappy

Target group	Respondent group		
	Working adults (N = 29)	Psychology majors (N = 44)	Clinical graduate students (N = 15)
Poor African Americans	83	79	93
Severely, multiply handicapped people	24	29	43
Unemployed men	100	95	100
Elderly people	38	50	43

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because they are pleasant, and are motivated to avoid or reduce unpleasant states. Thus, people may be likely to use coping strategies to remain in a positive state.

DISCUSSION

More research attention should be given to understanding why there is a preponderance of positive affect. For example, if most people maintain a positive level of satisfaction by adjusting their goals to be only slightly above reality, then perhaps people who suffer from severe melancholia are for some reason unable to adjust their aims. The design of interventions to help people with predominantly unpleasant emotions might profit from understanding what allows most people to be happy. If naturally occurring processes give most people the ability to remain happy and to return to happiness after a bad event, the understanding of such mechanisms can perhaps aid in the design of interventions to help people who remain unhappy. It may be, however, that permanently raising SWB above a person's set point is quite difficult.

Most people express positive satisfaction with their work, with products and services they receive, with their marriage, and so forth. This base level of satisfaction must be considered when evaluating satisfaction data. Just because people report positive levels of satisfaction with their work or with a consumer product, for example, does not mean inevitably that the work or product is highly desirable. Reports of positive satisfaction may say as much about people as about the target of satisfaction.

We do not mean to understate the amount of subjective ill-being. If only 10% of the population of the United States is unhappy and dissatisfied, there are 25 million unhappy individuals in our country. Nevertheless, it appears that most people are resilient in that they can recover from adversity. It should be a goal of psychology to understand such resilience. Although Myers and Diener (1995) explored the origins of differences in SWB, it is noteworthy that in absolute terms most individuals are above neutral.

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