

Lay beliefs and projections of trait happiness

Mutluluğa ilişkin halk inançları ve öngörülleri

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Abstract

To achieve high levels of Subjective Well Being, it is argued that one must experience frequent positive affect, low levels of negative affect, and high satisfaction with life. However, researchers have not investigated whether the lay theories of happiness also include these dimensions. Using a 2 (negative, positive affectivity) x 2 (low, high life satisfaction) factorial design, this experiment explored whether 256 university students believed that positive affect and high satisfaction with life were necessary precursors for happiness. Additionally, the study explored whether participant's own trait affectivity, life satisfaction, and happiness projected onto their social judgments of a hypothetical other's happiness. Overall, participants believed that both positive affect and life satisfaction are necessary for high levels of happiness, and that these two factors provided an additive effect in their social judgments. Correlational analyses demonstrated that, contrary to past findings, there were no significant associations between one's judgments of another's happiness, and their own affectivity, life satisfaction, or happiness. Altogether, our study suggests that when given sufficient information, participants are capable of formulating multidimensional judgments of happiness that are not influenced by their own trait happiness.

Keywords: Lay beliefs, projections, social judgments

Özet

Bir kişinin yüksek düzeyde öznel iyi oluşa ulaşabilmesi için sık sık olumlu duygu deneyimlemesi, düşük düzeyde olumsuz duyguya sahip olması ve yüksek düzeyde yaşam doyumuna sahip olmasının gerekli olduğu ileri sürülmektedir. Ancak araştırmacılar mutluluğa ilişkin halktan insanların fikirlerinin de bu boyutları içerip içermediğini araştırmamışlardır. Bu çalışmada, 2 (olumsuz ve olumlu duygusallık) x 2 (düşük düzeyde ve yüksek düzeyde yaşam doyumunu) faktörlü bir desen kullanımıyla 256 üniversite öğrencisinin, olumlu duygu ve yüksek yaşam doyumunun mutluluk için gerekli öncüller olduğuna inanıp inanmadıkları incelenmiştir. Bu çalışmada aynı zamanda katılımcıların kendi duygulanım özelliklerinin, yaşam doyumlarının ve mutluluklarının başkalarının mutluluğuna ilişkin sosyal kanılarına yansıyor yansımadağı da araştırılmıştır. Katılımcılar genel olarak hem olumlu duygunun hem de yaşam doyumunun yüksek düzeyde mutluluk için gerekli olduğuna ve bu iki faktörün toplumsal kanıları üzerinde artırıcı bir etkiye sahip olduğuna inanmaktadır. Yapılan korelasyon analizleri, geçmişteki bulguların aksine, kişinin kendi duygulanımı, yaşam doyumunu ya da mutluluğu ile başkalarının mutluluğuna dair kanıları arasında anlamlı bir ilişkinin söz konusu olmadığını göstermiştir. Çalışmamız, katılımcıların, kendilerine yeterli bilgi sağlandığında, kendi mutluluk özelliklerinden etkilenmeden çok boyutlu mutluluk kanıları oluşturabildiklerini göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Halk inançları, öngörülleri, sosyal yargılar

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Introduction

Happiness is a construct that has been contemplated since ancient times and has experienced booming scientific interest over the past 50 years. Over this time, researchers have debunked myths about happiness (Diener, 2008; Lucas, Dyrenforth & Diener, 2008; Lyubormirsky, 2013), created effective positive psychological interventions (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009), and collected immense amounts of data on societal happiness (Veenhoven, 2002).

The construct of Subjective Well-Being (SWB) has emerged as a modern reconceptualization of the much-debated term “happiness,” and although other conceptualizations of happiness exist, it has historically enjoyed the most popularity. The conceptualization includes three major components- life satisfaction, positive affect and negative affect (Diener, 2000), and allows for the idea that a large component of personal happiness is subjective.

In order to achieve a high level of SWB, it is believed that one must experience frequent positive affect, low levels of negative affect, and possess high satisfaction with life (Myers & Diener, 1995). However, there are often misalignments between what the scientific and non-scientific communities believe about a topic. While happiness researchers may be aware that these are necessary ingredients for high levels of happiness, no work has yet investigated whether the general population shares the same understanding. This study addresses whether there is an alignment between this scientific theory and student populations’ lay theories. These lay theories, in general, have been argued to be important by Molden and Dweck (2006), who suggest that they influence how people derive meaning, self-regulate, and perceive their social worlds.

Previous investigations have demonstrated mixed results regarding the alignment of lay and scientific theories of happiness (Scollon & King, 2011). For instance, utilizing the Causes of Happiness Questionnaire, Furham and Cheng (2000) uncovered four categories that lay people believed were important causes of happiness: Social Support & Esteem, Optimism & Contentment, Achievement & Freedom in Life and Work, and Mental Strength & Personality. These categories, they argue, are largely consistent with the factors deemed significant by empirical research. Additionally, utilizing an experimental vignette paradigm that manipulated job satisfaction, meaning, and pay, King and Napa (1998) reported that participants believed that pay was not an important components of the “good life”; a folk conceptualization of happiness that is convergent with the scientific literature (Diener, Horwitz & Emmons, 1985; Diener et al., 1993.) However, in a recent cross-cultural, mixed-mode investigation, Dell Fave et al. (2011) reported that happiness was often defined as a condition of psychological balance and harmony, a construct that is rarely discussed in happiness research. This suggested a misalignment between lay and scientific conceptualizations. The research on lay beliefs of happiness has yielded mixed results, which suggests that there is a need for more research.

Lay beliefs often are studied through quantitative survey methods (for examples, see Angermeyer & Matschinger, 1999; Furnham & Wardley, 1990; Walker, Lester & Joe, 2006), even though qualitative approaches also have been utilized (Koenigsmann et al., 2006; Lu & Gilmour, 2004). However, lay beliefs are less often studied experimentally. The present study examines lay beliefs of happiness by utilizing an experimental vignette paradigm similar to the one utilized in King and Napa (1998). More specifically, this study sought to test whether participants’ lay theories are multi-dimensional like Myers and Diener’s (1995) conceptualization of happiness. To this end, participants rated the happiness of a fictitious character whose reported affectivity and life satisfaction were experimentally manipulated. While our experimental approach does not supplant the role of survey or qualitative methods, it does offer an interesting perspective of lay beliefs by testing them experimentally.

Additionally, we were interested in exploring whether participants' own affectivity, life satisfaction, and reported happiness would affect their judgments of the character's happiness. While there is convincing evidence that temporary affective states can be projected onto and influence judgment processes (Forgas, 1994; Blanchette & Richards, 2010), there is less research on whether *trait* happiness, life satisfaction, and affectivity have similar effects. Goldings (1954) provided preliminary evidence that one's trait happiness can project onto his or her social judgment. Consistent with these findings, we hypothesized that there would be a positive relationship between one's own happiness and one's judgments of another's happiness.

Method

This study manipulated the affective and life-satisfaction components of SWB in a vignette experimental paradigm (see King & Napa, 1998 for a similar methodology.) To examine the importance of each factor in lay peoples' conceptualization of happiness, participants were asked to read a short story about a fictitious character, Casey, and rate how happy they believed the character was. Utilizing a 2 (positive/negative character affectivity) x2 (high/low character life satisfaction) factorial design, participants were assigned to one out of four scenarios where this character's reported emotionality and life satisfaction were manipulated. In order to test whether participants' own traits would project onto their judgments of Casey, we additionally collected data on participants' own affectivity, life satisfaction, and self-reported happiness.

Participants

Two hundred and eighty (140 male, 140 female, mean age = 21.10, $SD = 0.27$) undergraduates from a large southeastern university participated in an online study in exchange for partial course credit. Thirty participants were excluded from analysis for either providing incomplete data, failing an experimental manipulation check, or providing significantly outlying data. The resulting participant pool consisted of two hundred and fifty six participants (123 male, 127 female, mean age = 21.12, $SD = 4.76$) consisting of 7.6% Asian or Pacific Islander, 14.1% Black/African American, 2.6% Native American, 0.4% Asian Indian, 52% Caucasian/White, 16.4% Latino/Hispanic, and 3.1% Puerto Rican. Six percent of participants reported "Other" for their ethnicity.

Procedure

After agreeing to take part in the study, participants were asked to read a short story (Figure 1) about a fictitious character, Casey, and rate how happy they believed the character was on an 11 point scale (0 being the minimum and 10 being the maximum score). Utilizing a 2 (positive/negative character affectivity) x2 (high/low character life satisfaction) factorial design, 70 participants were randomly assigned to each condition where the character's emotionality and life satisfaction were manipulated. The first condition portrayed Casey as an emotionally unhappy/ low life satisfaction character. The second condition portrayed Casey as an emotionally unhappy/ high life satisfaction character. The third condition portrayed Casey as an emotionally happy/ high life satisfaction, and the fourth portrayed him as an emotionally happy/ low life satisfaction character. Altogether, each condition provided six examples of Casey's emotionality and one statement regarding his life satisfaction.

Afterward, participants were administered the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larson & Griffin, 1985), the general Positive and Negative Affective Schedule (Watson, Clark & Tellegan, 1988), and a single item, 11-point, overall happiness rating².

Results

Data Cleansing

Participants who provided incomplete data, failed the manipulation checks, or were significant outliers were excluded from the analyses. The experiment included two manipulation checks to verify that participants were paying attention to the experiment. The first check came after participants rated Casey's happiness, and asked them to correctly identify the scenario's character from a list of six names. The second manipulation check was added to the Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule questionnaire and asked participants to bubble a specified answer. Participants who failed either manipulation check were excluded from subsequent analyses. To determine outliers, a box-plot distribution exploration was performed within each condition, flagging six significant outliers that were over 2.5 standard deviations above the mean. Altogether, 30 participant's data were removed prior to the analyses.

Conditions 1 (n=63) and 2(n=62)
<p>Casey seems to not be a morning person, and is generally grumpy in the mornings. By the time he arrives to school, it is clear that this grumpiness has developed into a rather irate mood. This mood normally lasts most of the day. Some professors confess that they've never actually seen Casey smile. After classes, Casey is still generally frustrated or upset and often comes off as rude to strangers.</p> <p>At night Casey often lies in bed and contemplates life. Casey considers a lot of aspects of his life and normally concludes that he is (1) very unsatisfied/ (2) satisfied with his life.</p>
Conditions 3 (n=62) and 4 (n=63)
<p>Casey wakes up every morning with a smile on his face. Casey enjoys every aspect of his morning routine and is generally in an elated mood by the time he gets to class. Casey's positive attitude persists for most of the day. Professors often admit that Casey seems to always be smiling. After classes, Casey is in a generally good mood and seems very friendly.</p> <p>At night Casey often lies in bed and contemplates life. After considering various aspects of life, Casey normally concludes that they he is (3) very unsatisfied/ (4) satisfied with his life.</p>

Figure 1. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the four conditions where the vignette characters' affectivity and life satisfaction were manipulation. Afterwards, they were asked to rate Casey's happiness on an 11-point scale.

² Even though many SWB measures contain multiple questions, single-item measures have been used in the past (Bradburn, 1969; Cantril, 1965; Gurin, Veroff, & Feld, 1960). This particular 11-point single-item scale is argued to be both reliable and valid (Abdel-Khalek, 2006). Additionally, for comparative analyses, it was desirable to have participants answer the same overall happiness scale that they rated Casey on.

Examination of Happiness Attributions

A 2 (Character Emotionality: Negative or Positive) x 2 (Character Life Satisfaction: High or Low) between-subjects ANOVA was calculated on participants' ratings of the character's happiness. Results suggested that the character's manipulated emotionality ($F(1, 246) = 254.26, p < .001$) and life satisfaction ($F(1, 246) = 271.56, p < .001$) each had a significant main effect on participants' ratings of the character's happiness. Results also indicated that a significant interaction between these two variables existed ($F(1, 246) = 19.84, p < .001$), suggesting that the elimination of negative affect and introduction of positive affect significantly increases the effect that character's reported high life satisfaction has on participants' judgments of happiness. These effects are shown in Figure 2. Post-hoc LSD tests showed that the negative emotionality/ low life satisfaction character ($M = 1.19, SD = 1.23$) was rated significantly less happy than all other conditions ($p < .001$). In addition, participants' ratings of the emotionally happy/ high life satisfaction character ($M = 8.98, SD = 1.09$) were significantly higher than for all other conditions ($p < .001$). The emotionally unhappy/ high life satisfaction ($M = 4.08, SD = 2.78$) and emotionally happy/ low life satisfaction ($M = 3.95, SD = 2.01$) characters were in-between and did not significantly differ from one another ($p = .99$).

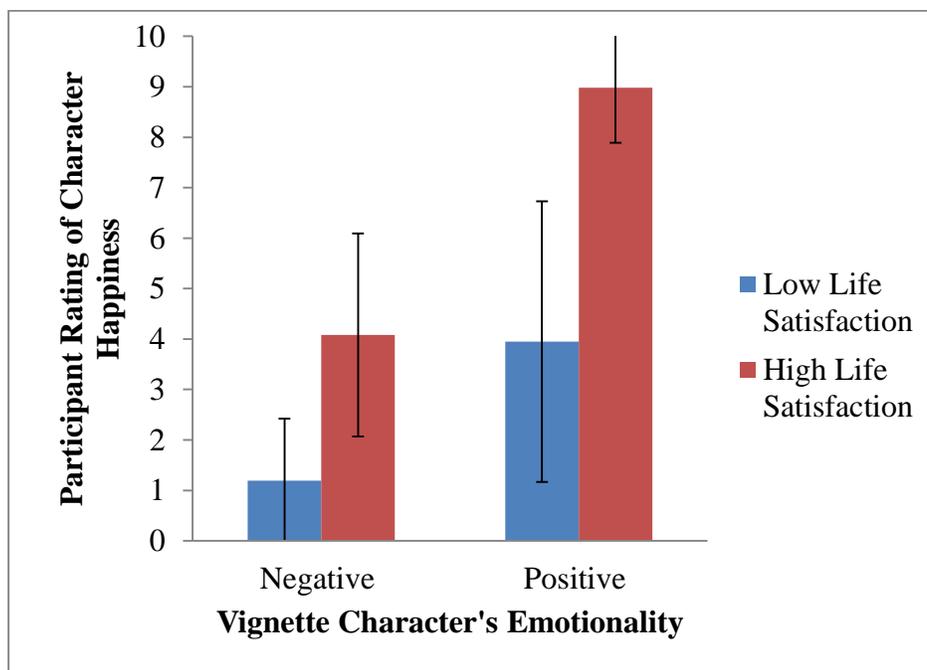


Figure 2. Results from a two-way between-subjects ANOVA containing the character's Affectivity (negative, positive) and Satisfaction With Life (low, high) as independent variables, and participants' ratings of the character's happiness rating as the dependent variable. Results indicated two significant main effects and a significant interaction.

Tests of Projection

A significant correlation between participants' trait happiness and their ratings of other's happiness was reported in Goldings' (1954) original study. In our study, to determine whether participants' own trait affectivity, life satisfaction, and happiness were projected into their judgments, we performed several correlation analyses between participant ratings of the character's happiness and the following variables: participant positive affect, negative affect, satisfaction with life, and self-reported happiness. Despite the fact that we ran a large number of analyses, we discovered no significant associations between these variables (see Table 1.) While a regression analysis could have theoretically been appropriate, we could not create a valid model due to the high collinearity between many of the predictor variables.

Table 1: *Pearson correlations between participant ratings of a vignette character's happiness, and participants' positive affect, negative affect, life satisfaction, overall happiness, and age.*

Variables	Correlations					
	Vignette Happiness Rating	Positive Affect	Negative Affect	Life Satisfaction	Overall Happiness	Age
Vignette Happiness Rating	–	-.049	.022	-.061	-.048	-.032
Positive Affect	-.049	–	-.288**	.428**	.575**	-.001
Negative Affect	.022	-.288**	–	-.431**	-.556**	.001
Life Satisfaction	-.061	.428**	-.431**	–	.724**	-.076
Overall Happiness	-.048	.575**	-.556**	.724**	–	-.048
Age	-.032	-.001	.001	-.076	-.048	–

** $p < .01$ (2-tailed)

Gender, Ethnic, Age, and Condition Differences

Additional analyses were performed to determine whether any significant gender, ethnic, or age differences in the ratings of Casey's happiness existed. An independent samples t-test suggested that no significant gender differences in ratings of Casey's happiness existed ($t(248) = .12, n.s.$). In addition, results from a one way ANOVA suggested that no ethnic differences existed ($F(7,242) = 1.08, p = .38$). Finally, results from a correlation analysis suggested that no significant correlation existed between age and participant ratings of Casey (see Table 1.)

In addition, to ensure that our results were not skewed by significant differences between the four experimental conditions, a series of one way ANOVAs comparing participant life satisfaction, positive affect, negative affect, and self-reported happiness were conducted. Results indicated that no significant differences existed ($p = .24, .45, .48, .29$ respectively).

Discussion

Myers and Diener (1995) suggest that in order to achieve a high level of SWB one must experience frequent positive affect, low levels of negative affect, and possess high satisfaction with life. Based on participants' average ratings of a character manipulated on these levels, our findings suggest that the lay beliefs are consistent with this notion.

In addition, our results suggest that there is additive effect between character affectivity and life satisfaction, suggesting that participants were taking both into consideration when making their judgment of the character's happiness. This indicates that, in alignment with our scientific beliefs, participants are capable of making multidimensional judgments of happiness based on several relevant factors. Additionally, our study uncovered a significant interaction between the vignette character's manipulated affectivity and life satisfaction. This interaction indicates that the elimination of negative affectivity and introduction of positive affectivity significantly increases the perceived value of life satisfaction in social judgments of happiness. This may suggest a lay belief that there is a qualitative difference between the life satisfactions of a negative, as opposed to, a positive person.

Our study also explored whether participants' own self-reported happiness, life satisfaction, and affectivity would project onto their judgments of the fictional character. Contrary to our initial hypothesis, correlational analyses yielded no significant relationship between one's own happiness ratings and their rating of another's happiness, suggesting that participants are not projecting their own characteristics onto their social judgments. This is a stark contrast to Goldings' (1954) findings. We believe that this difference may arise from the difference in the experimental paradigms. In Goldings' design, participants were asked to make this trait judgment solely based on visual inspection of the target's face. In our experimental paradigm, on the other hand, the vignette narrative provided participants with written insight into the character's private thoughts regarding their own life satisfaction as well as information regarding the character's emotional life (see Figure 1.) We conclude that the misalignment between our results is likely the result of the amount of judgment-relevant information provided, suggesting that when participants are provided with sufficient information about their social target, they are less likely to project their own trait happiness onto their judgment. In essence, projection of one's own internal states is used in ambiguous situations. However, when enough information is provided, humans can maintain multiple complex representations of happiness.

An alternative explanation for our results may be that they arose from the differences between the sample populations utilized in the two studies. Goldings' original study was conducted roughly 60 years ago and utilized 20 Harvard sophomore and junior students. While no description of the population was given, it is likely that these participants were predominately white males of high SES. Our study, on the other hand, sampled 256 participants who were presumably more diverse in gender, ethnicity, SES, and age. In addition to a more diverse sample, these two studies were conducted at drastically different time periods. It is possible that in our largely technologically interconnected world, people are more likely to encounter and engage with unfamiliar people. This would suggest that our modern participants may have more experience interacting with and judging unfamiliar people based only on written information.

Our findings provide another example of lay and scientific happiness theory alignment. In addition, our results suggest that, when given sufficient information, participants display the ability to perform multidimensional judgments. Future studies should continue to investigate lay beliefs about happiness in order to determine where misalignments exist. When misalignments are discovered, it will be important to discuss whether the resulting misalignment is a lay "myth" of happiness or a theoretical shortcoming in our conceptualization of happiness. Future investigations of lay theories of

happiness should continue to facilitate our understanding of how the lay-person understands, judges, and pursues happiness.

As with most research, our study does possess some limitations. For instance, before rating the character's happiness, participants read six statements regarding the character's affectivity before reading one statement regarding their satisfaction with life. Due to the fact that life satisfaction was presented last, participants may have been primed to put more weight on this factor. Alternatively, the fact that participants encountered more examples of affectivity than life satisfaction could have afforded them to place more weight on this factor. The potential frequency and order effects remain in our paradigm remain largely unexplored, and may warrant interesting follow ups.

Given that the participants in this study were undergraduates in the United States, these findings may not be generalizable to all of society, as significant age and cultural differences in lay beliefs about happiness have been reported (Chiasson, Dube & Blondin, 1996; Lu, 2001; Ryff, 1989; Westerhof et al., 2001). That being said, our study found no significant correlation between ethnicity ratings of the vignette character's happiness and age or ethnicity.

Overall, our study provides evidence that lay theories of happiness, like their scientific counterparts, make use of multiple cues of SWB. Specifically, frequent positive affect, low levels of negative affect and a high satisfaction with life are necessary precursors for high levels of happiness. The data also suggest that lay theories contain a belief that there is qualitative difference between the life satisfactions of a negative, as opposed to, a positive person. Additionally, our study provides evidence that when participants are provided with sufficient information about the social target, they are less likely to project their own characteristics onto their judgment.

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