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The meaning and nature of happiness

Znaczenie i natura szczęścia

ABSTRACT

Independently on the origin and background, chances are happiness is on the person's list of priorities. Happiness has been said to reflect the ultimate purpose of human existence for which efforts and energy are directed. People strive toward a happy and meaningful life but reaching the state does not follow one exact path. A widely sought-after universal receipt for happiness remains undiscovered. As many people so many ways to pursue happiness. This is because while happiness is clearly perceived when experienced, it is difficult to examine and evaluate. Centuries of ongoing interest supported by research conducted in different scientific disciplines still bring new findings and open the door to further research work.

In this paper, we present theoretical foundations of happiness and provide a range of perspectives that delineate the understanding of happiness. We present main characteristics and key determinants that manifest in happiness studies, and discuss challenges of embracing and measuring happiness in the modern world.

Keywords: happiness, well-being, life-satisfaction, set point, hedonic adaptation, assessment.

INTRODUCTION

Much has been said and written about happiness. The concept and meaning of happiness have long aroused the interest of various circles. Happiness have been approached in the writings of Zhuangzi, Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Maslow. References to happiness can be easily found in literature and culture. With the ongoing question of whether there is a universal formula for happiness that suits all, the importance

STRESZCZENIE

Niezależnie od jego pochodzenia i korzeni, jest duże prawdopodobieństwo, że szczęście znajduje się na liście priorytetów człowieka. Mówi się, że szczęście odzwierciedla ostateczny cel ludzkiej egzystencji, na który ukierunkowane są wysiłki i energia. Ludzie dążą do szczęśliwego i sensownego życia, ale osiągnięcie tego stanu nie przebiega dokładnie tym samym sposobem. Powszechnie poszukiwany uniwersalny sposób na szczęście pozostaje wciąż nieodkryty. Jak wielu ludzi, tak wiele dróg do szczęścia. Dzieje się tak, ponieważ chociaż szczęście jest wyraźnie odczuwane, trudno jest je zbadać i ocenić. Stulecia nieprzerwanego zainteresowania, wsparte badaniami prowadzonymi w różnych dyscyplinach naukowych, wciąż przynoszą nowe odkrycia i otwierają drzwi do dalszych prac badawczych.

W niniejszym artykule przedstawione są teoretyczne podstawy pojęcia szczęścia i nakreślonych jest szereg perspektyw, które determinują rozumienie szczęścia. Zaprezentowane są główne cechy i istotne uwarunkowania, które przejawiają się w badaniach nad szczęściem oraz omówione są wyzwania związane z doświadczeniem i mierzaniem szczęścia we współczesnym świecie.

Słowa kluczowe: szczęście, dobre samopoczucie, satysfakcja z życia, punkt odniesienia, hedoniczna adaptacja, ocena.

of scientific study of happiness has been recognized resulting in emerging areas and methods, as well as in integrating happiness theory into different fields. Recently, happiness has been introduced as a teaching discipline and adopted in curricula of schools and universities.

A search in the Scopus database (as for July 22, 2020) reveals 143 694 published documents, mostly in social sci-

ences and psychology. Among these, 102 674 are journal articles, whose authors are primarily affiliated to University of Michigan – Ann Arbor, University of Toronto, UCL and University of Oxford, with works mainly concerning United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and Germany. Temporal analysis indicates a steady increase in scientific writing. There were 3561 journal papers published in 2010, 7012 in 2015, 9976 in 2018, 12 939 in 2019, and as for 2020 there have already been other 8392 papers on happiness published. The evident attention of scientific community is accompanied by a huge wave of social media attention, and available training and coaching.

Regardless of this continuous interest, there seems to be no consensus on what happiness is as different approaches offered by different schools of thought provide a range of interpretations. Moreover, people make their decisions driven by the quest for happiness, but they tend to be surprisingly mistaken about how the choices they make truly affect their life and happiness.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF HAPPINESS

People say they want to be happy. No one consciously chooses unhappiness. Happiness is said to be the purpose and final end of human existence. Aristotle argues that there are obviously more than one, if not several ends, and not all of them are final. There is an end for everything we do. To be a final end, an undertaking has to be ultimate, achievable and self-sufficient. If there are more than one final ends, the ‘most final’ of them will be the one worth to pursue for the sake of itself and desirable in itself. While some things in life are pursued for the sake of something else, happiness is something so complete and self-sufficient, that we choose it for its own sake. This search occurs at both, conscious and unconscious levels. When acting in a conscious state, all decisions and actions aim to result in something good and positive. At unconscious level, we collect, keep and use feelings, thoughts and memories we are not willfully aware of, but which determine actions toward a supreme good (*Nicomachean Ethics*, pp. 1097a30–34).

There is, therefore, agreement that people seek the good and that the highest of all goods attainable by human action is happiness. Finding someone who does not want to be happy seems hard, if not impossible. Lyubomirsky (2008, p. 32) describes happiness as “the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one’s life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile”. She suggests that happiness requires something more than feeling good but the belief that one is living life that is valuable and that has a higher purpose. Happiness is a subjective evaluation of own well-being that derives from the analysis of life trajectories, changes and experiences, and from an appreciation of what they have brought to the individual. In literature, it is also referred or associated as subjective well-being, life satisfaction or flourishing, among others (Keyes, 2006; Andreou,

Roussi-Vergou, Didaskalou, & Skrzypiec, 2020; Moeinaddini et al., 2020). Lyubomirsky’s (2008) definition reflects the complexity of this construct because it obligatorily calls for a deeper reflection. Happiness cannot merely come down to an immediate assessment. Momentary emotions such as excitement or pride (Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O’Connor, 1987) cannot and should not be directly translated to general happiness due to their transitory character. To maintain the level and intensity of constant joy and positive emotions is unrealistic and unfeasible. On the other hand, happiness is not the absolute state in which everything is ideal and when achieved remains so forever hence, either. Following this logic, we reach two major philosophical strands. One group of philosophers regards happiness as a state of mind, the state in which an individual feels the prevalence of positive affect in everyday life. The experiences of positive emotional states such as joy, pleasure or satisfaction account for one’s perception of happiness. In the second case, happiness is seen as a result of one’s assessment of life, the life that provides an individual with conditions, circumstances and opportunities, that is fulfilling and satisfactory. In this sense, living a happy life means getting what benefits a person, what is good for him/her, and can be approached by utility, flourishing or well-being (Haybron, 2020). In this regard, Kahneman, Schkade, Fischler, Krueger, and Krilla (2010) distinguish between experienced happiness and life satisfaction. They argue happiness is a momentary experience that arises spontaneously and is transient. It is measured as an average of the subjective experience reported in real time over an extended period of time. On the other hand, life satisfaction is a feeling built on a global judgment about own’s life. This seems to be in line with Diener’s (1994, p. 103) view that “subjective well-being (SWB) comprises people’s longer-term levels of pleasant affect, lack of unpleasant affect, and life satisfaction”. Put differently, people have high level of well-being when they experience frequent positive and not frequent negative emotions, and when they are satisfied with their life. The first factor can translate into happiness or stress (resulting from prevalence of one type of emotions) and the latter refers to an individual evaluation carried out according to one’s perceptions and expectations. This definition points also to the need of separate measurement of the constructs and to a longer timespan of the analysis.

In their multiple-self theory, Kahneman and Riis (2005) advance with the examination of processes underlying human thought and propose that the result of the appraisal of happiness depends on the self that interprets the reality. They introduce the terms experiencing and remembering self as two very different entities. The experiencing self exists in the present and on the present focuses its attention. The remembering self remains in the past, collects moments in the form of memories and “keeps score” (p. 285). Life according to Kahneman and Riis (2005) can be regarded as a collection of moments and each day accounts

for about 20 000 moments, what gives 500 million moments in a 70-year-old life. The way each moment is approached is highly relative. The experiencing self lives each moment of life in real time. If asked about happiness, it will answer from the perspective of now, of how happy it feels in life in this moment. The interpretation of happiness of the remembering self will reflect the evaluation of life as a whole, until shortly ago. It is then highly relevant to realize which self speaks out (readers interested in the topic can find more in Kahneman, 2011). This brings us to the fundamental difference between experience and memory that Kahneman (2010) refers in his brilliant talk and the distinction between being happy *in* life and being happy *about* life (Holmes, 2018).

CHARACTERISTICS OF HAPPINESS

Perhaps the first reason that generates difficulties in determining one's happiness is its subjectivity. Happiness is highly individual and can mean different things to different people. The subjective character of happiness is associated to other important features that deserve to be presented here:

1. Happiness interpretation is prone to cultural variations. Differences are most easily observable between individuals from distant cultural environments but still traceable between similar yet not the same cultures. For instance, most of East Asian cultures generally have lower expectations for happiness (Stearns, 2012).
2. Not only are expectations culturally sensitive, but they are linked to previous experience and personality traits.
3. Attitudes toward happiness vary but are also subject to change (Stearns, 2012). Vision of the world people hold changes over time as a consequence of lived experiences, accumulated knowledge, gained wisdom, and reevaluated priorities. What seems indispensable for a teenager may not be essential for a pensioner.
4. Assessment of happiness highly depends on the evaluator's interpretation of happiness.
5. Assessment of happiness raises issues of intra-rater and inter-rater reliability. In other words, how much consensus exists in the ratings given by various evaluators (if assessed by another person) and how consistent are own evaluations (if assessed by itself). Is the person's assessment stable enough over time to capture the essence of the phenomenon? In which circumstances will the result change (and how much)?
6. How can the measurements be compared? How to compare the same person's assessments taken in different moments? How to compare different persons?
7. The experience of happiness cannot be expressed between a fixed range of values, and there are no minimum or maximum levels (but the assessment measure does provide them).
8. Whether happiness can be learnt is a matter of future studies (for an interesting research on innate character of happiness see Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005).

DETERMINANTS OF HAPPINESS

Seeking, and more importantly finding happiness is a very personal matter and there is no universal pattern that could be applied as 'gold standard'. While there is a general agreement that people want to live well and happy, opinions differ in regard to approaches and means that will result in living a good life. Aristotle argues that a happy person is the one "who lives in accordance with complete virtue and is sufficiently equipped with external goods, not for some chance period but throughout a complete life" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 1101a10). External goods are therefore seen as a long-term equipment necessary to perform noble acts rather than a briefly accessible instrument for the sake of own satisfaction. The extent to which people place value on goods is relative and dynamic. For example, an affluent individual may not think too much about the importance of financial resources whereas for the one lacking wealth, it primarily represents an essential commodity that satisfies life needs. In one interview, Kahneman elaborates on happiness and life satisfaction and defends his writings on the difference between the two. He sustains happiness is to a large extent reliant on individual's social networks and social connections (especially friends) whereas satisfaction is based on social comparisons and depends on meeting expectations and achieving goals. Money has a positive and proportional impact on life satisfaction. He sustains that in the case of happiness, financial resources are necessary to satisfy basic needs and affect happiness when they are insufficient (Mandel, 2018). One study did actually attempt to determine the exact income for happiness. Jebb, Tay, Diener, and Oishi (2018, p. 33) analyzed 1.7 million observations (representative sample of persons aged 15 and older from 164 countries) from the Gallup World Poll and found that 'income satiation' occurred at 90 000 USD for life satisfaction and 60 000–75 000 USD for emotional well-being. What was also interesting in that research was the finding that in some regions income higher than the satiation level was associated to lower life satisfaction. The money-happiness relationship is therefore complex.

It is however important to note that people tend to place great importance on the expected impact of external goods on one's happiness and that these beliefs are for the most part mistaken. Research offers some explanations for why goods do not fulfil the expected role. One possible reason is that people are social beings and surrender to pressure from social environment, even if imperceptible. As members of social groups and communities, individuals compare themselves to others and constantly change reference points. In practice, it means that the increase of salary will have a rather short-term impact on one's happiness as most likely the individual will determine another reference point (s)he now believes will bring them more happiness (see Lyubomirsky, 2008 for more on reference points). Another explanation is hedonic adaptation (hedonic treadmill), that is, the tendency to get used to positive or negative events and

changes (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006). Lyubomirsky, Sheldon and Schkade (2005) posit that each individual has its own fixed and stable over time general level of happiness that is resistant to life events and changes in long term. They also suggest that 50% of happiness can be accounted for by heredity, 10% can be attributed to life circumstances and the remaining 40% can be worked on. In her book, Lyubomirsky (2008) provides a selection of strategies that can be introduced to everyday life and that aim to improve happiness. They comprise intentional activities aiming to nurture social relationships, practice gratitude, savor and live in the present moment, manage stress, and commit to one's goals, among others.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Earliest conceptual considerations about happiness remain very relevant today. People seek to live well and enjoy a life filled with good moments. Independently of the taxonomy, happiness continues of interest of organizations, governments, researchers and general public, and is in the present days on the rise. International and national reports, publications, and indices contribute to advancements of the field and support developing solid methods and methodologies, but there is still a lot of research potential ahead. Even if disputed over centuries, the multifaceted nature of happiness is difficult to capture. How happy a person feels stems from a very own and subjective evaluation. Reactions to major life events and emotional states are a personal matter and can change over the lifespan. The complex income-happiness relationship does not facilitate the examination. While a happy life requires a range of conditions, external goods seem (at some level) to be part of the equation. Kahneman advances with a controversial statement that "(...) people don't want to be happy. They want to be satisfied with their life" (Mandel, 2018).

Happiness seems to be one of the human ever-present concerns. A question that should be asked is whether happiness is about the destination or the journey, and until which extent is total happiness possible to reach and sustain. One might say that as long as we do not know what the destination represents, we cannot deliberately pursue it. In contrast, too much focus may turn an inspiring lifelong experience into source of dissatisfaction and frustration.

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