

The Shifting Meaning of Happiness

Cassie Mogilner*

University of Pennsylvania

Sep Kamvar and Jennifer Aaker

Stanford University

Abstract

An examination of emotions reported on 12 million personal blogs along with the results of six surveys and experiments reveal that the meaning of happiness is not fixed; instead, it shifts as people age. Whereas younger people are more likely to associate happiness with excitement, older people are more likely to associate happiness with feeling peaceful. This change is driven by increased feelings of connectedness (to others and to the present moment) as one ages.

The Shifting Meaning of Happiness

From Ancient Greeks to Buddhists to modern philosophers and politicians, thinkers have queried the nature of happiness. Although scientists have investigated behavioral correlates, measures, and determinants of happiness (1-4), little empirical work has examined what *happiness* is. What is the meaning of happiness? Given the energy humans invest in the pursuit of happiness and the field of science developing around the question of what makes humans happy, the meaning of happiness merits scientific inquiry.

The results of seven studies shows that the meaning of happiness is not fixed; instead it is dynamic—changing over the course of one’s lifetime—such that older and younger adults are pursuing different things. Whereas younger people are more likely to associate happiness with excitement, older people are more likely to associate happiness with feeling peaceful. This change is driven by increased feelings of connectedness to others, as well as a shift in attention from the future to the present, as one ages. Moreover, younger people can be influenced to temporarily redefine happiness as feeling peaceful through simple meditations that increase their feelings of social connection and focus on the present moment. Finally, the behavioral implications of the shifting meaning of happiness are examined.

Understanding Happiness through Blogs

The first study examined 12 million personal blogs containing the phrase “I feel” or “I am feeling.” Unlike traditional methods of studying human emotion that rely on asking a convenience sample of a few hundred individuals to reflect on and then report their feelings, this method provides a non-reactive gauge of the broader population’s emotional experience—serving as a “hedonometer” (5). Our analysis focused on

instances of happiness, identified as a sentence that contains the phrase “I feel” or “I am feeling” along with the word “happy.” Because happiness is a purely subjective feeling, the only way to accurately define it is to determine what is experienced while one feels happy (6). We, therefore, examined the other emotions bloggers expressed in an instance of happiness, identifying such low-arousal words as peaceful, calm and relaxed, as well as such high-arousal words as excited, giddy, and ecstatic (7). Of the blogs posted between August 2005 and January 2009, we identified the ages of 4,527,511 bloggers from their public profiles, of which 71,452 expressed an instance of happiness. We measured the frequency of happiness expressed with peaceful words and happiness expressed with excited words as a percentage of overall happiness for each age group: teens, 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s. Because there are few bloggers 60 and older, we did not examine blogs of individuals over 59. See Table 1 for examples of expressions of peaceful versus excited happiness.

The results revealed the experience of happiness to shift steadily over the course of life (Fig. 1). Honing in on the endpoints of the bloggers’ age range, we found that bloggers under 20 were more than twice as likely to use the word happy in the same sentence as an excited-related word than bloggers over 40. In contrast, bloggers over 40 were almost twice as likely to use the word happy in the same sentence as a peaceful-related word than bloggers under 20. Importantly, these differences did not reflect an overall shift away from expressions of excitement to feeling peaceful; rather, the pattern was tied to expressions of happiness.

A National Examination of the Meaning of Happiness

Although personal blogs provide a rich source of data representing racial diversity and both genders, blogger demographics tend to skew towards the young (8). Therefore,

to extend our investigation to a more general population, we conducted a national survey amongst 18 to 78 year olds ($n = 386$), asking them to report their level of happiness (on three 7-point scale items: “In general, I consider myself happy;” “Taking all things together, I feel I am happy;” and “Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself happy”) as well as the proportion of time they feel peaceful versus excited (by allocating 100 points). The results corroborated those found amongst bloggers: feeling excited was positively related to happiness amongst adults under 25 ($r(84) = .26, p < .05$), whereas feeling peaceful was positively related to happiness amongst adults older than 50 ($r(56) = .26, p = .05$).

The Meaning of Happiness: A Laboratory Experiment

To gain insight into causality, we wanted to manipulate felt excitement and peacefulness to determine whether feeling excited or peaceful differentially translates into happiness depending on where an individual is in his or her life course. Thus, we conducted an experiment amongst 44 younger adults (between 18 and 25) and 30 older adults (between 50 and 68) who were made to feel excited or peaceful by listening to one of two pretested versions of the song, “Such Great Heights.” This manipulation was chosen because of extant work showing music to be an effective method to manipulate emotions (9-10). To inform our selection of appropriate music segments, we presented 21 participants (age range: 21 to 78) with pairs of exciting versus peaceful versions of five discrete songs. The two versions of the song “Such Great Heights” were selected for the experiment’s stimuli because they differed only in how excited ($M_s = 1.81$ vs. $2.67; p < .01$) and peaceful ($M_s = 3.00$ vs. $2.29; p < .05$) they made participants feel; they did not differ in familiarity, likability, or how happy they made participants feel ($p_s > .10$).

In a laboratory experiment, participants listened to both versions of the song; the order was counterbalanced between subjects. Manipulation checks confirmed that, irrespective of age, participants in the exciting song condition felt more excited than those in the peaceful song condition ($M_s = 2.42$ vs. 1.78 ; $p < .001$), and participants in the peaceful song condition felt calmer than those in the exciting song condition ($M_s = 2.80$ vs. 2.32 ; $p < .001$). Of central interest, we measured how happy participants felt (1=not at all, 5=very much) while listening to each version of the song. The results showed that younger adults felt happier in the exciting condition than in the peaceful condition ($M_s = 2.77$ vs. 2.36 ; $p < .05$); whereas older adults felt happier in the peaceful condition than in the exciting condition ($M_s = 3.03$ vs. 2.20 ; $p < .001$).

Why Does the Meaning of Happiness Shift?

The results thus far reveal a difference in the meaning of happiness for younger versus older adults. But what causes this shift? Although many factors likely contribute, we investigated two theoretically grounded factors (*11*)—an individual's feeling of connection to others (social connectedness) and the extent to which the individual is focused on the present moment (present focus). A national survey of 18 to 68 year olds ($N = 76$) assessed the relationship between age and these two factors (see Table 2 for measures). The results revealed that as people age, they feel more interpersonally connected ($r(76) = .32$, $p < .01$) and more focused on the present moment ($r(76) = .33$, $p < .01$).

To directly examine whether social connectedness accounts for the shifting meaning of happiness, we conducted a laboratory experiment to examine whether making young people feel interpersonally connected would influence them to define happiness in the same way as older adults. Half of the 56 participants completed a meditation based in

Buddhist tradition that increases connectedness by leading individuals to focus on the people closest in their lives and to visualize the love and well-wishes that flow between them (12); the other half did not. Manipulation checks confirmed that amongst younger participants, those who completed the meditation reported feeling more socially connected than those in the control condition ($M_s = 4.91$ vs. 3.56 , $p < .05$). However, amongst older participants, those who completed the meditation and those in the control condition did not differ in their feelings of social connectedness ($M_s = 3.67$ vs. 3.91 , $p > .10$)—supporting the notion that older people naturally feel highly socially connected.

Following the manipulation, participants were asked to rate on 7-point scales the extent to which they define happiness as “feeling excited” and “feeling peaceful.” In the control condition, adults under 25 defined happiness more as feeling excited than peaceful ($M_s = 5.69$ vs. 4.88 ; $p < .05$), whereas adults over 50 defined happiness more as feeling peaceful than excited ($M_s = 5.82$ vs. 4.91 ; $p < .05$). However, in the meditation condition, the younger adults (like the older adults) defined happiness more as feeling peaceful than excited ($M_s = 5.91$ vs. 4.52 ; $p < .001$), supporting the assertion that increased feelings of connectedness cause the shifting definition of happiness.

To examine the role of present focus, we conducted a similar meditation experiment to test whether making young people more focused on the present moment would lead them to define happiness in the same way as older adults. Half of the 86 participants completed a breathing exercise designed to draw attention to the here and now, dispelling thoughts about the future or the past; the other half did not. Confirming that the manipulation was effective, a greater proportion of thoughts of the younger participants exposed to the breathing task were present-focused compared to those in the

control condition ($M_s = .50$ vs. $.19$, $p < .05$). There was no significant difference in the present focus of the older participants' thoughts in the two conditions, ($M_s = .39$ vs. $.33$, $p > .10$), suggesting that older people are chronically more present-focused.

Following the manipulation, participants were asked to rate on 7-point scales the extent to which they define happiness as “feeling excited” and “feeling peaceful.” In the control condition, adults under 25 defined happiness more as feeling excited than peaceful ($M_s = 5.92$ vs. 5.12 ; $p < .05$), whereas adults over 50 defined happiness more as feeling peaceful than excited ($M_s = 6.41$ vs. 4.59 ; $p < .001$). However, in the present-focus condition, the younger adults (like the older adults) defined happiness more as feeling peaceful than excited ($M_s = 5.90$ vs. 4.75 ; $p < .05$). Therefore, a focus on the present moment also appears responsible for the shifting definition of happiness.

The Meaning(s) of Happiness: Behavioral Implications

Might the shifting meaning of happiness influence behavior as far-reaching as how individuals choose to spend their money? To examine this question, we asked 203 adults to report the next purchase they plan to make as well as a recent purchase that made them extremely happy. These purchases were coded as calming (e.g., yoga pants, Teavana herbal tea, bubble bath) or exciting (e.g., soccer shoes, Mountain Dew, Nintendo Wii). The results suggest that changes in how individuals define happiness play out in what they pursue to make themselves happy by showing that adults under 25 were more likely to state exciting purchases than adults over 50 ($M_s = .50$ vs. $.15$; $p < .001$), whereas the older adults were more likely to state calming purchases than the younger adults ($M_s = .24$ vs. $.07$; $p < .01$).

Conclusion

Although much extant research implies that happiness is a fixed endpoint and popular science saturates the market with advice for how to reach it, other work argues happiness to be purely subjective and individually determined. Indeed, Emanuel Kant observed, “The concept of happiness is such an indeterminate one that even though everyone wishes to attain happiness, he can never say definitely and consistently what it is that he really wishes and wills.” The current research suggests that the meaning of happiness is neither idiosyncratic nor singular and stable. Rather, happiness exhibits a predictable regularity, its meaning is dynamic over the life course, and the different meanings of happiness are malleable and drive behavior.

References and Notes

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Table 1. Examples of bloggers' feeling sentences.

Excited Happiness	Peaceful Happiness
"I feel really happy and excited."	"I feel peaceful and happy in my new position."
"I am smiling since I feel happy and know that I am getting cared for so well and that I am so excited to find my forever home."	"I feel happy and rested today after a calm no stress weekend."
"I feel happy and free and giddy and so stressed but so so so so so glad life is what it is."	"I like feeling in control; it makes me very happy and calm."

Table 2. Measures of social connectedness and present focus

Social Connectedness ($\alpha = .87$)	Present Focus ($\alpha = .90$)
“I feel very connected to the people in my life.” “When I interact with others, I typically feel connected to them.” “I feel disconnected from the people in my life.” (reverse-scored) “When I interact with others, I struggle to feel connected to them.” (reverse-scored)	“I often think about the present moment.” “I typically focus on the present moment.” “It’s important to me that my thoughts are in the here and now.” “My mind often focuses on what is happening now.” “I like to be present.”

Fig. 1. The effect of age on peaceful happiness vs. excited happiness. The percentage of blog sentences containing the word “happy” in addition to either an exciting word or a peaceful word across 10-year age groups reveals a continuous shift in the meaning of happiness over the course of life. Notably, this shift is not just a function of people getting calmer as they get older: the ratio of overall peaceful to excited feelings expressed by teens on blogs is 7:6, whereas the ratio of peaceful happiness to excited happiness expressed by teens is 5:6. Likewise, for people in their 40’s, the ratio of overall peaceful to excited feelings is 3:1, whereas the ratio of peaceful happiness to excited happiness for people in their 40’s is 4:1.

