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Journal id: RPOS_A_ 399423

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Title: How happy can you be?

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MOVIE REVIEWS

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How happy can you be?

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Introduction

What makes people happy, and what makes for a happy place? Most people desire to be happy. We all seek out activities, environments, friends, and jobs that, we hope, will help us maintain a positive mindset, and yet, even with all this work, some individuals are much less happy than others. Filmmaker Line Hatland falls into this unhappy category. Her search to becoming happier produced the film *How Happy Can You Be?* By abandoning the self-help book aisle, but not giving up on her hopes of sustainably increasing her happiness, with pen and post-it in hand, Hatland's happiness journey helps her discover the most robust finding in Positive Psychology. Hatland's happiness quest begins with a simple question: do we exert any control over our own happiness? This question leads Hatland to Dr. Sonya Lyubomirsky's positive psychology lab where Lyubomirsky assures us that happiness can be attained by practically everyone. Even better, we find out that happiness is the ultimate equalizer, anyone who wants to become happier can become happier. Thus, focusing on the empirical findings of psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists in the positive sciences, *How Happy Can You Be?* examines happiness over time and across cultures. Each section of the film flows by Hatland explicitly or tacitly asking the questions about happiness that we all ask.

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Why should we care about happiness?

Social scientists focused on the *problems* confronted by individuals for most of the last century. Common themes in the social sciences were indentifying how negative situations and characteristics impact individual's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. However, recently an optimistic shift has occurred. There is now a focus on positivity and how people can achieve a happy life.

This has led positive psychologists to travel all over the world to measure self-reported happiness. But why should we care about individual's happiness? Professor Robert Biswas-Diener and Dr. Ed Diener point out some of the benefits of happiness. Biswas-Diener notes that when individual's are made to feel happy they are more creative at problem solving and Diener notes that happy people are more likely to: (a) get married, stay married and have happy marriages, (b) to get jobs, raises, and make more money, and (c) to even live longer. However, these results beg the question of the universality of happiness.

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Is happiness universal?

To date, many positive scientists assume that happiness is universal, or at least can be measured universally, and most individual's can assess their own happiness. Again, Biswas-Diener and Diener examine this assumption. Their data from several Western and non-Western countries demonstrates that almost all individuals can answer the question 'How satisfied are you with your life?' Even specific facets of happiness (e.g. guilt, shame, pride) are understood and reported within most societies. Dr. Ruut Veenhoven's World Database of Happiness in the Netherlands has aggregated over 8000 empirical studies of happiness from all corners of the globe and demonstrates the universal understanding of happiness by most people. However, while happiness has benefits and appears to be universal, it also appears to be stagnant.

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The highest level of happiness for Americans was reported during the 1950s while happiness in France peaked during the 1970s. Veenhoven examines the happiness for entire countries and notes that there may be an upper limit to country level happiness, with Switzerland currently the happiest country with an average of 8.1 out of 10. However, non-Western

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societies are currently attempting to increase societal well-being to such levels. Specifically, the Buddhist government of Bhutan is focused on increasing gross national happiness. The Bhutanese government invited world-renowned positive scientists, including Veenhoven, to evaluate their happiness and help the government to show their citizens how to see life in a more positive light. Veenhoven advised Bhutan that, in time, they would reap the benefits of becoming a modernized country, including a higher level of country happiness.

Can I increase my happiness?

Because happiness can fluctuate within and between individuals, and even become stagnant after a period of time, Hatland attempts to determine how people can stay happy for long periods of time. To understand sustained happiness, Hatland asks what determines happiness. Lyubomirsky reports that there are three major components of happiness: (a) one's set point (b) life circumstances, and (c) intentional activity. One's happiness set point is determined by her or his genes, that is, each individual is born with a specific range of potential happiness. Research has shown that genes account for 50% of the variability in an individual's overall happiness; this shows that 50% of happiness is set at birth. A set point of happiness is supported by evolutionary theory. Analyzing facial muscle movement, Dr. John Caciuppo demonstrates our bias to positive or negative information and how this bias is an evolutionary tool for survival. Caciuppo explains that evolutionary theory proposes that individuals with 'happier' genes had an evolutionary advantage for survival because their positive outlook encouraged exploration, which in turn allowed them a slight advantage to escape predators. Thus, happiness was selected because it better equipped people to function in the wild, survive, and breed.

The second component of happiness is life circumstances, the degree to which money, marriage, and geography influence happiness. For example, most of us believe that living in harsh climates (e.g., complete darkness half the year, complete light half the year) would affect our happiness. However, Caciuppo argues that happiness should have been selected in all environments and, therefore, most people should be happy regardless of their climate. For example, data from The World Database of Happiness shows modernized and non-modernized societies almost all report being happy. To examine which hypothesis is correct, Hatland follows Biswas-Diener and Dr. Joar Vitterso to Greenland where the researchers

attempted to determine if the Inughuit are typically happy or unhappy. This is one of the more humorous scenes in the movie, with Biswas-Diener and Vitterso traveling great distances to interview three fishermen. However, they find, as Caciuppo predicts, that even in this harsh climate, the Inughuit are happy. Thus, in a country with 6 months of constant darkness, high suicide rates, and harsh weather conditions, the Inughuits happiness is not affected by their circumstances. So if the Inughuits are happy, just how many people in the world are unhappy? The best estimates place the percentage at about 3%. Hatland then discusses nuns in Wisconsin from the 1930s to further examine the effect of circumstances on happiness. Nuns seem like an ideal group as they live basically the same environment, thus their happiness should be the same. However, not only do the moods of nuns vary, but 'smiley' nuns outlived the 'grumpy' nuns by about 10 years.

These studies appear to argue that life circumstances have no impact on happiness. However, this conclusion minimizes the fact that there are societal conditions and life circumstances which alter happiness, at least somewhat. For example, one of the more humorous findings reported in the movie was that lawyers are the least happy. This prompted Hatland to write down on a pink sticky note 'don't become a lawyer.' Further, the old adage that 'money can't make you happy' isn't completely true. The effect of money on happiness just levels off. Finally, while finding a life partner is important to happiness, marital bliss fades after 5 years. Lyubomirsky and Diener then suggest that these findings are because humans have an amazing ability to adapt to their circumstances. We can return to our normal state of happiness after extremely positive, and extremely negative, circumstances. Adaptation can be a double-edged sword creating only temporary happiness to extremely positive and negative life events. At this point, Hatland is rather discouraged in her attempt to be a happier individual (she is shown burning money and photographs); however, the final component of happiness is completely under the control of individuals.

Lyubomirsky estimates that as much as 40% of the variance in happiness explained by the intentional activities we select every day. Hatland recites the laundry list of intentional activities research has discovered makes people happier: (a) be active and keep busy, (b) socialize, (c) lower expectations and aspirations, (d) be productive at meaningful work, (e) be organized, (f) stop worrying, (g) have positive and optimistic thinking, (h) be present oriented, (i) have a healthy personality, (j) have an outgoing

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social personality, (k) relationships are number one, (l) eliminate negative feelings, and (m) be yourself. She also notes that she should write down what she is grateful for a week and that for every negative comment she should balance that out with five positive comments. Also, and what may be the most exciting discovery, even though the last 40% of variation happiness may be the most controllable, positive psychologists are still determining the many activities one may perform to be happy.

Are there any drawbacks to being happy?

With so much of the film's focused on being happier, Hatland asks one final question: 'is it only positive to be positive?' In high-risk situations, happy people are extremely disadvantaged in that they tend to see life through 'rose-colored glasses.' Possible setbacks, as well as obsessing over minute details, are not something a happy individual does well. A cynical person is better at finding possible problems and working to resolve them. Thus, in high-risk situations (e.g. a shuttle launch), a group of negative or unhappy individuals are more appropriate than a group of positive and happy individuals. Luckily for the

skeptical viewer, being happy is not all positive; a little negativity is needed in certain situations. 205

Conclusions

Hatland makes a very insightful statement in the beginning of the film: '...it's not that I am unhappy...it's that I can see myself being just a little bit happier than I am now.' By the end of the film, Hatland's refrigerator is covered in pink post-it notes on how to happy. Even though *How Happy Can You Be?* does not provide a universal path to happiness, each viewer is presented with many happiness strategies and should be comforted by the knowledge that with the right amount of elbow grease anyone can be happy. Further, Hatland's quote is sound advice for the science of well-being, that being, not to eliminate differences in happiness between people, but to assist each individual in how to experience their maximum happiness. Thus, we believe that *How Happy Can You Be?* is a good addition to any introductory psychology class which may not have enough time to cover Positive Psychology or an excellent film to begin most any class focused on the positive sciences. 210 215 220 225