



Measuring and Maximizing the Pursuit of Human Happiness

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In economics, psychology and policy circles, interest in measuring and promoting happiness is growing. Surveys that ask about subjective wellbeing find that people who say they feel better about their lives tend to be married, employed, and enjoy economic security and higher incomes. There are other findings and puzzles too. Happiness dips in middle age and is negatively related to child-raising responsibilities. People who practice religion are happier, yet religious areas of the country have lower levels of happiness overall. Above all, research has yet to establish whether people seek to maximize their subjective well-being, and with what results.

Studying the Pursuit of Happiness

Is happiness the ultimate goal people try to maximize, or just one goal among many? In a new survey, my colleague Hannes Schwandt and I provide a direct test. Most people, we find, do indeed seek to maximize happiness. But, paradoxically, higher levels of happiness are reported by people who do *not* always try to maximize their own current happiness.

After asking respondents a standard question about how happy they are with their lives, our survey asked if respondents can think of changes in their lives that would improve their scores. The reasoning is as follows: If happiness or satisfaction is just one goal among others in respondents' lives, they should readily think of ways to improve it at the expense of other goals they care about.

Logically, we presume, the situation could resemble that of a consumer who can easily increase his expenses on food by spending less on other appealing items. But it would be impossible for the consumer to increase his overall satisfaction by changing all of his consumption at once. In our view, if respondents cannot think of ways to raise their scores on a particular happiness question, they must already seek to "maximize" it, meaning that it captures their overall goals in life. Results can be compared across happiness questions, to help us pinpoint specific measures of people's life goals.

What We Have Learned

Our main results reveal that nearly nine of every ten respondents seek to maximize their happiness, because they cannot think of improvements, or would not want to implement those they can imagine. Comparing results for different happiness questions, we find that people are most likely to report trying to maximize life satisfaction. Fewer appear to maximize their standing on a ladder of life satisfaction, and the smallest share pursues their happiness in emotional terms. Emotions are an important part of life, but not everything. Our question about general "satisfaction with life" proved the most reliable way for respondents to give global assessments of their situations.

Our survey also revealed information about the other goals people pursue – and for which they are willing to sacrifice some degree of general satisfaction. The most prominent additional goals referred to their families and personal futures – with the latter especially important for younger respondents. In other words, in addition to pursuing overall satisfaction in life, people strive for the well-being of others and for their own long-term well-being.

Our third main result is the most intriguing. Happiness, it turns out, is *lower* among respondents who aim to maximize this goal in their lives than it is, on average, among respondents who are not currently striving for maximum happiness. Furthermore, we learned a bit about who the relatively happier non-maximizers tend to be. When comparing advantaged to disadvantaged respondents in terms of income, education or employment status, we observed that the more advantaged groups tend to include more “non-maximizers.” This is especially true when we rely on an emotional measure, but less clear-cut when we rely on the other measures of happiness. A similar finding is obtained when we divide the sample by happiness levels: Non-maximizers are found in greater proportions among the happier respondents.

Are Less Happy People Constrained or Engaged in a Self-Defeating Quest?

The final result may sound paradoxical, because if everyone starts from the same conditions, people who more actively pursue happiness should end up happier. However, our results may point to the importance of life constraints. Disadvantaged people may need to strive to maintain modest levels of happiness, while advantaged people can afford a less active pursuit of happiness and still experience a high level of satisfaction. This interpretation seems very plausible in light of data showing that happier people tend to have higher incomes, educational achievement, and employment status. Perhaps the economically and socially advantaged can afford to think more about other goals, especially to help their own relatives and maximize their own future prospects.

There is, however, another way to interpret our findings. Possibly the pursuit of happiness is, beyond a certain point, self-defeating. Sacrificing oneself for the sake of other people or for long-term goals might actually enhance one’s happiness. This could happen because such an approach to life makes others more likely to reciprocate and helps bring personal plans for a good life to fruition.

The Bright Bottom Line – and Remaining Research Challenges

Our results draw a promising picture. Most people apparently seek to maximize subjective well-being – and even those who don’t may be seeking to maximize the well-being of others or their own future well-being. What appear to be non-maximizing approaches at any given time may actually amount to long-run maximization. Hence, societal policies that further overall human happiness are likely to be good for everyone, including current non-maximizers.

However, there is another, perhaps even more important question that current research does not yet fully address: Are current measures of happiness valid across groups and over time, and can they be used to assess levels of happiness for economically unequal groups? Happiness may well be a good proxy for what people really care about in life, but we must be sure we can measure it in valid, truly comparable ways before we can design truly effective policies to further happiness for everyone in society.

Research and data for this brief were drawn from Marc Fleurbaey and Hannes Schwandt, “[Do People Seek to Maximize Their Subjective Well-Being – and Fail?](https://scholars.org)” IZA Discussion Paper No. 9450, October 2015.
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