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Perception of One's Circumstances as it Relates to Satisfaction with One's Life

Gerhett Moser
Concordia University - Portland

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Perception of One's Circumstances as it Relates to Satisfaction with One's Life

A senior Thesis submitted to

The Department of Psychology

College of Arts and Sciences

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for a bachelor of the Arts degree in psychology

By

Gerhett Moser

Faculty Supervisor_____

Dr. Erin Mueller   Date

Department Chair_____

Dr. Reed Mueller   Date

Dean, College of Arts and Sciences_____

Dr. Michael Thomas   Date

Provost_____

Joe Mannion   Date

Table of Contents

Abstract

I explored the relationship between how one perceives the circumstances of their life and how satisfied one is with the life they are living. Researchers have suggested that there is a strong desire for people to be happy (Broyles & King, 1997; Deiner, Shao, Smith, & Suh, 1995; King & Napa, 1998), and that being happy can positively influence various areas of one's life (Deiner, King, & Lyubomirsky, 2005; Watkins, 2016). Furthermore, circumstances such as gender (Deiner & Pavot, 2013), age (Watkins, 2016), income (Deiner & Biswas-Deiner, 2002), intelligence (Choi & Veenhoven, 2012), and geography (Schkade & Kahneman, 1998) have little to do with one's level of subjective well-being. I correlated results from the Satisfaction with Life survey (SLWS; Deiner, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), and a life rating measure (Cummins & Nistico, 2002) to illustrate how perception of circumstances relate to how satisfied one is with their life. The results indicate that there was a significant positive correlation ($r=0.75$, $p<.01$) between the Life Rating ($M=75.90$ $SD=14.90$) and the SWLS ($M=23.93$ $SD=4.82$). I found that most of the people that participated in the life rating measure desired similar things for themselves, and were in similar places relative to achieving their own desired goals.

Keywords: Subjective Well-Being (SWB), Perception of Circumstances, Satisfaction with Life, Eudemonic Happiness, Hedonistic Happiness

Perception of One's Circumstances as it Relates to Satisfaction with Life

The search for meaning is a question that most humans deal with over the span of their lifetime. In the United States of America, the pursuit of happiness is a right given to us by the Declaration of Independence (Seligman, 2004). Over the course of the first century of psychology, the most studied area was mental illness, both symptoms and treatment, which gave rise to the foundation of positive psychology in the 1990s (Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000; Seligman, 2004). Csikszentmihalyi and Seligman described positive psychology in their book as "a science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions promises to improve quality of life and prevent the pathologies that arise when life is barren and meaningless" (2000, p. 5).

In the field of positive psychology, researchers have attempted to identify certain aspects of the human experience that lead to a more satisfactory life or what is generally called *eudaimonic* happiness. After review of the research, it will become clear that there is a lack of coherence across the literature. Cummins and Nistico's article about the role of positive cognitive biases and life-satisfaction, illustrated that there are three factors that are paramount to the generation of one's life-satisfaction: self-worth, perceived control, and optimism (2002). In a study done by Pelham and Swan, they also identified three factors that contribute to self-esteem across the globe: people's specific view of themselves, people's tendency to experience positive and negative affective states, and the way in which people frame their self-views (1989).

In related research by Gilmour and Lu (2004), they compared American and Chinese college students' views and experiences of happiness. During their interviews,

the researchers were overwhelmed by the many definitions of happiness they obtained, so

they created different groups of subjects, organizing them based on similar descriptions

of happiness (Gilmour & Lu, 2004). Deiner and Deiner examined how self-esteem and

life-satisfaction varied across cultures, and they found that the only factor that correlated

with life-satisfaction, was one's self-esteem (2009). It was also found by Deiner, Myers,

and Tay (2011) that people who are more religious reported slightly higher levels of

subjective well-being than those who were not religious.

In Eid and Larson's book, *The Science of Subjective Well-Being*, they explored a

variety of factors that contribute to one's subjective well-being; they explained how

everyone is different, and while there are certain correlates that contribute to subjective

well-being for some, that does not mean that it will hold true for all, or even the majority

(2008). Kroll supported this claim, by identifying that there are challenges within the

psychological community when studying subjective well-being due to differences among

people, and that just because it works for one person, or a group of people, does not mean

that there is any one formula for subjective well-being (2011). Deci and Ryan also

critiqued the current study of happiness and life-satisfaction by explaining that most of

the current research has been done from a hedonistic perception of happiness and the

current state of a positive affect in an individual, rather than the eudemonistic perception

of happiness, which concentrates more on how an individual is satisfied with their life

and where it is going (2008).

Based on the literature, the only common theme found, amongst the variety of

different ideas related to life satisfaction and eudaimonic happiness, is difference: the

idea that everyone is different and that everyone has their own perception of what makes

them happy and satisfied with their own life. However, most of the studies examined

tried to identify factors that will lead to a satisfied life; I suggest that the research has not

asked why certain factors only work for certain people and not for others. Therefore, I

hypothesized that one's level of life satisfaction will be positively correlated with how

they perceive they are doing in their life, relative to their own expectations.

<div align="center">Positive Psychology</div>

The study of positive psychology began in the 1990s when the psychological

community realized, as a whole, that the primary focus of psychology since its inception

has been studying what makes people abnormal (Watkins, 2016). Deiner and Myers even

estimated the ratio of publications focusing on negative aspects of the human experience

to the positive aspects as 17:1 (1995). Watkins defined positive psychology in his book as

"the scientific study of the good life" (2016). This is a bit broader than the definition of

Csikszentmihalyi and Seligman (2000) that I referred to above. There is no commonly

accepted definition for positive psychology; however, from a philosophical perspective it

is generally referred to as the study of things that contribute to humans living a happy

and/or fulfilled life. This is equally, if not more, important than studying the opposite,

because how can we help people be happy/fulfilled if we do not understand the things

that contribute to this happiness and/or fulfillment?

There are three main areas of focus when researchers study positive psychology

(Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000; Watkins, 2016). The first is the study of positive

subjective states, which is categorized further into two different areas, the study of

positive emotions, and the study of subjective well-being (Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman,

2000; Watkins, 2016). The second is the study of positive psychological states, which is

the morally valued strengths and virtues that lead to a fulfilling life (Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000; Watkins, 2016). The third, is the study of positive institutions, which would be examining how institutions contribute to healthy and happy individuals, as well as society (Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000; Watkins, 2016). I focused my study on positive subjective states as well as positive psychological states.

How does happiness play a role in the study of positive psychology?. As the philosopher Kristjan Kristjansson stated "there is hardly a muddier concept in the over 2,000-year history of philosophy itself than that of happiness" (2010, p. 300). For example, it is very different to say "playing baseball makes me happy" and "I'm a happy person." The first statement represents *hedonistic* happiness, which describes the current affective state of an individual. The second represents eudaimonistic happiness, which is focused on the trait happiness of an individual, how authentic they are being to their true self, and how that individual feels from a long-term perspective (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Watkins, 2016).

Eudaimonistic happiness is what we know as subjective well-being (SWB). Subjective well-being is how people evaluate the life they are leading through cognitive judgments of satisfaction, as well as affective appraisals of moods and emotions (Watkins, 2016). Subjective well-being can be divided into three different components: life satisfaction, high positive emotion, and lack of negative emotion (Watkins, 2016). Life satisfaction is composed of global satisfaction, which is how is the individual is satisfied with how they fit into society, and there is satisfaction with specific domains, such as profession, marriage, friends, and other personal values or expectations (Watkins,

2016). I examined eudaimonistic happiness during this study, specifically the domain of how individuals become satisfied with their lives.

The importance of studying happiness can be supported by the fact that there is a desire to be happy and live a fulfilled life (Broyles & King, 1997; Deiner et al, 1995; King & Napa, 1998). It has been found that people experience positive emotional states more frequently than they do negative emotional states (Watkins, 2014). Researchers have also found that negative emotional states feel more intense than positive emotional states (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenhauer, & Vohs, 2001). Negative emotional states tend to drown out positive emotional states due to the higher intensity and lower frequency of the negative emotional experience (Baumeister et al., 2001). The reason why the study of trait happiness is important is the overwhelming desire of the public to attain it (Deiner et al., 1995; Broyles & King, 1997; King & Napa, 1998).

Many psychologists have argued why the study of trait/eudaimonic happiness is important based around that logic that there have been no worthwhile consequences of being happy (Watkins, 2016). Deiner et al., showed that happiness results in success (2005). Deiner et al. hypothesized that a frequent positive affect would lead to success and used three different research designs to test it: a cross-sectional correlational study, a longitudinal study, and an experimental study (2005). In the longitudinal study, they measured happiness, and in various times of months, and years later they found happiness favorably predicted positive outcomes in one's health, occupation, and relationships (Deiner et al., 2005)

In a study done by Harker and Keltner (2001), they took pictures of women from two college yearbooks (1958 & 1960) and coded the pictures to categorize those that had

genuine smiles and those that did not because authentic smiles are difficult to display

inauthenticity. They found that the women who had been scored to have more of a

genuine smile, demonstrated more marital stability and satisfaction than their non-

genuine counterparts (Harker & Keltner, 2001).

There is compelling evidence to suggest how a frequent positive affect may

improve one's circumstances (Watkins, 2016). One of the concepts to help understand

how happiness can influence success and how success can influence happiness is what

Watkins (2016) calls a cycle of virtue:

Figure 1. Watkins (2016) Cycle of Virtue
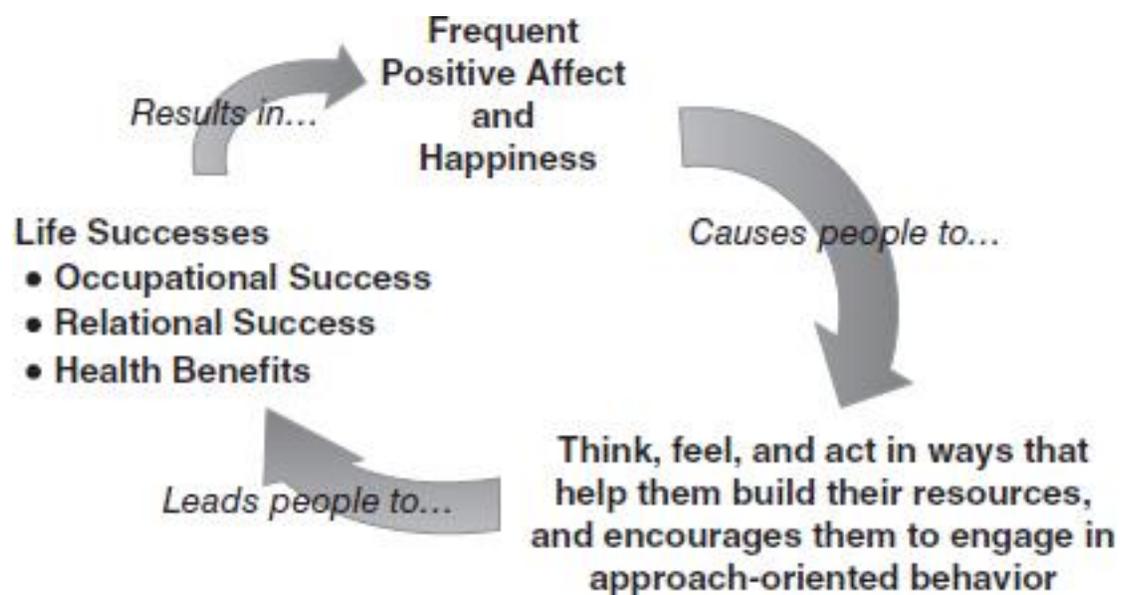
Happiness should be studied not just for the reason that the majority of people

desire to experience happiness but also that eudaimonic happiness has been shown to

predict positive outcomes (Watkins, 2016).

Since the beginning of the study of positive psychology, researchers have been

trying to determine the specific factors that correlate with living a happy life. Deci and

Ryan explained in their article that the primary focus of researchers in the study of

happiness has been in the field of hedonistic happiness rather than eudaimonistic happiness (2008). This has led to a great deal of information based on what makes people happy in the here and now and what types of things make us feel good, and less information regarding the things within people's lives that lead to satisfaction and fulfillment (Deci & Ryan,2008).

In the West, over the past decade there has been this new happiness craze, where there appears to be a focus on acquiring happiness (Watkins, 2016). As mentioned earlier, in the United States of America, our declaration of independence states that the pursuit of happiness is a right of our citizens. This has led to individuals witnessing others experiencing either form of happiness, and thinking that if they only had that house, or that smile, or that job, or that husband, that they could feel the happiness they observe in others. What many people do not understand is that the happiness that they are seeking is *state/hedonistic* happiness instead of *trait/eudaimonistic* happiness (Watkins, 2016).

<div align="center">Theoretical Models of SWB</div>

There are a few important theories that provide a framework for how we understand research areas related to subjective well-being, as well as direct future areas where we can develop our research (Watkins, 2016). The three theoretical frameworks that will be discussed are self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), the hedonic adaptation prevention model, which developed from the sustainable happiness model (Boehm, Lyubomirsky, & Sheldon, 2013; Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Lyubomirsky, Schkade, & Sheldon, 2005), and the Broaden-and-Build theory (Frederickson, 2001).

The self-determination theory, developed by Deci and Ryan (2000), posits that the more determined one's life is the healthier and happier that individual should be. The

concept of self-determination is closely related to examining the motivation behind why

one does what they do. For example, if I decide that I write this paper because I find the

content interesting and valuable, then I would be intrinsically motivated. If I understood

this was a requirement, but found that the process was important for my education and

what I want to become, then that would be considered integrated regulation extrinsic

motivation. If I did the paper because I want to graduate from college and this is a

requirement to do so, that would be considered externally regulated extrinsic motivation.

The first example would be someone who has high self-determination, the second would

be somewhere in the middle, where the last would be low self-determination (Deci &

Ryan, 2000).

Self-determination theory suggests that there are three essential psychological

needs for well-being: competence (people understand what they are doing, their activities

are not to difficult but also not boring), autonomy (people feel their engagement in

activities is because they want to), and relatedness (how much people feel accepted and

connected to others; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Basically, self-determination theory states that

when people feel competent in the work that they are doing, feel like they are doing their

work because they want to rather than they have to, and feel like they are accepted and

connected to the ones they love, than they should be happy. Researchers have provided

evidence for this theoretical approach (Watkins, 2016).

The hedonic adaptation prevention model is a theoretical approach that examines

the system of an individual's happiness distribution based on a pie chart (Boehm et al.,

2013; Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). When creating this

model, the researchers were not focused on what increased happiness in short doses, but

rather why did certain things not sustain the original increase in happiness (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Boehm et al., 2013; Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2013). Hedonic adaptation is the concept that when I buy a new house, I will be happier, but that after two years of living in the new house I will no longer experience the happiness I felt when I bought the house, having settled back down to my previous happiness level and adapting to the hedonistic happiness.

Researchers attribute 50% of one's happiness to genetic make-up in terms of having a genetic ceiling and floor for happiness levels (Watkins, 2016). Ten percent of happiness is attributed to one's circumstances, and the remaining 40% is attributed to intentional activities (Watkins, 2016). The intentional activities are the part of one's happiness that are the least influenced by hedonistic adaptation, and when developing treatment plans under the framework of hedonistic adaptation prevention, one develops a plan to engage more in activities where there is less likely hedonistic adaptation (Watkins, 2016). The idea of limiting one's hedonistic adaptation to events, and trying to maintain a lens of appreciation rather than a lens of expectation is the basis of the hedonistic adaptation prevention model.

The Broaden-and-Build theory developed by Frederickson (2001), examines how positive emotions impact and promote one's existence. The purpose of negative emotions from a functional perspective is; if something makes me afraid, due to a real or unreal threat, then I am more likely to stay alive or not become injured due to my awareness of a potential threat. (Watkins, 2016). The functionality of positive emotions is not as clear, but Frederickson explained how positive emotions can broaden our moment/action readiness and build personal resources that are important for the future (2001).

Positive emotions broaden one's moment/action readiness because they tend to look at the bigger picture of any given circumstance relative to negative emotions that tend to be focused on details of the event (Frederickson, 2001). Positive emotions also allow us to think more outside of the box, and through this broader scope of cognition, comes a broader scope of action (2001). Frederickson explained that not only do positive emotions broaden our momentary thought/action readiness, but also that positive emotions can build very important personal, social, physical, and intellectual resources (2001). This is an important theoretical framework when understanding how not only negative emotions are adaptive but how positive emotions are adaptive as well.

Watkins stated that "You experience an emotion when you appraise an activating event, which then results in a psychophysiological response, which prepares us for certain modes of acting and thinking (called thought/action readiness)" (2016, p. 28). By Watkins definition, in order to experience an emotion, one must appraise an activating event, and appraisal requires a judgment, and judgment can be controlled. This means that one's emotions should be able to be controlled based on how one perceives any given circumstance or event. This provides evidence that supports my hypothesis that perception of one's circumstances is positively correlated to satisfaction with one's life.

<center>Subjective Well-Being</center>

Ever since people have been studying subjective well-being and satisfaction with one's life, people have been trying to identify what makes people satisfied and happy. There has been a variety of research that has tried to identify specific factors that may influence an individual being happy or no (Watkins, 2016). What researchers have suggested is that there is not a specific formula that illustrates that framework of what it

means to be happy, although many researchers have tried to create a framework. Instead, everyone is different and that each individual has a different system that influences their own happiness (Watkins, 2016). There is a lack of coherence in results related to the causation of satisfaction with life and subjective well-being. I suggest further that the research has not taken a step far enough back, to examine a broader picture of all of the things that people are finding relate to each individual's system of happiness. Through the lack of coherence amongst research findings I suggest that the way people perceive they are doing relative to their expectations is the most significant correlate of satisfaction with one's life.

In the world of materialism, one may have heard of the *if only* approach to happiness; "if only I had that job" or "if only I had asked that girl out." Most of these if only expressions impact the circumstances of your life or the things that are happening to you (Watkins, 2016). When discussing happiness, one must consider how circumstances play a role in the happiness or unhappiness of an individual.

Abraham Maslow developed a theory of motivation and personality called the hierarchy of needs. Maslow used the concept of a pyramid to illustrate human behavior in terms of survival and growth (Schmute, 2013). The lowest level on Maslow's pyramid is basic needs such as food, water, and oxygen. In order for one to get to the next level of need fulfillment, the level that is lower must be met, so in order to get to level two of safety needs (not feeling like they are in danger), one must have food, water, and oxygen (Schmute, 2013). Maslow's idea is that one does not have the time or energy to worry about feeling neglected by their spouse if they need to drink water or find food to survive (Schmute, 2013).

Figure 2. (Schmute, 2013) Maslow's Heirarchy of Needs
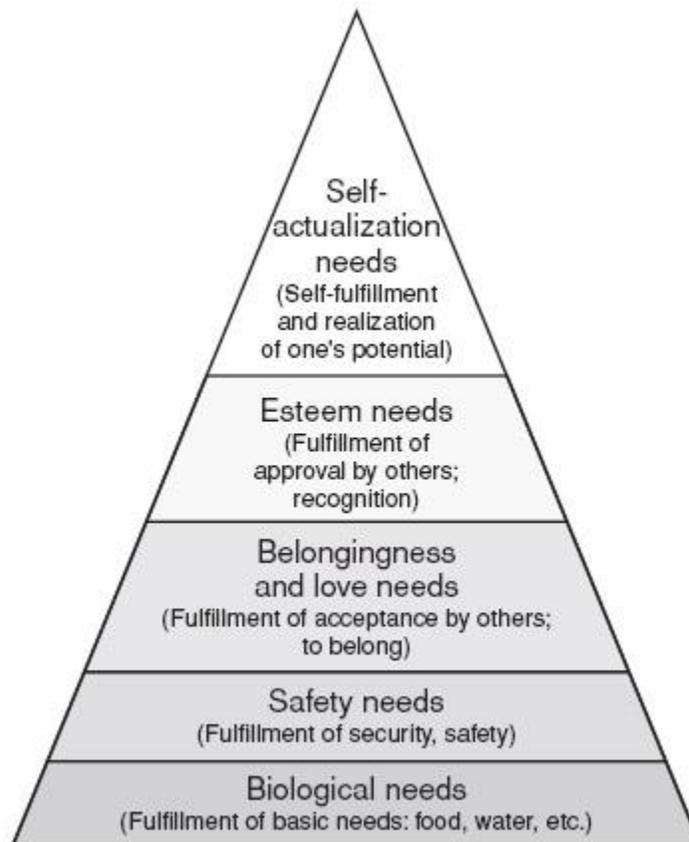
Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, one would only have the opportunity to worry about feeling fulfilled after they had meet their biological and safety needs.

After the biological and safety needs on Maslow's hierarchy have been met are there other circumstances that play a role into one's happiness? One of the common things people say is that if I lived somewhere else, I would be happy. Schkade and Kahneman (1998) wanted to know just that, and they conducted a study where they polled college students from the Midwest and southern California. Both the college students from the Midwest and California thought that the students in California would be happier, but they ended up showing eerily similar results in life satisfaction relative to each other (Schade & Kahneman, 1998).

Christenson, Herskind, and Vaupel (2006) examined why people in Denmark consistently scored highest in contentment amongst European nations. They studied Danish marriage rates, which were the highest amongst Europeans; however they also had the highest divorce rates (Christenson et al., 2006). The researchers also examined Danish health, and found that they smoke and drink the most while having the shortest average lifespan amongst European Union nations (Christenson et al., 2006). The researchers concluded that the Danes score the highest contentment because of their consistently low expectations (Christenson et al., 2006).

Gender contributes to how one is perceived by society (Watkins, 2016). Gender influences what types of roles you are prescribed to, how you are received by others, and potentially what type of opportunities are or are not available to you (Watkins, 2016). However, despite gender influencing a variety of different aspects in one's life, researchers have suggested that it has no significant correlation to subjective well-being (Deiner & Pavot, 2013).

Much like the circumstances above the research suggests that age has no significant correlation to one's subjective well-being (Watkins, 2016). However, there is evidence that, as one gets older, subjective well-being increases slightly (Watkins, 2016).

Does intelligence make you happy or is ignorance truly bliss? Choi and Veenhoven (2012) suggested that there is no correlation between an individual's education or cognitive intelligence and their subjective well-being. Choi and Veenhoven (2012) noted that at a national level the countries that have higher levels of education show higher levels of subjective well-being, but this only holds true when taking into account entire nations, not individuals.

This finding is interesting because, when examining how wealth relates to subjective well-being, Deiner & Biswas-Deiner (2002) found similar results. The researchers found that there is a significant correlation between a nation's gross domestic product per capita to a nation's subjective well-being. This suggests that the richer the nation is that you live in, the higher you will score on a subjective well-being measure. The interesting part of Deiner and Biswas-Deiner's findings was that although there was a significant correlation between national wealth and subjective well-being, the correlations between individual wealth and subjective well-being are not significant (2002). This means that just because you have a substantial amount of wealth, it does not necessarily mean that you individually will have a high level of subjective well-being.

Watkins (2016) suggested that the difference seen in correlations of national wealth and national SWB, relative to the correlations between individual wealth and SWB, could be related to the meeting of the lowest two levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. When in a nation that has a higher national wealth, the likelihood that you are worrying about the lowest two levels is lower than when you are in a nation that has more national wealth. Watkins stated, "Although your income does predict a bit of your happiness, for the most part it appears that once the essentials of life have been purchased, there's not much happiness left to be bought" (2016, p. 53). This illustrated the difference between the relationship of individual wealth and happiness, relative to national wealth and happiness.

What is it that does correlate to SWB if income, age, gender, intelligence, and geography do not show significant results? One of the higher correlates to SWB is employment status (Argyle, 2001). However, not for reasons one may assume like how

much someone is being paid (Argyle, 2001), or the status one receives in society for the work that they do (Haring, Okun, & Stock, 1984). Argyle found that the strongest predictor of satisfaction with one's job was in working relationships (2001). This means that how well you work with your colleagues, how much you enjoy the environment you work in, and how much you believe in the work that you are doing have the largest effect on satisfaction with one's job (Haring et al., 1984).

In the psychological community, it is generally accepted that there is a biological component to happiness. This is evidenced by a study done by Lykken and Tellegen (1996), where they took identical and fraternal twins and correlated their happiness levels. What the researchers found was that the identical twins who shared a genetic code showed a stronger correlation between happiness levels than the fraternal twins (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). Lykken and Tellegen (1996) estimated that the influence of genetics on happiness of an individual around 80%. The psychological community, although not in complete agreement, estimate that genetics contribute to about 40 to 50% of an individual's happiness (Lucas, 2008).

Estimates vary amongst the psychological community, however 40% is a relative average for what people believe to be the heritability of positive affectivity (positive emotional states) and 50 to 55% for the heritability of negative affectivity (negative emotional states; Bouchard, 2004; Peterson, 2006; Tellegen et al., 1988). Affectivity in itself has not been shown to be related to genetics, as no one could conduct an experiment that could control for difference in experiences (Tellegen et al., 1988; Bouchard, 2004; Peterson, 2006). It is not possible to obtain two different genetic specimens that will have

the exact same life experience; this limits our capability of examining how genetics

influence affectivity, therefore calling all of this research into question.

Happiness also means different things in different cultures (Deiner & Deiner,

2009; Lu & Gilmour, 2004). In a study done by Deiner and Deiner (2009), 13,118 people

were surveyed across 31 nations. Similar to the results above, they found that when it

came to financial success, family relationships, and social status, correlations both were

based on cultural values. One interesting finding of Deiner and Deiner (2009), was that

self-esteem was the only cross-cultural factor that showed a significant positive

correlation to satisfaction with one's life.

In a study done by Gilmour and Lu (2004) they asked American and Chinese

college students to write an essay with the prompt "what is happiness?" The researchers

found some fundamental similarities between Chinese and American answers, as well as

some fundamental differences (Gilmour & Lu, 2004). The key fundamental similarity is

that all of the students seemed to consider happiness as a "desirable, positive, inner state

of mind" (Gilmour & Lu, 2004, p.270). However, it is intriguing to note the difference

that the Chinese answers seemed to be more focused on creating balance and harmony

both within the individual as well as with the individual's surroundings (Gilmour & Lu,

2004). Compared to the Americans who were more focused on hedonistic satisfaction

like concrete achievements, and positive evaluations of the self (Gilmour & Lu, 2004). I

find it interesting how one's culture can be seen in how individuals collectively define

what happiness means to them.

The idea that one's beliefs have an influence on their subjective well-being can be

illustrated in a study conducted by De Barron, Echaniz, Fernandez, and Palacios (2015).

The researchers had 801 participants aged 15 to 65 years and had them take the

Satisfaction with Life Survey (SLWS) and the Personal Self-Concept questionnaire (De

Barron et al., 2015). The researchers found that the four individual factors of the personal

self-concept questionnaire showed no significant correlation to satisfaction with life;

however when you take all four of the factors together they explained 46% of the

difference observed with satisfaction with life (De Barron et al., 2015).

In a longitudinal study done by Chung (2017), participants entering retirement

created a retirement plan. The researchers interviewed the participants about how they

were doing relative to the retirement plans that they created for themselves, and then had

them take the SLWS (Chung, 2017). Chung found that there was a positive correlation

between those that were meeting their retirement plans goals, and higher scores on the

satisfaction with life survey (2017).

Mathews and Stolarski (2016) examined how an individual's time perspectives

could be accurate predictors of satisfaction with life and mood. Mathews and Stolarski

used four different measures; SLWS, the UWIST mood adjective checklist (UMACL), a

modified Zimbardo time perspective inventory (ZTPI), and the NEO-five factor

inventory (NEO-FFI), with 265 participants (2016). The researchers found that although,

the Big Five personality traits are good indicators of satisfaction with life, the single most

significant correlate to satisfaction with life is past negative time perspective (Mathews &

Stolarski, 2016). This means that, reflecting upon one's past with contentment or even

cheerfulness, is the greatest predictor of satisfaction with one's life.

In a study by Cummins and Nistico (2001), positive cognitive biases are shown to

have a positive impact on self-worth, self-control, and optimism. The researchers claimed

the role of positive cognitive biases were essential to the homeostatic maintenance of

subjective well-being within an optimal spectrum (Cummins & Nistico, 2001). If one is

too confident and thinks to highly of themselves, they will not be as motivated because

they will believe they can do anything, where on the opposite end of the spectrum if you

do not have enough confidence one will not even try (Cummins & Nistico, 2001).

Attention bias modification training is a treatment method for anxiety where the

psychologist helps the patient feel less anxiety around a specific focus through slowly

changing the way the patient thinks about the thing causing anxiety (Clarke & Macleod,

2015). The psychologist helps change the way one views what is creating the anxiety by

asking questions and attempting to guide the patient in a way where they can change the

way they feel themselves (Clarke & Macleod, 2015). This has not been applied in

happiness studies however perhaps it is relevant to creating happiness.

Overall, we know that there is strong evidence to support that people want to be

happy (Broyles & King, 1997; Deiner et al., 1995; King & Napa, 1998), and that being

happy can positively influence different areas of one's life due to Deiner et al. (2005) and

Watkins cycle of Virtue (2016). There are three theoretical models: the hedonic

adaptation prevention model chart (Boehm et al., 2013; Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2013;

Lyubomirsky et al. 2005), the broaden-and-build theory (Frederickson, 2001), and the

self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008), that do not explain in full what causes

subjective well-being. According to Maslow, one must meet certain needs specific to life

before they can worry about other needs (Schmute, 2013). Gender (Deiner & Pavot,

2013), age (Watkins, 2016), income (Deiner & Biswas-Deiner, 2002), intelligence (Choi

& Veenhoven, 2012), and geography (Schkade & Kahneman, 1998) have little influence

on subjective well-being. Subjective well-being means different things in different

cultures (Lu & Gilmour, 2004; Deiner & Deiner, 2009). One's time perspective

(Mathews & Stolarski, 2016), expectations (Chung, 2017), positive cognitive bias

(Cummins & Nistico, 2001), and self-concept (De Barron et al., 2015) have a significant

positive correlation with satisfaction with one's life. Therefore, I hypothesized that, after

an individual has met the bottom two levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, that the way

they perceive they are doing relative to their own expectations, will be positively

correlated with satisfaction with life.

Method

Participants

In this study, I used a convenience sample to survey 105 adults from the Portland

metropolitan area in Oregon. When I conducted a power analysis, I found that in order to

get an accurate picture of the Portland area, have a power of 0.80, with a medium effect

size of 0.30 and a correlation coefficient and alpha level of 0.50, that I needed to survey a

minimum of 85 people. I conducted surveys utilizing the people I know, as well as

individuals in public places including Concordia University and Washington Square Mall

to obtain the 85 surveys needed.

Instrumentation

To explore the relationship between one's own expectations for life and how they

are doing in life relative to those expectations, I addressed the hypothesis using

correlational methods. The first is a measure described by Cummins and Nistico, which I

refer to as the life rating measure (2002), had participants describe their idea of an ideal

life, then their idea of and their worst life, and finally their current life (refer to Appendix

A). After they finished their descriptions, the researchers had participants rate where their current life fits in between their negative and positive ideal from 1 to 100 (Cummins & Nistico, 2002). The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) contains 5 items related to life-satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect (Deiner & Pavot, 2008). When the scores are calculated they can range from 5 to 35 based on an interval scale: 5 to 9 is extremely dissatisfied, 10 to 14 is dissatisfied, 15 to 19 is slightly dissatisfied, 20 to 24 is slightly satisfied, 25 to 30 is satisfied, and 31 to 35 is extremely satisfied (Refer to Appendix B; Deiner & Pavot, 2008). The SWLS has an internal reliability coefficient alpha of 0.87 and has been tested for validity relative to a variety of other measures that provide evidence of the measures discriminant validity (Deiner & Pavot, 2008).

Participants were informed that all of their information was kept confidential and that no names were presented with any of the data shared in this study. Participants were not compensated for participating in this study. Participants were informed that if they ever wanted to end the survey process, or not have their information published with the findings of this research, they were allowed to do so at any time before I published my work in April.

Procedure

I recruited participants by asking them in person if they would like to participate in my Thesis study. The participants then hand signed the consent forms, and without revealing to them the purpose of my study, I explained what they were to do. Participants began by sharing basic demographic questions including age, gender, ethnicity, education and religion. Next they completed, with measure one (Life Rating) and once finished the participants completed the measure two (SWLS). After both measures were finished I

explained the purpose of my study, asked them if I could still use the information they gave

me, and that they had completed my study

In order to get the most authentic responses possible, I did not inform my

participants about the purpose of my study until after they had completed the second

measure. I revealed the reason for deception, as soon as they had completed both measures,

by explaining the relationship that I was examining. The main reason for this deception, is

that I felt as though, if the participants knew beforehand that I was looking at the

relationship between how they perceived they were doing, relative to their own spectrum of

life expectations, they may have answered in a way that was unconsciously, or consciously

biased. I did not want this to result in inauthentic reports.

Analysis

The value given from the first measure (life rating; Cummins & Nistico, 2002)

was correlated with the value given from the second measure (SWLS; Deiner & Pavot,

2008), using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences program (SPSS)

Data Protection

The data I received were stored on my personal laptop, that only I had access to

and was password protected; the data were confidential and anonymous. I assigned

numbers on my consent forms so that there were no names only numbers, and in order

for me to determine who was who I would have to refer to the consent forms which

were kept separately from the surveys to avoid breaching confidentiality. After I

completed the written portion of my thesis, I will destroy all of my data.

Risks and Benefits

The risks involved with this study were that by asking the participants to

describe their best and worst life imaginable, as well as to rank where their current life

sits on that scale could have brought about an emotional response.

Participants could have benefited from this study by potentially realizing that

their satisfaction with their own lives is based more upon their own beliefs and values

rather than circumstance. Through this they could potentially take more accountability

in their lives to create a life that they are satisfied with. Also, if I could provide some

evidence that perception of circumstances is correlated to satisfaction with one's life, it

could lead to more research in this area as well as hopefully improve overall satisfaction

with living in our world.

Results

I analyzed how the life rating measure correlated to the SWLS. The results

showed a significant positive correlation ($r=0.75$, $p<.01$) between the Life Rating

($M=75.90$ $SD=14.90$) and the SWLS ($M=23.93$ $SD=4.82$). I had a total of 105

participants in the Portland metropolitan area. There were 68 women, 33 men, and 4

unspecified gender, with a mean age of 27.95 years, a mode age of 21 years, and a

median age of 22 years. I met my generalization criteria and the data indicated that there

is a strong connection between how one views they are doing relative to their own

boundaries and how satisfied they are with the life that they live in the Portland metro

area. Any survey that did not have all questions from both measure 1 and 2 was not used

in the results ($n=3$). There were four participants who declined to share their gender, and

five participants who declined to share their age, and their results were included in the

study.

Discussion

We know that a consistent positive affect can benefit different areas of one's life (Deiner et. al, 2005; Watkins, 2016). There is a significant positive correlation between satisfaction with life and how one believes they are doing relative to their own expectations based on my own research. I was able to identify some trends when examining the responses to my life rating measure, although there was not qualitative methodology or coding. I hope to illustrate key fundamental differences in the responses of individuals to better understand why certain people report being more satisfied than others.

I divided the groups of responses into the happiest 25% (life rating > 85), middle 50% (life rating 70-85), and the unhappiest 25% (life rating < 70). I wanted to examine the responses of these groups to identify if there were any trends amongst the responses that could help explain the differences between responses. It was interesting to find that most of the people interviewed seem to want similar things: some form of love in either a romantic sense, family or both; financial stability; good health; and a meaningful/fulfilling career. The difference between the top 25% of responses and the bottom 25% of responses for the life rating measure was that bottom 25% seemed to be focused upon attainment of the different things listed above. They viewed these things as not been having achieved yet so they were in the place of satisfaction they may be once they had attained those things. Although some of the top 25 % had attained the goals they listed and were happy, a majority of them were in the process of attaining those goals similar to the people in the bottom 25%. The difference is that the top 25% reported an

outlook that was more focused on being in the process of fulfilling their goals and dreams rather than seeking satisfaction as a result of achieving them.

For example, one of the participants who rated themselves a 90 on the life rating measure described their best life as "happiness, love, fulfillment, success, living life with confidence, and having (their) dream career" similar to that of a participant who rated themselves a 60 on the life rating measure who described their best life as "love, success, happy, family, money, and nurse." The difference is that the participant that scored higher described their life right now as a "happy life, I'm surrounded by positive people that love and care for me. My life has its challenges but I am working towards successful goals and accomplishments". Compared to the participant who scored lower, who described their life as "stressed, worried, trying, working, student, I'm not quite where I want to be, but I know I'll get there." Both individuals are actively working towards the life that they desire, yet one is satisfied to the level of a 60 and the other is satisfied to the level of a 90.

Another example is that of a male student athlete who reported as an 89, relative to a male student athlete who reported as a 69. The participant who scored higher described his ideal life as that of being a successful athlete, having a girlfriend and having a healthy engaged family. The participant that scored lower described his ideal life as having good family/friend relationships, a special someone, a solid job with a reason to work for, and the ability to travel. However, when the person who scored higher described his current life he talked about enjoying being a college athlete, and having a great relationship with his parents, and although he did not have a great core group of friends or a girlfriend that he feels blessed to live the life he does. The participant who

scored lower described his life as being "just fine" and that he enjoys running and the competiveness of working hard to get better and achieve his dreams and goals, but that this hard work from running, school, and his job take away from his time for enjoyment. These two individuals are at very similar places in their lives, and want similar things in their own ways. Neither meets their own ideal life, yet one is happier than the other because of what appears to be his attitude about his current circumstance.

In the case of two 21-year-old female college students, they described their ideal lives as having their preferred jobs with financial stability (one a physical therapist, the other a lawyer), having a happy/healthy family, and being able to travel. One reported a 90 where the other reported a 50. The participant that scored higher described her current life as very supported by her family/friends, about to graduate college and move on to law school, and that God is the rock in her life. The participant who scored lower described her life as having good friends and about to graduate college but reliant on her parent's income. The apparent difference in the two would seem to be the way their time perspective on the present and future because their circumstantial difference from what they shared does not appear to be that large of a discrepancy.

This is also similar to Mathews & Stolarski (2016) study where they concluded that negative past time perspective is the most significant correlate to SWLS. Mathews & Stolarski (2016) also suggest that future negative time perspective is the strongest mood predictor of the future. This is similar to my results because it illustrates how mood states can be influenced by the way one perceives what is happening or going to happen to them.

Similar to how Watkins (2014) explained that people experience more positive emotional states than negative ones, my participants self-reported, on average, as being on the happier end of the spectrum. The finding that the way people view how they are doing relative to their own expectations aligns with some psychological findings in other similar areas. For example, Chung (2017) demonstrated that seniors had higher scores on the SWLS based on how well they were meeting their own retirement expectations. Christenson, Herskind, and Vaupel (2006) also concluded that the reason for Danes consistently higher contentment scores is due to their consistently lower expectations. It would be interesting to examine their data from the angle of meeting expectations, rather than just examining how high the bar is set.

Clarke & Macleod (2015) demonstrated how they could use attention bias modification training to reduce levels of anxiety for those who suffer from it. Clarke and Macleod (2015) take thought patterns and gradually work with their patients over time to adjust how an individual perceives what is making them anxious. It would be interesting to consider how something like attention bias modification training for people suffering from anxiety could be used to help people who are not feeling satisfied with their lives (Clarke & Macleod, 2015).

I would like to suggest a model for SWB besides the Broaden-and-build theory (Frederickson, 2001), hedonistic adaptation prevention model (Boehm et al., 2013; Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005) and the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Due to my findings that there is a significant correlation between satisfaction with life and the life rating measure I think that understanding subjective well-being through the lens of the life rating measure may give insight. I

propose that when attempting to understand an individual's subjective well-being, one must examine the individual's ideal self, unideal self, and current idea of self and the relationship between the three. These three different self-conceptions are constantly changing as the individual experiences different circumstances and events. The way one's current idea of self fits in between their ideal self and unideal self is a correlate to how satisfied they will be with their life. I propose examining the relationship between these three different ideas of self is the best way to understand one's subjective well-being.

Limitations

One of the large limitations of my qualitative analysis of the life rating measure, is that it is my own interpretation of the results I received. Having other researchers to comb through my data, would allow for a comparison of the meaning we derived from the results, which would help eliminate personal bias. My own perceptions on meaning in life could have an influence on my desire to research this relationship as well as what the correlation between satisfaction with life and how one feels they are doing relative to their own expectations means.

In this study, I had approximately two women for every one man surveyed, and this is not an accurate representation of the Portland metropolitan area. Furthermore, I surveyed some individuals close to me who believe similar things to what I do, and this could have also influenced my results. My population was young with a mean age of 27.95 years, a mode age of 21 years, and a median age of 22 years. This lack of diversity in age could have influenced my results, and it would be interesting to see whether or not the correlation would remain significant with different aged populations. Most of my surveys were distributed at Concordia University in Portland, Oregon, so this could have

biased my results based on lack of geographic diversity within the Portland area. It would

be interesting to explore this topic more by administering these measures online, and

getting a much larger more diverse sample to determine if the relationship is replicated.

Examining whether or not this correlation holds true across different cultures, ages, or

geographic location would be feasible online. If this correlation was found on a global

scale it would prompt further exploration as to how we could use models like the three

selves to better understand and positively influence satisfaction with life

Conclusion

To conclude, we know that people want to feel happy and satisfied. We know that

once someone has their basic needs met that circumstances do not play a significant role

in feeling happy and satisfied. We know that there is not any compelling evidence for

what cross culturally creates the feeling of happiness and satisfaction within an

individual. I found that how one perceives the circumstance they are living in, is

significantly correlated to their satisfaction with life. I hope we use this information to

better understand how individuals become happy and satisfied within their own lives, and

help others to create a happier and more satisfying experience.

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Appendix A

Measure 1

Cummins, R. A., & Nistico, H. (2002). Maintaining life satisfaction: The role of positive

cognitive bias. *The Journal of Happiness Studies.* 3, 37-69.

1. Would you please describe the best life that you can imagine for yourself in as many

    words needed?

2. Would you please describe the worst life you can imagine for yourself in as many words

    needed?

3. Please describe the life that you are currently living in as many words needed? Then on a

    scale from 1-100 rate the life you are currently living, with 1 being the worst life that you

    described above, and 100 being the best life that you described above?

Appendix B

Satisfaction With Life Scale

Diener, E., Emmons, R., Larsen, J., & Griffin, S. (1985). The Satisfaction With Life

Scale. *J Personality Assessment*, 49(1), 71-75.

Below are five statements with which you may agree or disagree. Using the 1-7 scale

below, indicate your agreement with each item by placing the appropriate number on

the line preceding that item. Please be open and honest in your responding. The 7-

point scale is as follows: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = slightly disagree,

4 = neither agree nor disagree 5 = slightly agree 6 = agree 7 = strongly agree

___ 1. In most ways my life is close to my ideal.

___ 2. The conditions of my life are excellent.

___ 3. I am satisfied with my life.

___ 4. So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.

___ 5. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

The SWLS is in the public domain. Permission is not needed to use it.