

## Happiness: A Critical Literature Review

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### **Abstract**

*The debate about what happiness is has been raging on for more than a century now. Without unanimity of definition though, the importance of happiness has manifested itself in the increase in happiness studies in journals and even in public policies. The study aims to bring a more unified definition by bringing together the main components involved in defining happiness. It also aims to highlight the importance of a working definition in happiness research. An outline of the operational definition helps identify whose happiness is being analysed. Findings from the systematic review of existing literature indicate that the debate still stands. Economists and positive psychologists, however, seem to concur that utility is a defining concept in happiness studies. Lastly, a group of authors seem to relegate to the peripheries the importance of the working definition of happiness in research yet this improves study evaluation. Thus, the misunderstanding of happiness is sometimes exacerbated by lack of the working definitions in some studies. The absence of operational definitions makes the question on whose happiness an important one to answer. The importance of indicating working definitions for controversial terms like happiness is recommended in this study.*

**Keywords:** *Happiness, Subjective well-being, satisfaction with life, quality of life, utility.*

### **1. Introduction**

Recently there has been a surge in happiness studies (Dolan, Peasgood and White, 2008) with current economists joining the discussion a bit later than other social science disciplines. This is despite its economic origin mostly associated with welfare economics views by Bentham (1823), Pigou (1920); who is considered the father of welfare economics, Hicks (1939) and Samuelson (1947). It seems Samuelson is among those economists to fight for the existence of welfare economics from the time of his PhD studies to the publication of his 1947 book: *Foundations of Economic Analysis* and the succeeding studies Samuelson carried out. The book has become so influential in happiness literature hence the popularisation of the Bergson-Samuelson Social Welfare function. However, Arrow (1948) cannot be ruled out with his famous impossibility theorem in which he also stated that hedonic psychology is aligned to utilitarianism. Thus, possibly based on these literature trends, Sen (2008) indicated that happiness has been a central concern in economics housed in the discipline of welfare economics. Despite the long history of welfare economics and hence happiness economics, the definition of happiness remains ambiguous among social scientists, economists included. The ambiguity in defining happiness makes its understanding complex. These complex differences in definitions have also possibly led to even the different measures of happiness with some researchers using single-item

questions (such as the one used by the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia, HILDA survey) while others use multiple-item questions such as the Satisfaction with Life Scale by Diener *et al* (1985) and its successor, the Temporal Satisfaction with Life Scale by Pavot, Diener and Suh (1998). Because of these conflicting views, this study aims to reveal some light on these complexities and tries to clear the mist. This, however, must be admitted at the onset that it is a very difficult task. Kesebir (2018, p.8) seem to concur that the definition of happiness is complex and not unanimous by saying “[p]hilosophers studying happiness agree, if on nothing else, on the challenges of defining the term” and “[i] am not alone in thinking that happiness, by whatever name we refer to it and however we go about looking for it, ...is a most fundamental and universal human aspiration”. The study also aims to reveal that indicating a working definition in researches on happiness, is very important, for it assists in several ways such as understanding the concept as used by the authors concerned.

There are several reasons why understanding happiness is important. One such reason is that happiness, a sub-category of well-being, has become one important aspect in measuring development or national progress. Therefore, for nations to use wellbeing as a measure of development, they need to understand well the concepts and at times their measurement. Again, it is important to understand the meaning of happiness since Diener, Sapyta and Suh (1998) stated that happiness is an important goal in life. Analogously, Hicks (1975) had earlier noted that happiness is the wealth of nations and therefore, Anielski (2007) indicates that happiness is the genuine wealth. Recently Veenhoven (2018) has also indicated that subjective wellbeing, the broader term for happiness, is a main goal in the modern society and that all human beings want a satisfying life. Again Kesebir (2018, p.8) indicate that happiness “..... is a most fundamental and universal human aspiration”. Given all these arguments in favour of happiness, it is important to show that the understanding of what the term means is very important so that policy-makers understand exactly what they will be targeting when they want to use happiness as a measure of national progress in place of the traditional approach, the GDP. Veenhoven (2018) indicated that interest in subjective wellbeing is increasing among policymakers.

The study is organised as follows: Literature review comes next followed by methods. After methods come results and conclusions in that order.

## **2. Literature review**

What constitutes happiness and to whom, is a central question. In the field of economics, and in particular, welfare economics, happiness has been central (Sen 2008). To Bentham (1823) happiness is made of up the sum of individual happiness. That is the total community happiness is made up of the happiness of the greatest number. If an action makes the majority happy as compared to the minority, then that action is morally justified because it leads to the greatest happiness principle. This theory called utilitarianism, became the official theory of welfare economics (Sen, 2008). Therefore, happiness of the majority counts more than that of the minority.

One other instrumental study to happiness economics is the work of Easterlin (1974). In that study, Easterlin found that an increase in income does not necessarily lead to happiness. This opened a Pandora's box because the understanding by then was income can buy happiness. The results of the works of Easterlin became known as the Easterlin paradox.

In 1997, Veenhoven (1997, p. 4) said “the prime question is then what happiness is precisely. One cannot raise happiness if one does not know what it is”. This question is very important to the current study because it is important to know that if authors write on happiness, what exactly will they be researching on. If authors do not define what happiness is in the context of their researches then they equally may not understand what they will be doing.

Oishi, Diener and Lucas (2007) noted that philosophers have grappled with the definition of happiness for a long time stretching to millennia. The variations have been acknowledged to substantially stem from theories. The three authors acknowledge several definitions of happiness such as the absence of pain by Bentham (1823) and Mill (2001). Faced with these definitions Oishi, Diener and Lucas (2007) defined happiness as subjective wellbeing or the subjective evaluation of one’s life. They, however, preferred happiness to refer to a long term judgment of one’s life. Contrastingly, Bieda *et al.* (2019) view happiness as a short term phenomenon. The long term version being satisfaction with life (Mandishekwa and Mutenheri, 2019). That definitions of happiness are theory specific may also be extended to say they are discipline-specific.

That theories on happiness have mainly caused these variations cannot also be denied. For instance, in positive psychology two seemingly different conceptualisations help define happiness (Fave *et al.*, 2011). These theories are hedonic and eudaimonia. Hedonic perspective refers to the pleasurable activities for achieving the good life (Vellar-Brodrick, Park and Peterson, 2009). It aims at maximising pleasure and minimizing pain among the majority since it argues that “... only pleasure is intrinsically good, and pain is the only intrinsic bad” (Brey, 2012, p.2). By aiming at minimising pain among the majority, Ivlevs (2015) noted that hedonism is related to utilitarianism by Bentham (1823) and Mills (2001). In their utilitarianism theory, what Sen (2008) call the long time “official” theory of welfare economics, Bentham (1823) and Mill (2001) aimed at the greatest happiness principle where happiness among the majority is the aim (Veenhoven, 1997). Again, hedonism is the affective component of happiness (Schimmack; 2003). It can also be argued to be a “... *hedonic balance* of pleasant and unpleasant moments” (Schimmack, 2003, p. 79). The hedonic perspective argues that people’s satisfaction with life depends on their evaluation of their experiences of pleasant and unpleasant moments, thus the individual is the ultimate judge of their satisfaction with life. Along the lines of research, hedonic dimension is quantitatively assessed using the satisfaction with life scale (Fave *et al.*, 2011). Within the economics discipline, Sen (2008) asserts that Bentham’s utilitarianism theory is hedonist in nature, where utility, because of the greatest happiness principle, is viewed as a sum of individual utilities creating what can be termed welfarism through rank-summing. Therefore, utility in economics can be equated to happiness (Sen, 2008).

Contrary to the hedonic perspective, the eudaimonic perspective takes well-being as distinct from happiness. According to Drakulic (2012), the term eudaimonia was first used by Democritus (460 to 370 BC) as referring to state of happiness. In this regard it is argued that not all desires that are met will yield well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Therefore, the major focus of eudaimonic approach is self realisation (Waterman, 1993) or what Maslow (1943) term self-actualization, where one needs to be the person they think they want to be, of course being cognisant of the fact that not all desires met will yield well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Again, while Waterman (1993) equated the aspect of eudaimonia to personal expressiveness, Fave *et al.*

(2011) take it as meaning in life. Brey (2012) also claim that eudaimonic approaches go beyond the subjective experiences by individuals. However, consensus on how eudaimonia is defined is still to be reached (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan and King, 2009). This inconclusiveness in defining eudaimonia also contributes to the confusion about happiness since eudaimonia is a component of happiness. Thus, being unable to understand the component parts may make the understanding of the whole difficult.

The seemingly<sup>1</sup> contrasting views on the definition of happiness have also given rise to certain categories in which the authors who define it can be placed. One group is made of authors who believe that subjective well-being is an umbrella term for both satisfaction with life and happiness. That satisfaction with life and happiness are different but collectively termed subjective well-being is also shared by Maddux (2018). That the two terms have a collective term has probably made some authors to treat these terms as one. For example, Ivlevs (2015) used the terms subjective well-being, happiness and life satisfaction interchangeably. Also, Veenhoven (2011), Veenhoven (2012) and Brown and Rohrer (2019) treated happiness, subjective well-being and life satisfaction as synonyms. Brown and Rohrer (2019) argued that they did it for simplicity. Implied in this statement then is that when authors use these terms differently, they will be complicating things. It, therefore, seems plausible to conclude that Brown and Rohrer (2019) treated these as synonyms to simplify things for the reader. Had it not been for the reader they would have used the terms differently. Thus, in as much as the terms may be treated as meaning the same they are different according to Brown and Rohrer (2019). What the two authors did not then clearly do is to indicate the differences.

The other group is made of views that happiness, satisfaction with life and subjective well-being are interchangeable terms but subjective well-being has several indicators. For example, life satisfaction is one of the components or indicators of subjective well-being (Diener, 1984, Mandishekwa and Mutenheri, 2019). Again, Hendriks and Burger (2019) seem to treat happiness as being analogous to subjective well-being and life satisfaction, however, they prefer to treat happiness and satisfaction with life as measures of subjective well-being. Thus, just like Mandishekwa and Mutenheri (2019), they believe subjective well-being can either be proxied by happiness or satisfaction with life. Along this line of thought, then, it is possible to say that Mandishekwa and Mutenheri (2019) treated happiness and satisfaction with life as meaning different things. One such reason mostly given is that happiness is a short term phenomenon while satisfaction with life is long term (Mandishekwa and Mutenheri, 2019) and more stable in nature (Bieda *et al.*, 2019).

For Diener and Diener (1996), subjective well-being is colloquially termed happiness meaning in ordinary terms happiness is akin to subjective well-being. Implied here is the idea that happiness is different from subjective well-being. They argue that the evaluation of happiness is both cognitive and affective. Along the cognitive view lies satisfaction with life while the affective perspective takes both pleasant and unpleasant emotional reactions. To them, then, happiness is

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<sup>1</sup> The author used the word 'seemingly' because these definitions may not contradict but need to be clearly stated as working definitions in each study. This will potentially resolve the potential controversy.

not really satisfaction with life but its valuation can be satisfaction with life. That happiness in its ordinary sense means subjective well-being has also been acknowledged by Veenhoven (2012). Duruyappah (2010) noted that subjective well-being also encompasses happiness and quality of life. Duruyappah (2010), however, preferred the term subjective well-being to happiness because subjective well-being is all encompassing. Additionally, Veenhoven (2004a) defines happiness as “[t]he word happiness is often used interchangeably with the term ‘quality of life’”. This, on its own, according to Veenhoven (2004a), means happiness and quality of life are the same. Also, Veenhoven (2004a) noted that social philosophy used to define happiness as good living. Therefore, Veenhoven (2004a) and Duruyappah (2010) view happiness differently since Duruyappah (2010) differentiates quality of life from happiness while Veenhoven (2004a) views them as the same. However, Veenhoven (1997) noted that happiness is one of the indicators of quality of life not quality of life *per se*. Thus, being an indicator does not mean being the same because being an indicator can mean a proxy of something. In this sense, it means the proxy can stand in place of, but is not, the actual thing that it can represent.

Also, Bjornskov (2003) and Okulicz-Kozaryn and Valente (2018) concur in taking happiness and life satisfaction as the same. Again, Ivlevs (2015) noted that happiness has been viewed as a manifestation of utility. Thus, Veenhoven (2004a, p. 287) said “[h]appiness is defined as the degree to which a person enjoys his or her life-as-a-whole” and Veenhoven (1997, p.5) says “[h]appiness is the degree to which a person evaluates the overall quality of his present life-as-a-whole positively”. These views of happiness must have emanated from the works of Bentham (1823) and Mill (2001) where Bentham advocated for the greatest happiness principle. Mill (2001) says the intention of the greatest happiness principle was to explain that people will be happy when pain is absent. Therefore, absence of pain was viewed as happiness. Thus, being satisfied with life yields utility and hence happiness as argued by Veenhoven (2004a). Possibly this is the reason why Veenhoven (2012) had to indicate right on the topic of the study that happiness and satisfaction with life are the same.

On the one hand, overall life satisfaction has been taken to refer to happiness (Veenhoven, 2006, Sakamoto, Chiu, Li and Wang, 2016, Veenhoven, 2018). On the other hand, the word overall, in the definition by Sakamoto, Chiu, Li and Wang (2016) has sometimes been interchanged as in Dolan, Peasgood and White (2008) who take life satisfaction as overall happiness. Therefore, Dolan, Peasgood and White (2008) and Sakamoto, Chiu, Li and Wang (2016) seem to define happiness and satisfaction with life as one thing. On another note, Dolan, Peasgood and White (2008) also seem to treat happiness as subjective well-being as reflected in the title of their study. This connotes variations in meaning and understandings of happiness. However, it may also reflect the fact that happiness is a branch of subjective well-being.

World Values Survey and European Values Study show that happiness and satisfaction with life are different (Bartolini and Sarracino, 2012). It also seems Bartolini and Sarracino (2012, p.14) are of the opinion that happiness and life satisfaction are fundamentally the same because they said “[i]n the long run changes in ... life satisfaction or happiness are strongly and positively correlated to social capital”. The use of the word ‘or’ in this quotation implies the two terms are alternatives. However, a contradicting view seems to exist when they then said “... when we substitute for social capital with GDP, its long run trends are unrelated to the trends of life satisfaction and negatively and significantly correlated with the trends of happiness’ (Bartolini

and Sarracino (2012, p.14). While the former statement seems to indicate interchangeable use of satisfaction with life and happiness, the later seems to show differences.

Given the controversy on defining happiness, a group of recent authors have proceeded to work on happiness studies without clearly defining what happiness really is. For example, despite the word happiness appearing about 251 times in their paper, Ali, Murshed and Papyrakis (2019) were not clear on their working definition of happiness. The closest they were in defining happiness is when they said “[t]he microeconomic literature on happiness focuses on the utility of an individual household” (Ali, Murshed and Papyrakis, 2019, p. 439) and when they introduced the measurement of happiness on the cited page. Tay and Diener (2011) have also done the same. They only used the components of happiness without clearly stating what happiness is. They said happiness is made up of life evaluation, positive feelings and negative feelings. Despite indicating the components, the real happiness was not clearly defined. Thus, the assumption was probably that once one understands the component parts he or she possibly will understand the whole. This assumption may however be wrong because of the possibility of the fallacy of composition. Also, Baujard (2013) used the word happiness nearly 30 times in their study but circumvented what is meant by that word. Another stunning illustration is where Devine, Hinks and Naveed (2019) used the word for close to 135 times in their Bangladesh study but did not clearly define what they mean by happiness. It is probably true to say the increase in the number of researchers who circumvent the definition of happiness emanates from the complexity of this term. It is again plausible to conclude that the definition of happiness depends on the person required to answer the happiness questionnaire as well as the reader of these articles. This is possibly so because satisfaction with life is individual-specific. Thus, van Praag and Ferrer-i-Carbonell (2008, p.2) indicate that “... satisfaction is measured within our mind ...”. This implies that satisfaction is cognitive by nature. For one to conclude that happiness is cognitive, what will that person be referring to as happiness, remains an interesting question. The interesting question related to this study is ‘what is happiness?’ by Layard (2005). To Layard (2005, p.13) “... happiness begins where unhappiness ends”. Where does unhappiness end is another question to ponder about. Because of the difficulties associated with these demarcations, Layard (2005) asserts correctly by defining the working definition in his book. Thus, Layard (2005, p.12) states “[s]o by happiness I mean feeling good-enjoying life and wanting the feeling to be maintained. By unhappiness I mean feeling bad and wishing things were different”. This quotation seems to have been derived from the first and second statements by Pavot, Diener and Suh (1998) in the temporal satisfaction with life scale which read “I would change nothing about my current life and I am satisfied with my current life”, respectively. Layard was right to clearly define the working definition of happiness for easy understanding. This is because happiness is defined differently by different people. Therefore, it is important to highlight whose happiness really counts in one’s writings.

While a significant number of authors define happiness, the increasing tendency for authors to defer the definition to the reader is astounding. This, however, has negative implications on the evaluation and understanding of the papers by these authors. A working definition enables readers to understand the author’s perspective and be able to somehow evaluate validity and reliability of the research. For instance, this may help in the cultural differences in interpretation of words such as happiness and satisfaction with life as noted by Veenhoven (1996). However, Veenhoven (1997) noted that satisfaction with life and happiness are synonyms but the term

satisfaction with life is usually preferred because of its emphasis on the subjective nature of the concept. Another important observation for the preference of satisfaction with life over happiness is that satisfaction with life is relatively stable as compared to happiness (Bieda *et al.*, 2019).

### 3. Methods

The study aimed at evaluating the various definitions of happiness in existing literature. It also aimed at revealing existing conflicting views in these definitions. This is very important, for policy purposes, to understand what really is meant by happiness since happiness is becoming an important aspect in national policy-frameworks. To attain these broad objectives, the term happiness was used to identify reviewed papers. A systematic approach was used in the process. The author would determine how the reviewed study defines happiness. Thus, the working definition of the word in each paper was the key determining factor. The majority of cited articles are journals while a few classic books as well as grey literature on the subject have been taken aboard.

### 4. Findings

Findings indicate no unanimity among researchers as to what happiness really is. While life satisfaction and happiness may be treated equally such as argued by Easterlin (2001), Ambrey and Flemming (2011) and Masferrer (2016), authors like Vellar-Brodrick, Park and Peterson (2009), Kim, Kim and Park (2016), Bieda *et al.*, (2019) and Van Aardt, De Clercq and Meiring (2019) treat the two as different but complimentary aspects, with Van Aardt, De Clercq and Meiring (2019) again agreeing that the terms may be considered to be the same. Usually, life satisfaction refers to a general evaluation of one's life given the prevailing situations while happiness is a short term element of the same. Happiness is usually a result of certain arousals (Bieda *et al.*, 2019), therefore, short-term in nature. Therefore, an evaluation of happiness over a relatively longer period is considered satisfaction with life. The question that remains is '[h]ow long is long?' Possibly, the disagreement on the answer to this question makes other authors to treat happiness and satisfaction with life as the same. However, Sirgy (2012, p.13) highlights that "... happiness is more than feelings of joy" while "[l]ife Satisfaction is viewed as a "cognitive" conceptualization of happiness or subjective well-being". From this statement, it may be inferred that happiness is equal to subjective well-being but is different from satisfaction with life. On the other hand, happiness has a temporal instability as compared to satisfaction with life (Bieda *et al.*, 2019).

Findings also indicate that some authors have preferred not to define happiness *per se* but to use proxies and indicators of happiness or subjective well-being. For example, indicators like positive affect have often been used in some studies. In such studies, it is plausible to argue that the authors assume that the component parts make the whole and so understanding the component parts makes one understand the whole part. This, however, may not be true. As an illustration, let us use the human body parts. Knowledge of all the body parts by someone who, probably does not know or have not seen or come into contact with, the human body may not make the person understand the human body as a whole even to have a picture of a person. Only the blind persons may have the picture because they are equally human beings.

For economists, utility maximisation is one of the main objectives of consumers. Because happiness has sometimes been defined as the absence of pain in the above paragraphs, it means it can safely be treated as a good not a bad. With this in mind, it means happiness yields utility. Therefore, because of this, the current study somehow concurs, in economics sense, with those positive psychologists who define happiness in the hedonic perspective. From the above, it seems that since positive psychologists' hedonic perspective aims at maximising pleasure and minimising pain, it goes hand in hand with Bentham's (1823) happiness. That utility can be considered as happiness has also been advocated by Bentham as noted by Veenhoven (2004b). Therefore, economists' definitions of happiness may need to be aligned with this view of happiness. This means that when economists speak about happiness they may consider viewing it as a utility-yielding item.

On another note, it is very important to acknowledge that happiness has no singular definition. The multitudes of definitions still need reconsideration among academics. There still remains a universal definition of happiness so that policy-makers will understand exactly what to target in their policy formulations. With the current knowledge, it is still a mammoth task to stimulate happiness among the population if its definition is still debatable. This, may however, be a blessing in disguise given the different circumstances under which happiness may be assessed.

## 5. Conclusions

There seem to still be no clear understanding of the word happiness among happiness researchers. Some view it as synonymous with subjective well-being and satisfaction with life. However, the commonest view is that subjective well-being is broader than happiness especially among philosophers (Veenhoven, 2018). Also happiness has been taken to be short-term while satisfaction with life is long-term and relatively stable. Therefore, it is important to recommend authors to make it clear, when researching, on what their working definition is. This will also facilitate evaluation of research findings. For instance, when the general objective of the study is long-term in nature, satisfaction with life may be preferred because satisfaction with life is relatively stable in the long-run, while if it is short-term, happiness may take precedence.

Additionally, it can be concluded that economists are associated with positive psychologists in that positive psychologists sometimes view happiness as absence of pain. This is analogous to economists' utilitarianism concept which is sometimes analogous to happiness. In this sense, something that yields utility leads the holder to be happy in some sense. It satisfies the needs to the bearer of that good, that is, it plays the exact, or close to the exact, roles it was sought for. That utility leads to happiness means that utility is not happiness but is a stimulus to happiness.

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