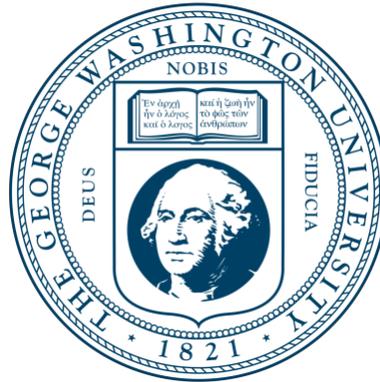


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Happiness in the United States: The Continuous Ambiguity of Well-Being

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Background & Introduction

Life's Ultimate Goal

What is happiness? Can one define it? Is it something that varies from individual to individual? Can it be attributed to race or ethnicity? Although research on the meaning of happiness, and what contributes to it is very vague, progress has been made regarding studies of what many call “life’s ultimate goal.”

Background

The question of what happiness is and how one comes to have it is a discussion that has existed for centuries. Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* text, written 350 B.C.E emphasizes the importance of happiness in one’s life. In the first book, the Greek philosopher argues that everyone agrees that happiness is the “supreme Good” because happiness is an end in itself. Aristotle claims: “Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for self and never for the sake of something else, but honor, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves, but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that by means of them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself” (Aristotle [350 B.C.E] 1985). Even though honor, pleasure, reason, and other virtues (or variables) might contribute positively to one’s life, their ultimate goal, as well as men’s’ is to achieve *Eudaimonia*.

In this text, the word *Eudaimonia* is translated to “happiness.” But, this Greek term also carries connotations of achievements, contentment and thriving for which there is no precise word in the English language. A person who is *Eudaimoniaous* is not just enjoying life, but he is living successfully as well. Ever since the development of societies, happiness has been regarded as more than a feeling, it is a way of living which involves living in a community. If it is attainable for everyone, happiness should then be equally achievable for everyone. But, this is clearly not the case. It is evident that the United States (and the world for that matter) is not an equal playing field for all its citizens, and in many cases, one’s way of

life, or the way of life one is able to live could depend on measurable factors not only like income, but race and ethnicity as well.

A more contemporary, and widely accepted definition of happiness comes from the Oxford English Dictionary: “Feeling or showing pleasure or contentment.” But, this is very unhelpful in understanding what contributes to it. And, as Aristotle claims, happiness is more about living life in a fully and deeply satisfying manner, than simply a sentiment.

The word “happy” has a very interesting etymology. It came from the Greek to the Irish and it had a special connotation. It meant “lucky.” But one’s happiness cannot be limited to chance, for it would be *immeasurable*. It might be possible that in a simpler time, being happy was tied to fortune of events. But in today’s conflicted societies, in which many differences exist among its citizens, we can find different causes and variables that attribute to happiness.

Everyone, regardless of race or ethnicity, seeks well-being and wants to live a happy life. Sadly, not everyone lives an equally satisfying life. Why are happiness disparities present in the country? After the fact that the disproportion of happiness exists was established (due to the fact that people fall into different categories when asked about their general happiness), the need for variables to measure this (more than a feeling) rose. The use of the variables regarding: *income, marital status, health, generosity, education, leisure, mental health, gender, and race/ethnicity* from the General Social Survey (administered in the United States since 1972), was an attempt to establish parallel variables for the ones used by the World Happiness Report (WHR- which was used as framework) to measure happiness levels in different countries. The variables the report examines are: *GDP per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity, and freedom from corruption*. The report also measures *negative and positive affect*.

The chosen parallel variables were all expected to play a significant role in determining a respondent’s happiness (in the GSS) since the WHR was deemed as one of the best attempts to measure this abstract variable (happiness). One assumption was that there would be clear racial and ethnic disparity of happiness in the United States (in respects to the ethnic and racial variables that were reviewed) and this

variation could be explained by the usual un-equal standing in the parallel variables mentioned (from the GSS- like income). Statistical significance of the variables was helpful in determining if this framework (WHR) could be modified (to look at individuals and not countries) in order to examine variations in happiness in the United States.

Both the WHR variables and its parallels were looked at in more depth and the reasoning on why these were chosen was explored as well. When looking at individual (racial and ethnic) populations in the USA, it was expected that minorities would be in a disadvantage in regards to not only most individual variable as these are the “disadvantaged populations,” but in respect to happiness as well.

What was examined, was whether this model of the WHR can be used (through parallel values) to measure which variables play a significant role in an individual, or respondent happiness in the United States. Per the report, the variables that were used in this model could be significant in explaining a respondents’ happiness. These were assumed to partly determine the quality of life of a respondent- including race and ethnicity as predictors of happiness.

Introduction

My interest in the World Happiness Report came about when I was in high school. I remember my teachers, classmates and friends talking about this ranking. At that time, Colombia was going through huge political, economic and social changes after the “Peace Treaty” was signed with the “Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia” or “FARC”- a guerilla which had been at war with the Colombian government for more than half a century.

Although this unstable change was under-way, rumor was, that for the third time in a row, the country had been ranked highly on this happiness scale. The results were somewhat surprising. In a place filled with war and poverty, how could people still be thriving in regards to their well-being? How was this measurement being done?

What about the United States? Where does this nation fall on the scale? The World Happiness Report from 2016-2019 ranks the United States as the 19th happiest country. As Colombia, the United States has a history of unequal development especially in regards to race and ethnicity. But, the US, unlike Colombia has

notably developed many other aspects in regards to health care and education for example. So, what contributes to the country's relatively low happiness ranking?

Literature Review

Until recent years, happiness had not been considered as a proper subject for thorough empirical analysis. Many believe that this is a study of the human mind and should be left primarily for scientific study. There are just a few articles in which happiness is experimented with in comparing it to other variables that might attribute to it. Also, the way to properly measure happiness has not reached a consensus. What constitutes this seemingly abstract variable is constantly under debate since the connection between needs fulfillment (when basic needs are met) and objective conditions is unclear. Human needs are in constant fluidity, and it is difficult to sustain what accounts for happiness beyond biological requirements (Diener and Lucas 2000).

Since happiness is thought to be a production of the mind, psychologists are predominantly the ones who study this matter. "The subject of happiness is only rarely addressed in sociological journals...Until the year 2000 the subject was hardly mentioned at all and today the number of publications on this subject is still below 2% of the total" (Veenhoven 2006:16). In his article, "Sociology's blind eye for happiness", Veenhoven concludes that since sociologists are more interested in what people do instead of focusing on how they feel, the study of happiness in a social context has been somewhat neglected. Veenhoven mentions how Sociology's concern with happiness has been dealt through the term "quality of life" which may be used interchangeably with happiness throughout this thesis.

Through debating quality of life, it has been discussed that happiness is a social construction. A social construction is an idea that has been created and accepted in a society. As philosopher Paul A. Boghossian explained: "To say of something that it is socially constructed is to emphasize its dependence on contingent aspects of our social selves." (Boghossian 2001:6). This would mean, that if happiness is something that we have "built" and agreed upon as a society, not only does it imply the need for further

sociological research, but it suggests there are certain variables that constitute and help construct a happier life. Even if there is no clear consensus of what these variables may be, an approach must be made.

Recently, there has been debate in the literature that suggest that there are certain conditions that do contribute to happiness, which had previously been regarded so abstractly. In 1969- for example, Susan R. Orden and Norman M. Bradburn conducted a study published in the American Journal of Sociology in which they concluded “A woman's freedom to choose among alternative life styles in an important predictor of happiness in marriage” (Bradburn and Orden 1969:398). This study correlated freedom to participate in the labor market (by choice, not by necessity) and happiness among both partners. Other more recent studies also suggest other more apparent correlations of happiness and other variables. Income is suggested to be one of the most important indicators of happiness. “Material aspirations are initially fairly similar among income groups; consequently, more income brings greater happiness” (Easterlin, 2008: 468). Other studies, like the United Nations World Happiness Report (which will be furtherly discussed) also indicate that happiness is more than just a mental, individual study. There are certain factors (economic, cultural, social) that contribute to what was previously thought as a mere “feeling.” Even though studies like Veenhoven’s reported the absence of the study of happiness in sociology, it can be said that some progress has been made in the subject area of well-being since 2006. When regarding happiness as more than a feeling, attributions are explored and when attributions are explored, conclusions may be approached.

As Shin and Johnson claim in their article “Avowed Happiness as an Overall Assessment of the Quality of Life,” “The concept of happiness has been mistakenly identified with feelings of pleasure in recent studies of quality of life” (Shin, Johnson 1978:478). They suggest that it can be concluded that humans desire to be happy, but no one is sure on how this can be achieved. Even though at the time the article was published, there was already some research being done on the matter, it was based on individual reports and the possibility that interactions could be involved was discarded.

In Shin and Johnson’s article, there are three main uses of the term “happy” which are discussed. The first one is the previously mentioned *feeling*, which usually is short in length. They define it as the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain, which is essentially what philosopher John Stuart Mill claimed

when explaining that beyond pleasure and pain, there exists nothing else that accounts for happiness (Hoag 1986).

But, unlike Mill, they suggest that this definition can be advanced. The second expansion to the definition of happiness refers to *satisfaction*. It is used to describe the “welfare aspect of life’s experiences” (Shin, Johnson 1978:480). The third, and the one that will be the most useful definition for this research is the notion that “happy” refers to *overall quality of experiences*. This requires the “highest assessment of total condition” (Shin, Johnson 1978:479). They also consider that happiness is the “prime force of human action,” a statement that will be discussed from a more contemporary point of view. This statement implies, that most of our actions are done with an intent that wishes to produce an effect. This effect would be happiness, but not just as a feeling, but as a possible way to measure the value of our experiences.

If happiness is the “prime force of human action,” of what does happiness consist of? In his book, *Homo Deus*, Yuval Noah Harari, the renowned historian includes a section titled “The Right to Happiness” in which he concludes that after the struggle for “eternal youth” (human approach to try and extend longevity), the second biggest project on the human agenda in the near future will be to find the key to what constitutes happiness. The author claims that in the past, “the pursuit of happiness was a personal quest” (Harari 2015:34). This coincides with previous research regarding the psychology of happiness. In contrast, modern thinkers see happiness as “a collective product”. “Without government planning, economic resources and scientific research, individuals will not get far in their quest for happiness” (Harari 2015:34). He too, suggests that there are contributors to happiness, although he fails to precisely examine what these might be. But, his proposal that there are forces that influence ones’ happiness are valuable in determining which fields these might cover. For example, he sheds a light on the fact that the government plays an important role in the happiness perceived by its citizens.

There seem to be various studies that point to the fact that the literature regarding sociology and happiness is insufficient (Veenhoven 2006; Shin and Johnson 1978). But, if happiness is something that aside from feeling, can be attributed to certain qualities, then there should be a way to empirically study it somehow. The most accurate depiction of how this study could be done was found in the “World Happiness

Report” also known as WHR. The WHR is a landmark survey that ranks 156 countries by how happy their citizens perceive to be. This means that there is a way to (try to) measure happiness by country. There should be a way to somewhat do this for individuals, or groups of individuals.

The WHR has determined that there are eight key variables for creating what they refer to as the “Happiness Index”. These variables are: GDP per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity, and freedom from corruption. Even though the entire variation is not explained, the addition of variables of the previously described psychological aspects of happiness will be useful in this study. The WHR examines positive and negative affect as well to account for these variations. These last two variables will be of much value in this thesis, because as proven by previous studies, there is a large psychological component in the measure of happiness. These eight mentioned variables were the preliminary ones examined in this thesis since the WHR Happiness Index was used as a framework.

In the twentieth century, “Gross Domestic Product” per capita was probably the most accurate way to evaluate the success of a country. Production levels were the state’s priority and a state with high production levels was regarded as a satisfactory state. GDP is the way to measure the value of goods and services produced yearly by a country. This correlation (between GDP and happiness) has been significantly studied. In 2003, wealth and happiness were revisited: “Most importantly, increasing national income does go with increasing national happiness, but the short-term effect on happiness is larger than the long-term effect...” (Hagerty and Veenhoven 2003:6). It may be concluded that an increase in material income does increase our happiness, but not for long. This may be partly due to the fact that after certain needs are met happiness levels remain constant across economic groups. In *Homo Deus*, Harari claims that “Production is important because it provides the material basis for happiness. But it is only the means, not the end” (Harari 2015: 37), which sounds a lot to what Aristoteles was pointing at centuries ago.

Aside from producing, what people want is to live a prosperous (emotional) life. But, since a country’s wealth is highly correlated with its happiness, GDP, was a useful way to begin to measure this abstract concept.

Social support is a key aspect in regards to happiness in the WHR. The report uses the data from the Gallup World Poll where the respondents reply “yes” or “no” when asked if they have people they can count on to help them if they were in trouble. Even though there might be economic factors that affect happiness, “happiness depends far more on embedding in intimate networks” (Veenhoven 2006:13). He bases this statement on previous research done by Heady and Wearing in their journal “Understanding Happiness” published in 1992 where they suggest “friendship and leisure satisfaction make a major contribution to an overall sense of well-being” (Headey and Wearing 1992:62). As mentioned before, in previous literature the term happiness has been used interchangeably with well-being. Well-being refers to pleasant and unpleasant emotional responses (Diener et al. 1999). Our social networks and consequently the strengths of these are mayor contributors to pleasant emotional responses. In the study of “The Relationship Between Happiness and Social Support,” the regression analysis concluded that both interpersonal support (including that from spouses, parents, friends, neighbors, and colleagues) and support utilization were significant predictors of happiness and positive and negative affect (Ziqiang and Liping 2001). The strength of social support perceived by one is clearly an important indicator of happiness. Therefore, social support from spouses (through marital status) will be examined as a contributor of happiness.

Life expectancy refers to the average period a person is expected to live. Since the 1970’s, not only has life expectancy risen, but happiness levels have as well (Veenhoven 2006). “We live now longer and happier than ever before in human history” (Veenhoven, 2005:330). Veenhoven supports this claim by assuring quality of life in a society is measured though how long and how happy the people living in it are. Life expectancy is also correlated to other factors. How long one lives also depends on where they live and what kinds of services they’re provided with. Even though other factors influence life expectancy in a country, it is still presumably related to how happy one is. A person living in a hostile environment, for example, will feel restricted in terms of achieving and pursuing aspirations. These goal blockages, felt predominantly in marginalized environments where life expectancy is usually lower, are predictors of strain which leads to heightened stress and anxiety, and consequently less happiness (Featherstone and Deflem

2003). Life expectancy is linked to many other factors but it is a measure of not only how long one lives but also how hopeful one could be about the future.

The question the Gallup World Poll (GWP) asks regarding freedom is used by the WHR to measure “freedom to make life’s choices” one of the variables of happiness. The respondent must answer whether he/she is satisfied or dissatisfied with their freedom to do what they want with their lives. Happiness therefore needs conditions that humans value, such as freedom. Happiness is systematically greater in countries who give greater importance to aspects like human rights and freedom. Political, personal and economic freedom are all indicative aspects of happiness (Veenhoven 2010). The freest nations were the happier ones in Veenhoven’s (2010) empirical analysis. Veenhoven suggests that one of the ways a nation can increase happiness among its citizens, is for public policy to improve conditions that are conducive of happiness. In his findings, freedom is one of these conditions. Similarly, in the previously mentioned “Working Wives and Marriage Happiness” study, it was concluded that when freedom in choosing a career is perceived by wives in a marriage, not only will there be greater marital success, but both individuals in the relationship will have higher levels of wellbeing (Bradburn and Orden 1969). The United States has always emphasized the importance of freedom, or perceived freedom at least, to produce success and wellbeing in the country. But, this variable was not measured in the model due to lack of data in the freedom module of the GSS. Still, it is important to note the association of freedom and happiness.

In the WHR, “generosity,” the fifth variable examined, refers to the question asked by the GWP regarding if a person had donated to charity in the past month. Why would this be a contributor to happiness? Generosity is part of our own perception of our moral qualities (Heady and Wearing 1992). Older people usually report higher levels of life satisfaction and these two authors suggest that one of the causes could be high perceptions of their own and other people’s moral qualities due to experiencing less strain, or anxiety. If one gives back to their community, they are usually in a (financial, emotional, etc.) place where their own needs are met and they can therefore help others in achieving these as well. Generous behavior is costly, since it involves the input of your own resources for the benefit of others. Nevertheless, generosity has been proven to have a benefit for the contributor: increased happiness levels in the brain

(Park 2017). Park's study of the neural link between generosity and happiness is the perfect example of how technology will help in further research of happiness. This study, done using MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) human brain scans, helped in understanding how generous choices in an independent decision-making task lead to strong increases in self-reported happiness. Future studies that examine how other variables might be indicative of happiness in the brain could help in the research of this subject.

Perceptions of corruption are examined through two aspects in the WHR using the GWP. The respondent must answer if they believe corruption is widespread in both their government and their business place. In terms of government functioning, corruption is negatively associated with happiness. When a government is "clean" people report higher levels of "subjective well-being" (Tavits 2008:1609). Even though there might be cultural variations in the acceptance of corruption, corruption lowers happiness levels everywhere (Veenhoven 2010). An honest government consequently may imply happier citizens. This may be due to the fact that when resources are properly invested in what they were deemed to, cities and countries reflect greater advances and this might imply satisfaction felt by individuals since they can conclude their government is doing their job (Tavits 2008). Satisfaction might be generated when people feel they're contributing to the well-being of their city or country. In another study explored regarding tolerance towards corruption, it was concluded that "educated individuals were less favorable towards bribery than their less educated counterparts in society" (Zakaria 2018:11). This finding is consistent with previous literature that concludes that educated individuals are less tolerant of corruption (Swamy et al., 2001; Melgar et al., 2010). In this model, the measure of corruption was done through *education*.

"Experienced well-being" considers the feelings experienced by an individual. In the WHR, positive affect refers to feelings of enjoyment in the previous day while negative affect refers to feelings of worry felt in the previous day. Even though happiness does have some structural needs, it cannot be discarded that meeting emotional needs is of equal value in the pursuit of well-being. This goes back to the previously mentioned "first" definition of happiness given by Shin and Johnson's (1978) article which regards the aspects of happiness as a "feeling." To account for positive and negative affect this thesis will use measures of *leisure* and *mental health*.

Due to the fact that this report is based on overall countries and not individuals or groups, parallel variables must be flexible in order to fit the model.

Literature Review II: Happiness, Race and Ethnicity in America

In contemporary America, a variety of social problems may be traced back to issues of race and ethnicity. Many Americans have a racially blindfolded attitude when implying that these are matters of the past. People may think that after the Civil Rights movement, equality for all has been achieved, and problems with ameliorating one's life may be perceived as personal issues. The attitudes that many have in regards to achievement go along the lines of saying that in the United States, the pursuit of basically anything is just a matter of "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps" to get ahead. But, for many, if not most, this is not the case. There exist many societal blockages, especially regarding race and ethnicity, in this pursuit of happiness, well-being and subsequently- success.

Though links of happiness with race and ethnicity have been barely studied in the literature, what has, still perceives this as a black and white issue. Even though happiness is barely examined, mainly due to its intangibility, if it has, it has been a comparative Black and White study (in terms of race). As America is becoming increasingly diverse, issues are no longer black and white and there are many other aspects (like ethnical ones) that need to be explored. This model will extend previous research on race and happiness by examining not only both White and Black Americans, but Hispanics and Asians as well.

In the study of "Race and the Pursuit of Happiness", Philipp suggests that it is reasonable to consider that racial discrimination, institutionalized in U.S. society, is very frequent in leisure places which he equates with happiness. He concludes that "nowhere else does race matter as much as during leisure" (Philipp 2000:123). Happiness too has become racially segregated in the United States. But, this does not come as a surprise.

In America, racial and ethnic disparities in regards to income are apparent. There is a disproportion in regards to wealth among the white, and a disproportion in salaries as well. Many studies have suggested

that after a certain degree of wealth is obtained, the happiness perceived remains steady (Veenhoven 2005). A more recent study regarding “Social Inequalities in Happiness in the United States” concluded that “The negative effect of being poor is twice as large as the positive effect of financial abundance on happiness” (Yang 2008:209). It is expected that *income* will be one of the more indicative variables in regards to happiness in terms of race and ethnicity. After a certain level of wealth is achieved, happiness seems to remain steady. But, as poverty increases the effects on individual well-being are even stronger (compared to poverty decreasing).

In a more outdated study conducted in 1998, Thomas and Hughes concluded that race significantly influenced quality of life in the United States claiming that African Americans have a clear disadvantage. “It is clear that being black in U.S. society results in a lower quality of life than does being white” (Thomas and Hughes 1998:785). They conclude that discrimination is the main cause of this imbalance. Even though discrimination might be a contributor, it is not the only factor that accounts for disparities. This was explained in the model.

Life expectancy has been rising in America but differences still exist among racial groups. A research regarding differences in life expectancy due to race in the United States concluded that “White males and females outlived black males and females, respectively, at every age and level of education” (Olshansky 2012:8). This is a disheartening finding. This means that the race or ethnicity one is born with in the United States determines how long one will live.

What about freedom? One of the pillars of the American society? Has this been historically racially and ethnically reality available for all? In 1999, when David Carrol first published his book *Color of Freedom*, he might not have guessed that his findings would be as prevalent in 2019. Black and white Americans still represent two groups that experience the promise of freedom very distinctly. He is right. There still exists an “essential link between race and the ideal of freedom” (Carrol 1999: 32). Perceptions of freedom is one of the systematical indicators of happiness used in the WHR for a reason. It is of great worry that there are still such large disparities in freedom perceived in regards to racial and ethnic differences. But further research is undoubtedly required.

In terms of social support, there are a few key distinctions between races. In an article regarding “Racial Identity and Well- Being among African Americans” it was concluded that “African Americans strongly identify with their group and view it very positively” (Hughes et al. 2015: 29). African Americans tend to identify more within their group and evaluate it positively. However, findings also support that internalized racism may lead to depressive symptoms among this studied group. Even though African Americans show high levels of social support, it is usually with people within their race. Sometimes this carries negative connotations which may lead to psychological distress. Regardless, social support is a tool that is used to cope with isolation.

The post- Obama era has not been a good one for race relations. Instead of a society moving into a post-racial society, we have seen a rise in the “alt-right” which is just a clever nickname for a conglomeration of white supremacist ideologies, a slew of unjust murders of African-Americans at the hands of the police, a disdain for refugees from other countries, and a President who seemingly refuses to condemn racism until after being pressured to do so. One might rightly ask how could this be the case. Some thought that the Obama presidency signaled that Americans were moving past the unethical and antiquated ideas regarding race and ethnicity. However, this does not seem to be the case. Instead, the intransigence with which racist ideas remain a part of the public discourse is quite shocking. There is not enough being done to end these disparities. If these disparities account for how satisfied one can be with their own life, why are we not finding ways to ameliorate quality of life regardless of racial or ethnic grouping?

Even though there is a vast amount of literature that can be found regarding happiness and other variables, (marriage, economy, suicide, children) the study of race/ethnicity and happiness is incomplete. In a country like the United States where racial and ethnic divisions are so apparent, there should be further research in regards to the roots and possible solutions towards well-being disparities. There is a gap in the literature not only in the sociological study of happiness and what accounts for it, but happiness differences among ethnic and racial groups (in the United States) are barely explored as well.

If the attributions of the perceived state a respondent finds themselves in terms of quality of life can be attributed to certain aspects, public policy ameliorations could be put into place.

Which variables could account for what is deemed since ancient Greece as life's' ultimate goal?

As Americans' life expectancy continues to grow, there needs to be increasing research not only in the *quantity* of life but in the *quality* of life as well. Happiness should be considered one of the best indicators of the quality of life one lives and this matter is of insufficient study.

Data and Methods

World Happiness Report:

One way to measure happiness is provided by The World Happiness Report (WHR) which is: “a landmark survey of the state of global happiness that ranks 156 countries by how happy their citizens perceive themselves to be” (Helliwell and Sachs 2019:2). The report uses eight variables to measure citizen's happiness in every given country. It has been released since April 2012.

The variables used to measure happiness in the World Happiness Report are: GDP per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity, and freedom from corruption. These six latter variables are used to explain three quarters of the perceived difference in happiness across the 156 countries ranked. “Taken together, these six variables explain almost three-quarters of the variation in national annual average ladder scores among countries, using data from the years 2005 to 2018” (Helliwell and Sachs 2019:5). But, these are not the only variables used. The report, explains that higher life evaluations (meaning being happier, or at least perceiving yourself to be so), are also dependent on “experienced well-being” which is in turn measured by positive affect and negative affect. Consequently, these two measures were also reviewed in the model.

The WHR report, claims that the addition of positive and negative affect done to implement the “Aristotelian presumption” that suggests that positive affect is crucial to living a good life. Positive affect encompasses the average frequency of laughter and enjoyment on the previous day. Negative affect, on the other hand, comprises the average frequency of worry, sadness and anger of the previous day.

The prevalence of this report lead to the conclusion that this would be the most accurate way to measure the somewhat obscure concept of happiness in this model. These variables were therefore changed into comparable ones from the General Social Survey to examine if they are relevant (or significant) in respondents perceived happiness in the United States.

Data:

The General Social Survey has been administered in the United States since 1972. The goal is to provide an unbiased perspective of Americans feelings and thoughts on different issues ("GSS General Social Survey", 2016.) The General Social Survey (GSS) is based on a full probability sampling design and is representative of the noninstitutionalized adult (18 years of age and older) population of the United States. The GSS was administrated yearly between 1972 and 1994, and biennially since 1996, by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago (Smith et al. 2018).

The dataset that was looked at from the GSS included the years 2000 and beyond (00-18). This national survey is based on full probability sampling designs and is representative of the noninstitutionalized adult population of the continental United States.

The variables from the Survey that were examined, and were concluded to be somewhat parallel to what the WHR claims constitutes happiness (in parentheses) were: *income* (GDP), *marital status* (social support), *health* (life expectancy), *altruism/generosity* (generosity), *respondent's education* (corruption), *leisure* (positive affect) and *mental health* (negative affect).

Measures of freedom were not included in the model.

Race and Ethnicity

The recoding of the race and ethnicity variable that was done lead to the creation of the variable "raceeth" which was used in this model. This variable was referred to as *race/ethnicity* in this thesis. *Race/Ethnicity* recoded race and ethnicity into four categories: "nhwhite," "nhblack," "hisp," and "asian." These represent (respectively): *Non-Hispanic White* respondents, *Non-Hispanic Black* respondents, *Hispanic* respondents and *Asian* respondents. The comparison category used in the model was *Asians*.

Happiness

The approach made aimed to try and determine what would significantly contribute to a respondent's happiness (by using the United Nations World Happiness Report variables to parallel ones in the GSS) and examine whether what contributes to a country's happiness explains individual happiness as well. The variable that measures *happiness* in the GSS was used to primarily establish that there is a difference in perceived happiness levels in the United States. This *happiness* variable is measured through a question that asks: "Taken all together, how would you say things are these days--would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?" For this thesis, "all together" could refer back to the independent variables from the GSS examined in the model.

The GSS's measure of *happiness* is done through the "general happiness question" that encompasses all the aspects of a respondents' life. *happiness* was used in the model as the dependent variable. The variable was recoded and collapsed when combining the response categories (1) *very happy* and (2) *pretty happy* into a new category (1) and the *not too happy* which was previously category (3) as a new category (0). This new variable was coded as "*happyR*" and was referred to as the *happiness* variable/measure. The independent variables examined are the ones previously discussed through the WHR and additional ones deemed necessary for the comparative analysis to be done. The reasoning for the mirror or parallel variables follows.

GDP

Gross Domestic Product, or GDP is the monetary measure of the market value of the goods and services that are produced annually in a country. This has been the main measure of success in a country since economic prosperity is highly valued.

Similarly, income is used to measure a gain received in a period of time (usually monetary) which comes from working. A country's GDP could be analyzed parallel to a one's income. The variable in the GSS that measures total family income states the following question: "In which of these groups did your total family income, from all sources, fall last year before taxes, that is? Just tell me the letter."

To accurately measure total family income in the GSS a combination of three “income variables” was done. The range for income in the years 2000-2000 is from *less than \$1,000* to *\$110,000 or over*, in the survey years 2006-2014 the categories range from *under \$1,000* to *\$150,000 or over*, and in the survey years 2016 and 2018 the highest income category has been *\$170,000 or over*. These metrics have changed over time since the upper category does not suffice as income categories increase in the general population. This new variable (*newincome*) was used to measure *income*.

Social Support

Social support in the World Happiness Report regards the average of the country’s responses to the Gallup World Poll question: “If you were in trouble, do you have relatives or friends you can count on to help you whenever you need them, or not?”

The best measure of support system for this thesis was deemed to be a respondent’s marital status in the GSS. Since there is literature on this specific topic (marital status and happiness) the choosing of this variable seemed appropriate. The question that measures a respondent’s marital status reports as follows: “Are you currently--married, widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never been married?” The *marital* variable was dummied up into categories, each coded 0,1: 1 if married, 0 otherwise; 1 if widowed, 0 otherwise; 1 if divorced, 0 otherwise; 1 if separated, 0 otherwise; and 1 if never married, 0 otherwise. The comparison category is (1) married.

Healthy Life Expectancy

The average life expectancy of each country in the World Happiness Report is measured through data from the World Health Organization. Since the General Social Survey does not measure life expectancy, it could be appropriate to look at the GSS measure of *health* which measures the respondent’s over-all health. The question asked follows: “Would you say your own health, in general, is excellent, good, fair, or poor” Answers range from category (1) *excellent* to category (4) *poor*. Even though this might not measure life expectancy per say, it does shed a light on the kind of life that is lived by the respondent. One who is living in un-healthier conditions might expect a shorter lifespan.

Generosity

In the WHR, the variable “generosity” is used to measure how involved a country is in regards to charity. Parallel to this, the GSS has two variables that account for volunteer work and money given to a charity. These two measures of *altruism/generosity* used in the GSS (through variables “givchrty” and “volchrty”) are (1) referring to volunteer work done for a charity and (2) which includes answers about money given to a charity. Both range from category (1) *more than once a week* to category (6) *not at all in the past year*. Giving back to one’s community is said to be one of the sources of happiness by the WHR and these two variables measure both time and money given back to one’s community. The amount that one can give back was expected to reflect the limits (of being able to contribute to the community) that depend on a respondent’s standing (social, economic, racial, etc.).

Corruption

The WHR considers a country’s level of corruption in the measure of happiness. The claim is that the levels of corruption perceived might lead to questioning and revulsion of the ones in power and consequently frustration for the impediments in social mobility corruption leads to (Helliwell and Sachs 2019:4-5). For this model, the variable that was looked at for this aspect was education. “Respondents Education” is one of the aspects the GSS considers. Respondents *education* measures the highest year of school completed by a respondent. The answers range from category (1) *1st grade* to category (20) *years*. Even though this is not a direct measure of government reliability, the variable of education was used for quantity reasons. This measure has been used in every year that the survey has been administered and levels of education point to many other factors that might influence the quality of life of a respondent.

Various variables regarding the modules of “Role of Government” in the GSS were attempted but insufficient. *Education* was used in the model as a measure of perceived corruption. The impediments that corruption may lead to are strongly linked to lack of social mobility which is emphasized as a reducer of happiness in the World Happiness Report. (Helliwell and Sachs 2019:4-5). Lack of social mobility could then in turn be measured through lack of opportunities given (i.e.: education received). Various studies done on education levels and corruption point to the conclusion that bribery and corruption is less tolerated as

education levels increase (Zakaria 2018; Swamy et al., 2001; Melgar et al., 2010). Systematic influencers like education were expected to be important indicators of happiness and therefore important in this model.

Positive Affect

In the WHR, positive affect indicates how enjoyable the previous day was. This component of happiness can seemingly be measured through the measure of *leisure* (through variable “hrsrelax”) in the GSS. This measure asks the following question: “After an average work day, about how many hours do you have to relax or pursue activities that you enjoy?” Leisure points to how much time was spent doing activities that the respondent enjoys (or how enjoyable their day was depending on the hours spent doing what respondent likes.) Responses range from category (0) *0 hours* to category (10+) *10 or more hours*. The time spent at work (or studying) and the time spent in leisure was expected to play a significant role in a respondent’s happiness.

Negative Affect

Measurements of worry, sadness and anger from the Gallup World Poll (Helliwell and Sachs 2019:22-23) are what the WHR uses to measure negative affect. The measure of *mental health* in the GSS takes these factors into account when asking the question: “Now thinking about your mental health, which includes stress, depression, and problems with emotions, for how many days during the past 30 days was your mental health not good?” Responses range from category (0) *0 days* (0) to category (20+) *20 or more days*. This variable regarding *mental health* was used to measure negative affect.

Freedom to make life’s choices

It might be evident that having freedom to choose what path one takes is crucial in regards to happiness. The question asked in the World Happiness Report is as follows: “Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your freedom to choose what you do with your life?” It was surprising to find that the GSS does not seem to pay close attention to the measure of freedom. Questions and modules regarding *freedom* have only been done in a relatively few number of years and were not sufficient enough to be used in the model. Even though various variables were attempted, the substance was unsatisfactory. This was considered as a limitation of the model.

Gender

The use of *gender* was appropriate for the model as previous literature points to well-being differences based on gender (male or female) (Corra et al. 2009).

The inclusion of gender was done through a recode of the GSS's gender variable. Since the use of a dichotomous variable was not appropriate, the *gender* variable was dummied-up and coded into categories (0) and (1). Female=0, Male=1.

Findings: Data Analysis

In using *happiness* as a dependent variable, a recode was needed. The new created variable, "happyR" combined the answers *very happy* and *pretty happy* into one category (1) and the response *not too happy* was coded category (0). The independent variables that were added to the binary logistic regression model were: *income, marital status, health, generosity, education, leisure, mental health, gender, and race/ethnicity*.

The use of the binary logistic regression model was determined by the dichotomous dependent variable *happiness* (happyR). Happiness was recoded into the 2-levels (or categories) mentioned above. Since the independent variables examined, the ones that were expected to impact a respondent's quality of life, or happiness, were categorical or both categorical and continuous, a binary logistic regression model was the model was the appropriate choice for these variables.

This model, which included all of the variables mentioned, accounts for 23.4% of variance in happiness. This ultimately means that 23.4% of variance in the model was explained by the dependent variable of *happiness*. This measure was done through the statistical measure of *Nagelkerke's R₂* which is an adjusted version of the Cox & Snell R-square that adjusts the scale of the statistic to cover the full range from 0 to 1. For this model the value was of .234.

This coefficient of determination indicates the portion of the variance in the dependent variable (*happiness*) that was explained by the independent variable(s) in the model. This initial finding was

surprising. Even though the coefficient of determination was relatively high; because the WHR is the most prevalent measure of happiness, it was expected that the model would account for more of the variation. This means that there are other variables that play a significant role in happiness that were not accounted for in this model.

While a main assumption of the model was that a respondent's race or ethnicity would be a determinant of the happiness level of a respondent, as Table 1 shows this proved to be a nonsignificant variable in the model. Neither *Non-Hispanic Blacks*, *Non-Hispanic Whites*, nor *Hispanics* were significantly different from the comparison group *Asians*. Being a member of a certain racial or ethnic category (from the ones included in the model) was not a significant factor when determining respondents' happiness.

GDP has been regarded as one of the best measures of a country's success. The theory of relative utility claims that one's happiness is reliant on relative income. The theory claims one compares income not only to others (social comparison) but to one's previous income as well. This theory would hold that increasing everyone's income would have no effect on long-term happiness. On the other hand, the theory of absolute utility claims that a raise in income would mean people could fulfill additional needs and their happiness would increase (Hagerty, Veenhoven 2003.) This previously mentioned study (2003) concluded that the national increment of income does produce an increased national happiness. But, when analyzing this model, income was not a significant measure of a person's happiness. *Income* does not have a significant impact on respondents perceived happiness level.

Marital status, which was used to measure a respondent's level of social support was not initially included in the model. Social support was initially examined as more of a communal aspect. The decision to include *marital status* into the model yielded surprising results. The nominal variable was dummied up and category (1) was used as the comparison group (*married*). When looking at the coefficients in Table 1, it can be noted that every marital group is significantly "less happy" than the comparison group, married. This negative relation explains that people who are not married are less happy than people who are (*married*). In other words, married people are the happiest in the category. The relationship (with the dependent variable) was significant for all categories. The p-values for this category were as follows:

widowed =.011, *divorced*=.000, *separated*=.001 and *never married*=.000 in relation to the constant (*married*=.024) (Table 1).

Condition of health did not prove to be of significance in the model. This was a surprising find since per most literature, being healthy is one of the most prevalent aspects of being happy (Featherstone and Deflem 2003; Veenhoven 2006). But in this model, *health* was not significant in determining a respondent's happiness. Significance remained above the .05 level. (See Table 1). Reasoning for lack of significance was inconclusive and requires further exploration.

In the World Happiness Report, and studies like Park's (2017) MRI scanning results of the existing neural link between generosity in happiness proved to be important indicators of the relevance of giving back to one's happiness. But, in this model both *health* and the measurement of *altruism/generosity* used proved to have no significant effect in the model. Both the amount of money and the amount of time given to a charity did not prove to have a significant effect on a respondent's happiness. For both aspects measured, significance remained at a level greater than .05 (see Table 1).

Corruption was measured in this model through *education*. Higher levels of education has been linked to lower tolerance toward corruption (Zakaria 2018). Education was measured through number of school years the respondent has completed. Even though it could assume that schooling could be positively correlated with happiness, that did not prove to be true for this model. Significance remained above the .05 level which meant that this variable does not have a significant impact on a respondent's happiness (see Table 1).

While a main supposition was that free time (*leisure*) would be significant in determining happiness, it did not prove to be so in the model. The hours a respondent has to relax per day remained above the .05 significance level.

If *health* or the condition of health of a respondent were insignificant in the model, what about the respondents' *mental health*? It was not surprising to find that mental health was highly significant in relation to *happiness*. Days of poor mental health experienced has an unstandardized beta (B) value of -.075. The negative coefficient in the log-odds unit (B) indicates that as the number of poor mental health days

experienced increase, the happiness level of a respondent decreases. This variable remained significant at a value of .000.

A respondent's gender (Female or Male) was not significant in the model in determining the level of happiness of a respondent. Significance level for this variable remained above the .05 sig. level.

The strongest effects in the model were attributed to both *marital status* and *mental health* of a respondent. Both of which significantly shape perceived happiness in a respondent. Taken together, these two were the most important explanatory factors in the model. R-squared in the model remains at a value of .234.

Below, implications of the findings and suggestions for further research will be discussed.

TABLE 1
Regression of Happiness on Race/Ethnicity, Income, Marital Status, Condition of Health, Altruism/Generosity, Education, Leisure, Mental Health and Sex/Gender, 2000-2018 General Social Survey (GSS) Data

GSS		
	B	Sig.
Race/ Ethnicity		
Non-Hispanic Black	-.700	.515
Hispanic	-.138	.900
Non-Hispanic White	.012	.991
Income	.031	.228
Marital Status		
Widowed	-1.490	.011*
Divorced	-1.830	.000*
Separated	-1.681	.001*
Never Married	-1.229	.000*
Condition of Health	-.235	.107
Altruism/Generosity		
Volunteer Work	-.087	.339
Money given to charity	.072	.442
Education	.028	.516
Leisure	.038	.389
Mental Health	-.075	.000*
Sex/Gender	-.169	.469
Constant	3.267	.024

*p < .05.

Summary and Conclusion

The facts that there is still no consensus on what happiness is, who should study it, and if it can even be empirically measured were reflected in this model. Due to the inconclusiveness of its measurement, finding explanatory variables for perceived happiness levels of respondents proved to be of a challenge. Happiness, even though it has been a human goal of life since ancient Greek times, seems to be a continual mystery in terms of its measurement.

These conclusions are based on analysis of the 00-18 GSS data and these findings might not be generalizable to the population. Among the several explanations for perceived happiness levels, two of the explored variables proved to be of utter importance when explaining perceived happiness levels in respondents. These two measurements were the ones of *marital status* and *mental health*. These both significantly attributed to the respondent falling into either happiness category.

“Experienced well-being,” one of the categories reviewed in the World Happiness Report proved to be of great importance when measuring happiness levels perceived by respondents in the United States. The aspect of regarding happiness as a “feeling” is very relevant for this model. This emotional measure of happiness could shed a light on what could be looked at in further research. Even though it might have been implied that happiness would be mostly accounted for by structural reasons (like education, income), it could be useful to look at a more emotional explanation towards the variable. Since this model was trying to explore happiness as beyond the “feeling” (Shin and Johnson 1978), variables were predominantly accounting for structural explanations. Knowing that *mental health* is positively linked to happiness is important in furthering research on the importance that mental health needs to be given in human life. If this is one of the significant aspects in human happiness, it should be taken very seriously. Mental health (and its serious implications in its lack of) is on the continual fight to gain acceptance in settings like work environments.

The finding that a respondent’s *marital status* plays a role in determining perceived happiness is consistent with previous literature (Bradburn and Orden 1969). Even though this previous study does not

associate marriage with perceived happiness, Bradburn and Orden describe why a woman's perceived freedom in a marriage is linked to a happier marriage which might then indicate a happier life.

The significance of the variable might also be explained by loneliness. Marriage, a symbol of company might indicate that people are less lonely and therefore happier- further research could explore this as well.

The finding that *health* had no significance in a respondent's perceived happiness level was very unexpected along with the outcome of *race or ethnicity* having no impact on perceived happiness either. Even though the variance explained by the model was relatively high (23.4%), there is still a lot of room for variance to be explained by the model. This indicates that there must be other variables that play a larger role in determining the happiness level perceived by a respondent than the ones that were reviewed in this model. Further research could also explore other groups (racial or ethnic) as comparison categories.

There could be implications in having collapsed and recoded the *happiness* variable. Since it was collapsed into a 2-level variable, one of the categories combined the answers *very happy* and *pretty happy* into one category. This could have yielded different results if the dependent variable was measured through another regression.

Every measurement or variable in the model was chosen for a reason. The main idea in trying to find parallel variables from the World Happiness report seemed appropriate because this happiness measure was not only reliable (since it is done by the United Nations) but substantiated (by measures like the Gallup World Poll). The insignificance of the measures could indicate that these measures are more effective for countries rather than individuals. Emotional explanations motioned above could be of more significance when measuring happiness at the individual level. Further studies like Park's (2017) study using MRI scans to study the neural link between generosity and happiness could be helpful in exploring other variables' impact on a respondent's brain.

Even though a consensus has been reached on how to measure happiness levels across countries, there is still a lot to be said on individual happiness levels, what accounts for these, and which public policy measures could in turn ameliorate these perceived gaps. There is still a lot to be said in the area of happiness

in sociological literature. If this topic is not only furthered in its exploring but also its explaining, there could be actions taken in order to ameliorate this perceived well-being that is extensively pursued. But, if no consensus (not even on its definition) is reached, well-being will preserve its ambiguity.

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