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Happiness and Identities[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Previous sociological research has focused on macro forces that are associated with overall happiness with one's life, but it has neglected an analysis of happiness in immediate situations and the micro forces that may shape it. In this study, we examine social structural as well as individual factors that may influence happiness in situations that are morally challenging. Data are examined from an experiment in which satisfying self-interests may involve cheating to get ahead. The results reveal that while distal, structural factors influence happiness for those who do not cheat, proximal, individual factors influence happiness for those who cheat. We discuss how both macro and micro forces may shape happiness in situations.

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Happiness has drawn the attention of psychologists far more than sociologists. Part of this may be because psychologists have been influenced by the positive psychology movement that has become increasingly popular over the past 15 years (Power, 2015). This movement has encouraged an analysis of human strengths and virtues rather than human weaknesses and vices. Research on happiness reveals that it is associated with many desirable attributes such as positive self-views, sociability, prosocial behavior, and creativity, as well as successes across major life domains such as work, love, and health (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005a). Happiness is not simply a consequence of these desirable traits and accomplishments, it may also be their cause.

Researchers in sociology have a tendency to focus on social problems or negative states such as poverty or inequality rather than positive states such as generosity or happiness. In studying people's overall happiness, sociologists have examined social structure arrangements and social processes that allocate more resources to some people over others, thus leading to greater happiness among the resource-rich (George, 2010). Social factors that have been examined and that are often positively associated with happiness include people's higher position in the stratification system along such dimensions as race/ethnicity, education, income, and marital status (Schnittker, 2008a; Yang, 2008); their social integration into society such as attending religious services (Yang, 2008) or volunteering (Borgonovi, 2008); and the social support they receive in social relationships such as friendships and marriage (Schnittker, 2008a; Yang, 2008).

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Psychologists have argued that broad social factors do not account for a significant amount of the variance in happiness (Diener et al., 1999), arguing that they explain only about 15 percent of the variation in happiness. This may be because people rapidly adapt to their new circumstances, and happiness deriving from positive events may be short-lived (Brickman et al., 1978). However, even adaptation theory does not always predict happiness levels. For example, there are individual differences in the rate and extent of adaptation for the same event (Diener et al., 2006). Not surprisingly, psychologists maintain that individual factors are stronger correlates of happiness than social factors. They turn to genetic evidence that reveals that one's level of happiness is moderately heritable or relatively fixed, explaining 50 percent of the variance in happiness levels (Lykken and Tellegen, 1996).¹ Aside from genetics, they also find that happiness is negatively associated with personality traits such as neuroticism, and positively associated with cognitive factors such as optimism and efficacy, and motivational factors such as the pursuit of goals that are intrinsic in content and consistent with one's values (Diener et al., 1999; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005b). Taken together, these individual factors claim almost another 40 percent of the variance in happiness.

If psychologists have found that individual factors importantly influence happiness, sociologists may need to give more attention to individual processes. One way to do this is through the social comparison process, an activity individuals participate in every day. Essentially, happiness is an outcome of ranking one's current state in relative or comparative terms to an earlier state, to one's current goals, or to some reference group (Diener et al., 1999; George, 2010; Lyubomirsky, 2001). Comparisons can be "upward" in which an association is made with an earlier, more positive condition, a higher goal state, or a reference group that exceeds one's current accomplishments, all of which reduce happiness. Alternatively, comparisons can be "downward" to a poorer earlier condition, lower goal state, or reference group whose successes fall below one's own, and these comparisons can increase happiness.

Social comparison theory has been somewhat popular in trying to understand individual variability in happiness in psychology (Diener et al., 1999; George, 2010; Lyubomirsky, 2001),² but how social comparisons relate to particular kinds of happiness is not always straightforward.³ If happiness is the evaluation that the overall quality of one's life is favorable (commonly labeled "subjective well-being") (Diener et al., 1999; George, 2010; Yang, 2008), it has been argued that social comparisons may be less relevant in explaining overall happiness and may be more relevant in understanding happiness in an immediate situation (Veenhoven, 1991).

In the current research, we use the lens of social comparison to study micro forces or proximal factors that may influence happiness, which in this research is a morally challenging situation. Individuals participate in an experiment in which doing well on a task increases their chances of earning money in a lottery, but they learn that there is a way to cheat to get ahead. Some cheat and some do not. For each group, relying on the identity process in sociology (Burke and Stets, 2009), we measure participants' moral identity and examine whether comparisons of self versus others' views along the moral dimension influences happiness in this situation. A discrepancy between self-other views may reduce happiness because individuals' identities are not being verified. More generally, we study the social comparison process that exists within identity theory (Stets and Burke, 2014b), which we then apply to an analysis of the moral identity in this study to determine its influence on situational happiness.

We also examine macro forces or distal factors that may influence happiness. We examine one's position in the social structure in terms of gender and race, and human capital that individuals may possess in the situation. Human capital is individuals' investment in skills, knowledge, and experience that increases their worth as producers and advances them materially (Becker, 1964). In this research, human capital is assessed in terms of people's skills/ability to successfully carry out the task in this study. Clearly, if people have the ability to perform well on the task, there is no need to behave dishonestly, and thus self-other views along the moral dimension may not be pertinent. Thus, we explore whether distal factors play a more significant role in influencing happiness when moral issues are not as salient for individuals.

1. Theory

1.1. Macro forces

Early studies in sociology revealed that those higher in the status hierarchy along a variety of dimensions such as race, education, income, and marital status were happier than those lower in the status hierarchy (Davis, 1984). The exception to this was gender with women reporting greater overall happiness than men. More recent evidence reveals that inequality in

¹ Sociologists who study the role of genetics in happiness show that genes matter for some successes related to happiness such as spousal support, but they matter less for other successes such as support from friends (Schnittker, 2008b).

² The social comparison process also has been used in sociology to understand, for example, how income and happiness are related (Schnittker, 2008a).

³ An upward comparison does not always decrease happiness and a downward comparison does not always increase happiness. It depends, for example, on the targets of one's comparison (Buunk et al., 1990), and the individual characteristics of the person making the comparison (Wheeler, 2000). For example, a comparison to a similar other can produce identification, with a downward comparison leading to negative feelings (fear) that one could experience a similar plight, while a downward comparison to a dissimilar other can lead to a contrast effect and induce pride that another's plight will never happen to oneself (Smith, 2000). Regarding individual characteristics, compared to those with low self-esteem, those with high self-esteem make more downward comparisons, and compared to those with a stable self-esteem, those with an unstable self-esteem make more upward comparisons (Wheeler, 2000). Thus, the question is not whether social comparisons influence happiness, but when and what kinds of comparisons produce this effect (Diener et al., 1999).

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