

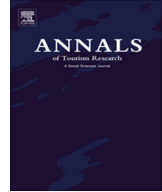


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The influence of holiday-taking on affect and contentment

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the question whether and to what extent holiday behavior and happiness influence each other over time. To capture these relationships a cross-lagged panel model is specified and estimated using data from a four-wave panel of Dutch respondents. The results show that, over time, holiday-taking has a positive reciprocal relationship with the cognitive component of happiness. However, holiday-taking is not related to the affective component of happiness. Hence, those who go on holiday judge the conditions of their lives as more optimal, but do not generally feel better. Theoretically, the results suggest that (in the long term) holidays trips may be instrumental in living up to certain individual or social standards, but are unable to enduringly raise happiness.

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Introduction

Happiness can be valued in its own right as a form of general well-being and for its observed positive effects on longevity (Diener & Chan, 2011; Veenhoven, 2008) and success in multiple life domains, including marriage, friendship, income, work performance, and health (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). In short, happy people live longer and perform better. Thus, creating conditions that help to make people happy is arguably in the public interest, and understanding which factors contribute to happiness is important for developing effective policy to achieve this end.

Since leisure satisfaction is strongly related to overall life satisfaction (Neal, Sirgy, & Uysal, 1999), one potentially relevant factor is holiday behavior. Empirical research on the relation between holiday behavior and well-being can broadly be categorized into two approaches. The first focuses on short-term effects of vacationing and typically involves a pre-test/post-test design in which relevant

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outcome variables are measured some time before and after the vacation (either with or without a non-vacationing control group). Based on a meta-analysis of such studies De Bloom et al. (2009) conclude that vacations generally have small but positive effects on various outcome indicators, such as health, life satisfaction, mood and affect. Additionally, for several indicators De Bloom et al. (2009) found evidence that the effects fade out shortly after the vacation. Empirical studies published after this review corroborate this finding, showing that well-being measures generally return to pre-vacation values within short periods of time (Chen, Lehto, & Cai, 2013; De Bloom et al., 2010; Nawijn, Marchand, Veenhoven, & Vingerhoets, 2010).

The second approach focuses on the long-term effects of holiday-taking by correlating subjects' holiday behavior over a longer period (e.g. a year) with outcome indicators such as happiness or life satisfaction. While initial studies were based on cross-sectional data, Nawijn (2011) and Nawijn and Veenhoven (2011) recently extended this approach using longitudinal (panel) data. These data allow the researcher to empirically investigate the direction of causation. For example, based on a large German panel, Nawijn and Veenhoven (2011) found a sizeable cross-sectional correlation of 0.18 between the frequency of holiday trips and life satisfaction. Controlling for possible third variables such as income and personality, the (partial) correlation dropped to 0.14 but remained significant. However, when controlled for life satisfaction measured one year earlier, the over-time correlation was found to be insignificant. Nawijn (2011) replicated this finding among a sample of Dutch respondents.

From a methodological point of view these results clearly show that the use of panel data is warranted. Substantively, the findings led the authors to conclude that if the direction of causation indeed runs from holiday-taking to life satisfaction, the effects are small and short-lived. However, since vacationers are generally found to be happier than non-vacationers even before going on holiday (Gilbert & Abdullah, 2004; Nawijn et al., 2010), it might well be that the causal effect (indeed) runs the other way around.

The present study aims to contribute to this latter approach, investigating the long-term relationship between holiday-taking and happiness. To this purpose, a four-wave panel of Dutch respondents is analyzed. The main question to be addressed is to what extent the association between holiday-taking and happiness is the result of a causal effect in either or possibly both directions and/or the result of underlying common variables influencing both.

Its specific contributions to the present literature are twofold. First, the analysis includes both an *affective* measure of happiness and a *cognitive* measure of happiness. This will allow us to answer the question whether holiday-taking primarily influences how people feel (the affective component of happiness) or alternatively, how people evaluate their life (the cognitive component). As we will argue below, the answer to this question has important theoretical implications.

Second, this study will model the relationships between holiday-taking and happiness within a structural equation framework, which offers the opportunity to fit an entire model structure to the data (with multiple independent/dependent variables and indirect/direct effects). Specifically, a cross-lagged panel model will be specified to model the bidirectional relationships between holiday-taking and happiness. In many research domains this model has been successfully applied to assess causal dominance among variables of interest (see e.g., Arnau, Rosen, Finch, Rhudy, & Fortunato, 2007; Brennan, Schutte, & Moos, 1999; Kenny, Blustein, Haase, Jackson, & Perry, 2006; Matsueda & Anderson, 1998).

Theoretical background

Theoretical mechanisms

Various researchers have theorized about the possible mechanisms of causation between holiday-taking and well-being (Dolnicar, Yanamandram, & Cliff, 2012; Gilbert & Abdullah, 2004). Most of the mechanisms are focused on the immediate effects on happiness. For example, in the short term, holidays provide opportunities for relaxation and relief from the pressures of everyday life (De Bloom

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