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Original

Revisiting happiness: Frequency versus intensity

Redefiniendo la felicidad: frecuencia versus intensidad

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Abstract

Mexico is consistently portrayed as a happy country. Research endeavors, both national and international, show that Mexico's levels of happiness are favorable, although little has been done regarding specific measurement underpinnings. There is a constant debate on whether happiness should be measured in terms of frequency or intensity of positive affect over negative affect (Diener, Sandvik, & Pavot, 2009), although some consensus points toward frequency's superiority over intensity of emotions. Some authors insist that frequency can be measured more easily and accurately than intensity, allowing for cross-person metric comparisons. This research put to test the frequency-intensity debate by providing several conceptual frameworks that accentuated one over the other, allowing people to decide how they defined their own happiness. Two independent samples ($n_1 = 158$, $n_2 = 583$) of Mexican men and women provided insights on whether happiness in Mexico is defined in terms of frequency or intensity. Once it was defined, happiness levels were compared between two groups showing that those who define happiness as "frequency" present higher levels of joy. This research supports the premise that happiness could be defined as the sum of frequent events, congruent with bottom-up approaches to happiness and wellbeing.

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Keywords: Happiness; Wellbeing; Frequency; Intensity; Bottom-up

Resumen

México es consistentemente definido como un país feliz. Algunas investigaciones, tanto nacionales como internacionales, muestran que los niveles de felicidad de México son favorables, aunque poco se ha hecho respecto a algunos aspectos clave sobre la medición de la felicidad. Existe un constante debate sobre si la felicidad debe ser medida en términos de intensidad o de frecuencia de afecto positivo sobre afecto negativo (Diener, Sandvik y Pavot, 2009), aunque existe cierto acuerdo en torno a la superioridad de la frecuencia sobre la intensidad. Algunos insisten en que la frecuencia puede ser medida de manera fácil y precisa, permitiendo una métrica comparable entre individuos. Esta investigación tuvo como propósito poner a prueba el debate de frecuencia-intensidad al proveer diferentes esquemas en torno a la felicidad, permitiendo que la gente eligiera cómo se define esta. Dos muestras independientes ($n_1 = 158$, $n_2 = 583$) de hombres y mujeres mexicanos proveen información útil sobre cómo se define en México la felicidad. Una

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vez definida, se compararon los niveles de felicidad de 2 grupos, obteniendo resultados que apuntan a mayores niveles de felicidad en aquellos que la definen en términos de «frecuencia». Estos hallazgos apoyan la premisa de que la felicidad puede ser entendida como la suma de componentes básicos que ocurren con relativa frecuencia, congruente con las posturas teóricas de «abajo-arriba» (sumativas) en torno al estudio del bienestar y la felicidad.

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Palabras clave: Felicidad; Bienestar; Frecuencia; Intensidad; Procesos sumativos

The study of wellbeing started with researchers trying to assess happiness, which was considered for some as the goal of human life. Wilson's (1967) and Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith's (1999) reviews have been consistently used as conceptual and empirical frameworks toward research in the field. Wilson's (1967) conclusions about who the person who is universally happy stated that the happy person is a "young, healthy, well-educated, well-paid, extroverted, optimistic, worry-free, religious, married person with high self-esteem, job morale, modest aspirations, of either sex and of a wide range of intelligence" (p. 294). Since then, extensive research has been made in the field (see Diener, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d) toward defining a happy person.

Social behavioral sciences consider the study of Subjective Well Being (SWB) the field in which people's evaluations of their lives are studied. It includes many of dimensions and assessments ranging from quick-momentary moods, feelings, and cognitive frameworks to global judgements of life satisfaction and overall feelings toward life (Diener, 2009a). Diener (2005) defines SWB as the various types of evaluations that people make of their own lives. These evaluations may be either positive or negative and include both cognitive evaluations of satisfaction toward life, and affective reactions to life events, such as feeling happy or sad.

In Mexico, some of the most recent endeavors concerning the scientific study of SWB and happiness (Arita, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; INEGI, 2015; Palomar, 2000, 2004, 2005; Velasco, 2015) have directed their efforts into trying to explain how the access to public services (water, electricity, gas, paved roads), sociodemographic data (age, sex, income), and personality traits determine self-reported levels of happiness/wellbeing. One of these efforts (INEGI, 2012, 2015), labeled as BIARE (*Bienestar Auto-Reportado* in Spanish, Self-Reported Wellbeing in English) was intended to obtain enough information in order to generate data equivalent to that of the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development). The assessment involved a series of questions such as "On a scale of 0 to 10, how satisfied are you

with your life?" (10 being the most satisfied), "How happy did you feel yesterday?", "How happy would you consider yourself?" among others. With more than ten thousand participants, results showed the following: 36.5% of the Mexican population is moderately satisfied with life (ranging from 7 to 8 in the 0–10 continuum), 47.1% is satisfied (9–10 interval), 33.4% is moderately happy (7–8 interval), and 55.7% is happy (9–10). These findings seem to be consistent for Mexican population across time (Gómez, 2012; Velasco, 2015).

According to Diener et al. (2009), when people seek happiness, some desire to be happy most of the time, even if only mildly so. Arguably, some people may think that happiness and wellbeing are addressed when frequent positive affect and intense positive affect are both fulfilled, with minimal amounts of non-intense, non-frequent negative affect. However, many people would suggest that either frequent (mild) or intense (but frequent) experiences of positive affect are necessary of sufficient to produce a happy life.

Diener, Sandvik, & Pavot (2009) and Diener, Sandvik, and Pavot (1991) suggest that happiness refers to the frequency and not the intensity of positive affect (feeling good) over negative affect (feeling bad). According to these authors, frequency of emotions is more easily and accurately measured than intensity since information concerning frequency can be encoded in memory and can therefore be more accurately recalled. Also, frequency can be more easily comparable across persons, whereas intensity of emotions is usually too subjective, making it harder to compare among individuals. Even more, Diener and Iran-Nejad (1986) argued that the judgment of happiness versus unhappiness is easier in terms of frequency since people tend to understand, live and experience both of them in terms of dominance: when one of them is dominant, the other one exists, if at all, at low levels.

Emotional intensity is likely to be more difficult to encode because of its nature. The calibration of emotional experiences becomes more challenging as emotions become more intense. Frequency information

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