



Brief Report

Dispositional happiness and college student GPA: Unpacking a null relation

Morris A. Okun^{a,*}, Roy Levy^b, Paul Karoly^a, Linda Ruehlman^a^a Department of Psychology, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287-1104, United States^b Psychology in Education, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287-0611, United States

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ABSTRACT

We examined the mechanisms that underlie the null relation between dispositional happiness and college grade point average (GPA) by testing the hypothesis that dispositional happiness has positive and negative indirect links to GPA that offset each other. The sample consisted of 317 first-year students. Using structural equation modeling, we found that dispositional happiness exerted a positive indirect effect on cumulative GPA via commitment to college ($p < .01$) and a negative indirect effect on cumulative GPA via satisfaction with peer (student) relationships ($p < .05$). As predicted, the sum of its indirect effects on cumulative GPA was not significant ($p = .22$).

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1. Introduction

The present study was guided by a top-down view which posits that there are stable individual differences in the disposition to be happy. From this perspective, happiness entails experiencing a preponderance of positive affect most of the time (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Happy people differ from less happy people in how they encode, interpret, and respond affectively to objective life events and conditions (Lyubomirsky, 2001). Happiness is posited to be associated with several resources that promote success in many culturally valued domains such as health, wealth, love, and work (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Nevertheless, Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999) proposed that dispositional happiness should be unrelated to college GPA. In support of this prediction, they (1999) reported correlations between their measure of happiness and college GPA of $-.03$ and $-.08$. Our goal was to provide an explanation for this null effect.

We propose that some of the affective resources of happy people that may foster success in other contexts are detrimental to academic performance in college. More specifically, we hypothesize that dispositional happiness is linked to satisfaction with peer relationships and to positive arousal related to academic goals, and these variables, in turn, hinder academic performance. At the same time, dispositional happiness is posited to be associated with motivational variables such as commitment to college and goal-striving that foster academic performance. Because of a cancellation process whereby its positive indirect effects are offset by its negative indirect effects, we pre-

dict that the sum of dispositional happiness' indirect effects on cumulative GPA will not be significant.

2. The proposed model of the relation between dispositional happiness and GPA

As indicated in Fig. 1, we contend that dispositional happiness will not exert a direct effect on cumulative GPA. Instead, we hypothesize that dispositional happiness will exert two positive indirect effects and two negative indirect effects on cumulative GPA. The rationale for each hypothesized indirect effect is presented ahead. Because of the robust correlations that have been reported between high school GPA and first-year GPA and between composite scores on the ACT College Entrance Exam (ACT) and first-year GPA (Robbins, Allen, Casillas, Peterson, & Le, 2006), we controlled for academic readiness in testing our structural equation model linking dispositional happiness to cumulative GPA.

2.1. Happiness \rightarrow commitment to college \rightarrow cumulative GPA

Robbins et al. (2006) defined commitment to college as a student's dedication to staying in college and getting a degree. Upon deciding which college they will attend, happy students increase their ratings of the college's desirability whereas unhappy students do not (Lyubomirsky, 2001). Consequently, happy students may start college with a greater commitment to the institution than unhappy students. Kluger and Koslowsky (1988) found a strong positive relation between academic commitment and college GPA. Therefore, we hypothesized that dispositional happiness will exert a significant positive indirect effect on cumulative GPA via commitment to college.

* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 480 965 8544.

E-mail address: okun@asu.edu (M.A. Okun).

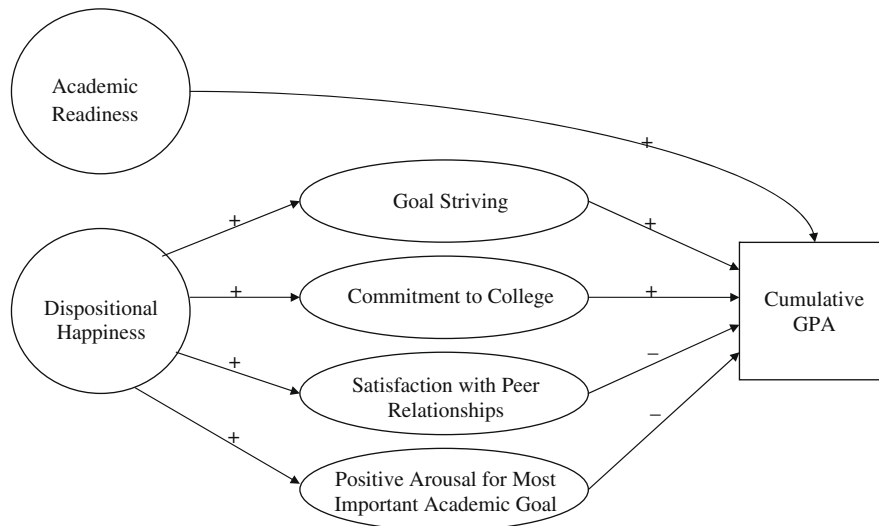


Fig. 1. Hypothesized indirect effects model of the relation between dispositional happiness and cumulative GPA.

2.2. Happiness → goal striving → cumulative GPA

Robbins et al. (2006) defined goal striving as the strength of a student's efforts to achieve goals. Happy and unhappy people have been shown to differ in their self-regulation and instrumental pursuit of goals. Happiness may foster goal striving by conferring resources such as energy and optimism that are linked to effective coping, self-improvement, and recovery following resource-draining acts of self-regulation (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Controlling for prior grades, aptitude test scores, and academic self-efficacy, grade striving is a positive predictor of course grades (Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994). Consequently, we hypothesized that dispositional happiness will exert a significant positive indirect effect on cumulative GPA via goal striving.

2.3. Happiness → satisfaction with peer relationships → cumulative GPA

Relative to unhappy people, happy people report more frequent social interaction and greater enjoyment of social interactions (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Wintre and Bowers (2007) found that the likelihood of university persistence increased as social adjustment increased from low to moderate levels and then decreased as social adjustment increased from moderate to high levels. They suggested that students with a large investment in friendships may be less likely to persist because they spend less time doing their academic work. Consequently, we hypothesized that dispositional happiness will exert a significant negative indirect effect on cumulative GPA via satisfaction with peer relationships.

2.4. Happiness → positive arousal for most important academic goal → cumulative GPA

Happiness is strongly related to the proportion of time that people feel positive emotions (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). The evidence regarding the effects of positive affect on cognitive performance is mixed (Oishi, Diener, & Lucas, 2007). Consistent with the mood-as-input model (Martin, Ward, Achée, & Wyer, 1993), positive arousal for academic goals has been shown to be a significant, inverse predictor of test scores in Introductory Psychology (Okun, Fairhome, Karoly, Ruehlman, & Newton, 2006). We hypothesize, therefore, that dispositional happiness will exert

a significant negative indirect effect on cumulative GPA via positive arousal for most important academic goal.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants were a convenience sample of 317 first-year students who (a) entered the University in the fall of 2006, and (b) were enrolled in sections of Introduction to Psychology in the spring of 2007. Students who participated in the study received credit towards fulfilling a course requirement. Sixty-three percent of the students were women. Eighty-nine percent of the students reported that they were White-Non-Hispanic and 11% reported that they were Hispanic.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Dispositional happiness

Indicators of dispositional happiness included the four items on the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). Across 14 samples, the mean coefficient alpha for the happiness scale was .86 and the mean test-retest reliability estimate was .72. Items were rated on 7-point scales. One of the items asked the extent to which participants identified themselves as a happy person with anchor points of "not a very happy person" and "a very happy person."

3.2.2. Academic readiness

Indicators of academic readiness included total scores on the ACT, total scores on the SAT Reasoning Test (SAT), and high school GPA. ACT total scores were correlated .86 with SAT total scores, and ACT and SAT total scores were correlated .37 and .38, respectively, with high school GPA.

3.2.3. Satisfaction with peer relationships

There were four indicators of satisfaction with peer relationships (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983). Okun, Karoly, Martin, and Benshoff (2008–2009) reported coefficient alphas of .85 and .87 for this scale. Items were rated on a 5-point scale with anchor points of "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree." One of the items was: "The student friendships I have developed at ... have been personally satisfying."

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