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VARIABILITY OF HAPPINESS ACCORDING TO HEALTH, INCOME, RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AND RELATIONSHIP STATUS IN ROMANIAN YOUNG ADULTS

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Abstract
Subjective feeling of happiness with life is an intensely studied domain in positive psychology because its correlates with health, mental health and social factors. This study aimed to investigate levels of happiness depending on four factors that are considered to influence level of happiness: income, relationship status, religious affiliation and health. N=1444 (860 woman, 584 man) Romanian young adults who recently finished high school were included in our study. Happiness, subjective health evaluation, financial situation, religious affiliation and relationship status, were assessed with an online questionnaire. The majority of participants reported being happy. All four variables counted for variance in happiness level. Happiness level significantly increased according to financial situation of family and subjective evaluation of own health. The unhappy participants were singles, with low income, and several health issues, also Greco-Catholics and atheist participants. Data makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the role of socio-demographic factors in youth well-being and it provides further evidence to cultural generalizability of this model.

Keywords: happiness, well-being, religion, financial situation, young adults, health, Romania

1. INTRODUCTION

The question “why are some happier than others?” - is one of the most interesting and challenging questions in the field of psychology. A consolidated literature proved that subjective happiness provides useful insight into an individual’s quality of life and a reliable source of information about people's well-being (Oishi, Diener & Lucas, 2007). On the other hand several authors have advanced the claim that happiness or, more generally, positive attitudes towards life can predict longevity and other indicators of physical well-being (Diener & Chan, 2011). Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener (2005) reviewed cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental data showing that happy and satisfied individuals are more likely to have fulfilling relationships, high incomes, superior work performance, good health, and a long life. Happiness was weakly but constantly associates with socioeconomic status, education, employment and emotional stability. Cross-cultural research has also shown consistent mean-level differences in subjective happiness ratings across nations, concluding that political and religious freedom, human rights, and societal equality encouraged greater happiness and life satisfaction (Diener Lucas, 2000, Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003).

According to the 2013 Happiness database Romania is ranked on the 90th place out of 150 participating countries in the study. North European countries were ranked on the first five places in the 2013 World Happiness Report, with Denmark and Norway in first and second place respectively, rounded out by Sweden in the fifth place. According to the National Happiness Survey realized on a sample of 1002 respondents only four in ten Romanian adults are considered happy (14.3% of reported feeling truly happy and 24.8% felling happy). When asked what brings them happiness and satisfaction, most respondents have referred to personal relationships, health and leisure time. The lucky sought refuge in education and community according to the survey. Divorced or widowed and those between 45 and 54 years old with low income, were the least happy in the sample.

Health, religious affiliation, income level and relationship status are set to be among the most important factors that were related with happiness across studies (e.g. World Happiness Database, 2005, 2013). This paper provides new evidence over the well-being a quality of life younger growing up generation by analyzing the above correlates of individual subjective feeling of happiness.

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2. METHOD

The present study is a part of a larger research project aiming to investigate social and psychological aspects of transition from adolescents into adulthood. Data analysed in this paper is comprehensive and belongs to the second wave of a three year longitudinal study. Sample: N=1444 young adults (ages 19–23, M=21.6(1.3) years, 59.0% female, 41% male, 24% living in rural, 76% living in urban residential area) participated in the study. The majority of the sample was students enrolled in universities (74%) or technical schools (7.6%). The remaining of the sample (17%) was working or staying home. Procedure: Respondents were recruited with the assistance of school inspectorates during the first wave of the study and re introduced when we obtained their contact data and agreement to participate in our study. The surveys were mainly conducted online, questionnaires being completed on our project website: www.vitoradult.ro. In some targeted regions, without internet, project team members and trained students assessed participants individually. Measures: Happiness was measured using the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS, Lubomirsky & Lepper,1999). The SHS has high internal consistency, good to excellent reliability, and construct convergent and discriminant validity (Lubomirsky & Lepper,1999). The psychometric properties of the scale were calculated over the whole sample, N = 1457 (96% responses) Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was .67. All item-test correlations were higher than .58, suggesting good psychometric properties. Items related to analysed variables demographics and socio-economic status was taken from the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS, http://www.ggpi.org). Demographic data has been recorded based on standard questions used in public opinion barometers.Subjective health was assessed by a single item with a five pint scale ranging from I have serious health issues going on” to “Excellent health”.

3. RESULTS

Data were analysed using SPSS version 22 for Microsoft Windows. Mean comparison and variance analysis was used to estimate differences according to self-rated health, income, religious affiliation and relationship status. Overall score on subjective happiness ranged from minimum 1.5- to a maximum of 7. The average score on subjective happiness on the overall sample was M=5.16 (SD=1.09). The average happiness score in general population runs from about 4.5 to 5.5 according to previous studies that use the SHS scale. College students tend to score lower (averaging a little below 5) than working adults and older, retired people (who average 5.6) (Lubomirsky & Lepper,1999). In the present sample young woman reported being happier than man t(1444)=2.36, p<0.5. There was no significant difference between those living in urban or rural area.

An important correlate that was related to happiness across studies is self-evaluated health. Global health was based on self-report, assessed with a single item „how do you evaluate your health?” Differences in happiness level were significant across all quasi groups, those reporting being healthier being also happier F(4,1420)=18.05, p<.001 (Graphic 1.). Among those with “serious” and “some health issues” subjective happiness was way below average. Those indicating a “very good” and “excellent health”, where happier, than the average. In case of woman, differences were significant between all quasi groups F(4,845)=14.32, p<.001. In case of man, there was no difference between “some health issues” and “good health”, but in overall, self-evaluation of health, counted for variances in levels of happiness F(4,570)=7.91, p<.001. Nevertheless, those reporting having a chronic illness (N=49), (M=4.71, SD=1.24), reported being significantly less happy t(1370)=3.03, p<.001 than the rest of the participants (M=5.20, SD=1.08).

![Graphic 1. Variance in subjective happiness level according to self-evaluation of health](image-url)
Happiness was weakly but consistently related to income level across studies. There was no significant relationship between happiness level and money received from parents, personal earnings or money spent by participants. Since, the majority of the sample indicated they were still financially supported by parents, we checked variances in happiness level according to the participant’s family income (Graphic 2).

**Graphic 2. Variance in happiness level according to participant family’s income level**

Our data indicated, that average happiness score continuously increased depending on this variable, F(8, 1442) = 4.841, p<.001. In the overall sample, happiness level of those earning below 500 or between 500-1000 Ron per month was below average and they were significantly unhappier compared to all quasi groups. Happiness increased to above average if participant’s family’s income level was above 2000 RON and reached a higher level if family income was above 10000 RON/ month. Low income level (below 500 Ron) and between 1000-1500 Ron was not associated with level of happiness in woman (was around average), only with level of happiness in man (scoring below average), while very high income (above 100000 Ron) was associated with below average happiness in men (M=4.8) and high happiness in women (M=6.5).

Those who were working M=4.82(1.34) were unhappier t (1473) =2.85, p<.001 compared with participants who did not have to work M=5.19(1.01). Those who choose to work while studying for the purpose of gaining experience and learn M=5.4(0.98) were happier, t(1474)=3.03, p<.001, compared with those who had to work to earn a living besides studies or to pay for their studies M=5.08(1.16).

Religious orientation is another factor that plays role in variances of subjective well-being measure. Data indicated significant differences in levels of subjective happiness according to religious affiliation F(7,1432)=3.200, p<.002. The most happy individuals were those with “other religions” (mainly Baptist and Buddhists) followed by Orthodox and Neoprotestants who were also a little happier than the average (Graphic 3). The least happy were Greco-Catholics. They were significantly unhappier compared to all other groups except atheist.

**Graphic 3. Mean comparisons for happiness depending on religious affiliation**

Participants reporting to have a stable relationship were significantly happier than singles. This finding was considered valid for both man t(845)=4.20, p<.001 and woman t(845)=2.56, p<.005. Those reporting to have a partner scored above average on happiness. Data indicated that men’s level of happiness was more strongly “affected” by relationship status, single men being less happy compared to single woman t(609)=2.28, p<.05 (Graphic 4).
4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study analyzed happiness in a large sample of Romanian youth along four major factors that are known to be linked to happiness: health, income, religious affiliation and relationship status. Overall, Romanian youth reported to be happy, woman a little happier than man. Self-evaluation of own health was related to happiness, the healthier one’s felt the happier it was. Happiness and health have been anecdotally linked for quite a while now—“laughter is the best medicine”, “healthy mind in a healthy body”— but new research has been backing up what many people have instinctively assumed all along and scientific study provided hard evidence for these ancient sayings. In line with previous studies, happiness was also linked to better financial situation. In our sample of young adults what counted was participant’s family’s income and not personal earnings. This finding is obvious since in Romania the majority of students can’t earn that much to support themselves, thus they are dependent on their parents. Those who had to work alongside their studies were a little unhappier. An interesting finding was differences by gender, while happiness in man slowly increased with family income after a certain level decreased, while woman’s level of happiness showed sudden jump if family’s income was over 10000 Ron. Our data is just descriptive and we cannot answer the question if money buys happiness, but common sense and scientific data proves that financial security is causally related to happiness at least to certain degree. Explanation of this relationship of course, may not always be direct. A better financial background comes with multiple benefits like: more options in life, more leisure time, sense of security, lower levels of stress, etc. that can lead to positive emotions. Are healthier people happier, or are happy people more likely to care for their health? Or does money allow all of the above? The arrow of causality goes probably both ways as proven by many studies. A study of the “Economic Determinants of Happiness,” has revealed that health is a far more powerful determinant of an individual’s happiness than his or her income. Self-described “healthy” people are 20 percent happier than average, while “unhealthy” people are 8.25 percent less happy.

Another considerable finding of this study was that participants reporting to have a stable relationship, were significantly happier compared to singles. This finding was considered valid for both man and woman, although single men were unhappier than single woman. Explanations for these results are obvious. The presence of a partner is associated with many advantages that indirectly or directly links to positive emotions and happiness, to name some: being loved, belonging to someone, taking care of someone or and being cared by someone. Studies show that in general, people appear to feel better about themselves and their lives when they move into a relationship.

The present study also found differences in happiness level according to religious affiliation. Religious participants were unhappier than non-religious participants. Previous findings repeatedly demonstrated that religious feelings, attitudes were linked to happiness. Religion may promote happiness because gives people a sense of purpose, order and serves as a resource for coping with negative life experiences, also provides social connectedness. An interesting finding was that Greco-Catholics were significantly unhappier compared to all other participants, except non religious one’s (atheists). The happiest individuals were those with “other religions” (e.g. Buddhists) followed by Orthodox and Neo-protestants (Adventist, Baptists, Unitarians, Lutherans) who were happier than the average of the sample. One explanation can be that catholic religious believes are stringent and less permissive in terms of enjoying life, while for example neo-protestant or other religion are more permissive, person oriented and opened to ways of joy. In conclusion, participants reporting to have a better health, stable relationship, and higher income were significantly happier compared to participants who were singles, experiencing diverse health issues, and having a low income? These endings in Romanian young adults are in line with the findings elsewhere in the world. Explanations of such results are obvious: health, better financial background and a having a stable relationship comes with multiple benefits. Although
The present data is cross-sectional and correlation is a valuable finding that complements existing research on youth well-being in relation with socio-demographic correlates. We intend to present in the future deeper layers of our research and to effectuate a more complex analysis in regard of happiness and its predictors and correlates. Future longitudinal data will provide more insight into changes in happiness and its predictors.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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6. REFERENCE


