Concepts of Happiness Across Time and Cultures

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Abstract

We explored cultural and historical variations in concepts of happiness. First, we analyzed the definitions of happiness in dictionaries from 30 nations to understand cultural similarities and differences in happiness concepts. Second, we analyzed the definition of happiness in Webster's dictionaries from 1850 to present day to understand historical changes in American English. Third, we coded the State of the Union addresses given by U.S. presidents from 1790 to 2010. Finally, we investigated the appearance of the phrases *happy nation* versus *happy person* in Google Ngram Viewer from 1800 to 2008. Across cultures and time, happiness was most frequently defined as good luck and favorable external conditions. However, in American English, this definition was replaced by definitions focused on favorable internal feeling states. Our findings highlight the value of a historical perspective in the study of psychological concepts.

What is happiness? Although the scientific study of happiness and subjective well-being (SWB) has thrived over the past 30 years, the *concept* of happiness has been elusive. In fact, Ed Diener (1984) advocated the use of the scientific term *SWB* as opposed to happiness precisely because of the ambiguities associated with the term *happiness*. SWB has been frequently operationalized as the subjective evaluation of life as a whole, the presence of pleasant emotions, and the relative absence of unpleasant emotions (Diener, 1984). As SWB research became popular in psychological science, some researchers started using the term *happiness* (e.g., Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997). However, the fundamental question regarding the meaning of happiness has been examined only rarely (see Wierzbicka, 2004, for this critique).

The main goal of this article is to explore various concepts of happiness using current and historical dictionaries and speeches (cf. Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008; Simonton, 2003). Just as our understandings of action (Noguchi, Handley, & Albarracín, 2011), emotion (Pennebaker, 2011), cognition (Maass, Karasawa, Politi, & Suga, 2006; Semin, 2000), and culture (Kashima & Kashima, 1998) have been deepened by detailed linguistic analyses, we believe that the linguistic analysis of the term *happiness* is critical to advance psychological theory and the scientific understanding of well-being.

The second goal is to demonstrate the utility of a historical perspective on psychological science. Psychological scientists today are concerned almost exclusively with the latest developments and cutting-edge research (see Nisbett, 1990; Oishi, Kesebir, & Snyder, 2009). It is, however, important to document the history of our science and the role that history might play in shaping our science to avoid repeating mistakes (cf. Allport, 1954; Hilgard, 1987). In addition to the epistemological advantage, there are also advantages to investigating historical changes in psychological phenomena and concepts. The cross-temporal meta-analysis of survey results from different historical periods, for example, can address important questions such as whether Americans are increasingly more agentic over time (Roberts & Helson, 1997), more narcissistic (Twenge & Campbell, 2008) or not (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2008), and whether Japanese people are becoming more individualistic over time (Hamamura, 2012). Similarly, the linguistic analysis of popular songs over time can reveal

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