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Stressful situations affecting the perception of happiness: Love as a stressor

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to analyze the association between subjective happiness, perceived stress and number of stressors, and to identify which of the latter have greater influence on subjective happiness and perceived stress. It was a transversal study carried out with 238 women and 52 men from the general population with an age range from 25 to 44 years, residents of the city of Monterrey or metropolitan area of the state of Nuevo León, Mexico. The Subjective Happiness Scale, the Perceived Stress Scale and a question about stressful situations were used as assessment instruments. Results showed a negative correlation between happiness and perceived stress. Likewise, the group of participants who reported love and partner relations as major stressful situations were the ones who also reported lower levels of happiness and higher levels of perceived stress. We conclude that, in our sample, situations related to love and partner relations had a higher impact on happiness, regardless of marital status and sex.

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Situaciones estresantes que afectan la percepción de la felicidad: el amor como estresor

RESUMEN

Los propósitos de este estudio fueron conocer la relación entre la felicidad subjetiva, el estrés percibido y el número de estresores, e identificar aquellos sucesos vitales con más influencia sobre la felicidad subjetiva y el estrés percibido. Fue un estudio transversal donde participaron 238 mujeres y 52 hombres de población general de 25 a 44 años de edad, residentes en la ciudad de Monterrey o área metropolitana del estado de Nuevo León, México. Como medidas de evaluación se utilizaron la Escala de Felicidad Subjetiva, la Escala de Estrés Percibido y una pregunta sobre situaciones estresantes. Los resultados mostraron una relación negativa entre la felicidad y el estrés percibido de los participantes. Las personas del grupo que reportó las situaciones de amor y pareja como eventos generadores de estrés fueron quienes reportaron menor felicidad y mayor estrés percibido. Puede concluirse que las situaciones relacionadas con el amor y la pareja son las que tuvieron un mayor impacto en la felicidad, independientemente del estado civil y el sexo.

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Recently, the interest to conduct researches about happiness and subjective wellbeing has increased (Luhmann, Hofmann, Eid,

& Lucas, 2012). Seligman (2002) proposes to include three elements when defining happiness: experiencing positive emotions (the pleasant life), being engaged in life activities (the engaged life), and finding a sense of purpose or meaning (the meaningful life).

Pozos, Rivera, Reidl, Vargas, and López (2013), after performing a study with semantic networks in Mexico, state that happiness is a positive emotion strongly linked to love, which occurs when a

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person assesses life or a particular life event; in the case of Mexican culture, this is related to support networks including family, partner, children, and friends.

Recent studies indicate that increasing the level of perceived happiness has several benefits (Schiffirin & Nelson, 2010). According to Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener (2005), happy people are successful in several areas of their lives, including marriage, friendship, income, job performance, and health. Other studies show that having a partner and formalizing the relationship through marriage increases happiness – married people are happier – (Pozos et al., 2013). However, it is important to mention that marriage can also be considered a stressful life event. Life events are those circumstances that require an adjustment due to changes in the environment (Peñacoba & Moreno, 1999).

Considering the above, the present study takes stressors into consideration. According to Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein (1983), people interpret environmental events based on their values and resources, and then reacts biologically, psychologically, and behaviorally. Accordingly, the events are only interpreted as stressful when the environmental demands exceed the person's available resources.

Stressors are also the first element of the stress process according to the transactional stress theory. This theory postulates that a person who faces a stressful event can experience stress depending on the evaluation they make of themselves, their available resources, and the situation (whether they see it as a threat, a challenge, or something that will harm them or cause loss) (González-Ramírez & Landero-Hernández, 2006).

The concept of stressors refers to problems, threats, or conflicts that most people experience in their everyday life, and that are relatively long-lasting. Many of these stressors are chronic and are related to social roles, for example, difficulties at work, relationship problems, or complications between parents and children (Sandín, 2003). The impact of these types of stressors has been studied in relation to other variables such as wellbeing and depression. For example, Luhmann et al. (2012a,b) mentioned that unemployment and bereavement had a more negative initial effect on subjective well-being than divorce or retirement. In this regard, it has been found that unemployment can cause negative psychological consequences, especially in people living in developing countries (Paul & Moser, 2009). Several studies have also documented that losing one's job results in the loss of one's social circle, which may lead to less contact with people outside the family circle, this in turn can lead to a decrease in self-esteem, motivation, and personal productivity (Clark, Knabe, & Ratzel, 2009; Latif, 2010).

In addition, Anderson, Salk, and Hyde (2015) found that perceived romantic stress predicts depressive symptoms in adolescent girls and boys. Some studies have found that being in a romantic relationship is beneficial for one's mental health and well-being, as long as these relationships are rewarding and offer mutual support. On the other hand, being in a dysfunctional relationship could be worse than not having a relationship (Dush & Amato, 2005; Ross, 1995).

In accordance with the proposed definitions of happiness (Seligman, 2002) and stress (Cohen et al., 1983; González-Ramírez & Landero-Hernández, 2006), these two constructs could be seen as independent. However, research has shown an inverse correlation between these variables, and that is why it has been recommended to study the variables that affect the association between happiness and perceived stress. This could be helpful to develop future interventions that increase the level of happiness (Schiffirin & Nelson, 2010).

Currently, Mexico is ranked number 14 among the 20 happiest countries in the world (above the United States, England, and Germany) and it is number two in Latin America only after Costa Rica (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2015). In 2012, a happiness survey

was conducted in Mexico. The results revealed that health, family relationships, and financial income were the most important topics to achieve happiness. Nevertheless, this information is surprising when taking into account the present context of the country (high levels of unemployment, poverty, insecurity, and corruption) (Ordorica & Prud'homme, 2012).

In view of the above, the objectives of the present study were (1) to analyze the association between perceived stress, subjective happiness, and number of stressors, and (2) to compare the level of perceived stress and subjective happiness in relation to the type of stressor, in order to identify which of the stressors have a major effect on subjective happiness and perceived stress.

Method

Procedure

Men and women were invited to participate if they lived in the city of Monterrey or metropolitan area of the State of Nuevo León, México, and whose age ranged from 25 to 44 years. The age range of the sample was determined based on the age groups established for the normative values of the measure instruments used. People who met the inclusion criteria for age and residence were asked to answer an online questionnaire.

The questionnaire was answered through SurveyMonkey.com and distributed through social networks using snowball sampling technique. The survey link, as well as an invitation to participate, was published on the personal profile of the authors. Likewise, participants were encouraged to share their profile link, to be able to reach more people. The questionnaire was online from March 10, 2015 to May 14, 2015.

At the beginning of the questionnaire participants were asked to answer the full survey, so those participants who did not fill it in completely were excluded from the analyses. Instructions for the survey included an informed consent statement including general information about the content of the survey. Participants signed the consent form indicating their willingness to participate. Data was treated confidentially.

Participants

The sample consisted of 290 participants who completed the online questionnaire. Participants were 238 women (82.1%) and 52 men (17.9%), with a mean age of 32.4 years ($SD = 5.3$). In relation to marital status, 43.4% were single, 36.6% were married, 15.9% lived in cohabitation, 3.1% were divorced, and 1.0% were separated. Most participants did not have children (77.6%). Also, most participants had a formal job (79.7%), and all of them had at least bachelor's degree.

Instruments

To measure happiness, the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) was used, in its validated version for Mexican population (Quezada-Berumen, Landero-Hernández, & González-Ramírez, 2016). This 4-item Likert-type scale measures global subjective happiness through a series of statements with which participants either rate themselves or compare themselves to others. The normative data of subjective happiness for the 25–34 year old group was 4.55–6.65, and for the 35–44 years old group was 4.57–6.75. The scale showed an adequate Cronbach's alpha coefficient ($\alpha = .77$) (Quezada-Berumen et al., 2016). Cronbach's alpha was .76 for the present study.

The variable "number of stressors" was evaluated using a question based on the threatening situations of the Life Events Questionnaire of Sandín and Chorot (1987), which consists of a

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