



## “I’ll die with the hammer in my hand”: John Henryism as a predictor of happiness

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the association between John Henryism – a behavioral predisposition to cope actively with psycho-social environmental stressors – and happiness. On the basis of previous research on aspiration and goal regulation, we predicted that John Henryism would be negatively associated with happiness when controlling for demographic factors and attainment in various domains of life. We tested the prediction in a sample of hypertensive participants ( $n = 758$ ) drawn from an inner-city, mainly African-American, safety-net hospital in Jefferson County, Alabama. Bivariate analysis revealed no association between John Henryism and attainment in six domains of life: marriage, children, education, employment, income, and health. However, a significant negative association between John Henryism and happiness was found both in bivariate analysis (Spearman’s  $\rho = -0.335$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and when controlling for demographic factors and attainment using ordinal logistic regression analysis. There was a significant interaction effect between John Henryism and gender: being male was positively associated with happiness among participants with low John Henryism, but negatively associated with happiness among participants with high John Henryism. While further study would be required in order to establish the extent to which these findings can be generalized as well as their causal underpinnings, the results support the hypothesis that John Henryism is negatively associated with happiness, especially among men, and underscore the limitations of using self-report measures of happiness as proxies for well-being for purposes of public policy.

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## 1. Introduction

The literature on systematic empirical happiness research is rapidly expanding (Angner, 2009; Diener, Lucas, Schimmack, & Helliwell, 2009; Diener & Seligman, 2004; Frey & Stutzer, 2002; Krueger, 2009; Layard, 2005). Often treated under the heading of “subjective well-being” – a broader term referring to any positive cognitive or affective state, including positive emotion, engagement, satisfaction, and meaning – happiness is typically assumed to be an affective, hedonic, or emotional state (Diener & Seligman, 2004). Though systematic empirical happiness research originated in psychology, more and more contributions to the literature are due to economists, many of whom have come to believe that happiness measures are superior to orthodox economic welfare measures for purposes of both science and policy (Frey & Stutzer, 2002; Krueger,

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2009; Layard, 2005). To assess degrees of happiness, researchers tend to favor simple first-person reports on a numerical scale, elicited in face-to-face interviews, over the telephone, or using electronic devices. As evidence of reliability and validity of such measures has accumulated (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Diener et al., 2009; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), efforts are currently shifting away from validation studies and toward the building of substantive empirical theories of happiness. Much of this work has appeared in the pages of this *Journal* (e.g., Ahuvia, 2008; Caporale, Georgellis, & Yin, 2009; Dolan, Peasgood, & White, 2008; Easterlin, 2006).

### 1.1. Aspiration

A theory that has acquired a central role in the economics of happiness literature is *aspiration level theory* (Bjørnskov, Gupta, & Pedersen, 2008; Bruni & Stanca, 2006; Caporale et al., 2009; Frey & Stutzer, 2002, 2005; Stutzer, 2004). According to this theory, a person's happiness depends not just on her *attainment* or *achievement* – that is, what she succeeds in having, being, and doing – but also on her *aspiration* – that is, what she seeks to have, to be, and to do. In a nutshell, the idea is that “individual well-being is determined by the gap between aspiration and achievement” (Frey & Stutzer, 2005, p. 125). This theory entails that, all things equal, greater attainment in various domains of life leads to more happiness. But because one's attainment is evaluated in part by reference to the standard defined by one's aspiration level, all things equal, a higher aspiration level leads to less happiness. Thus, happiness is thought to be an increasing function of attainment but a decreasing function of aspiration. Formally speaking, let  $U_i^t$  denote the happiness of individual  $i$  at time  $t$ , let  $X_i^t = (x_{i,1}^t, x_{i,2}^t, \dots, x_{i,n}^t)$  denote the vector of  $n$  attainments (e.g., in  $n$  different domains of life) of individual  $i$  at time  $t$ , and let  $a_i^t$  denote the aspiration level of individual  $i$  at time  $t$ . According to aspiration level theory, then:

$$U_i^t = f(X_i^t; a_i^t)$$

where

$$\begin{cases} \partial U_i^t / \partial x_{i,j}^t > 0 \text{ for all } j \in [1, n] \\ \partial U_i^t / \partial a_i^t < 0 \end{cases}$$

While there are other ways to formalize aspiration level theory, this adaptation of a model from Frey and Stutzer (2005, pp. 125–126) captures the essential insight.

Aspiration level theory plays a central role in contemporary happiness studies because it can be used to explain a wide range of otherwise puzzling phenomena. For example, the theory can explain what has come to be known as the *Easterlin paradox*: the finding that average happiness levels have remained relatively flat over the course of the last half-century, in spite of the fact that the standard of living has increased dramatically (Easterlin, 1974). Assuming that aspiration levels rise with rising income, aspiration level theory implies that happiness levels – if they increase at all – will not be proportional to the standard of living. The theory can also account for the *relative income hypothesis*: the proposition that happiness is a function of relative income instead of, or in addition to, absolute income (Duesenberry, 1949). Assuming that aspirations are determined in part by other people's attainment, aspiration level theory implies that relative income, and not just absolute income, will predict happiness. Due to its role in generating explanations of a broad range of phenomena, aspiration level theory is as fundamental a theory as any in happiness studies.

One problem with the literature on aspiration level theory is the absence of a standard measure of aspiration (Clark, Frijters, & Shields, 2008). Many articles offer no direct test of the predicted negative association between aspiration and happiness at all. One of the most direct tests of the theory so far examined aspiration in the domain of income (Frey & Stutzer, 2005; Stutzer, 2004). As a proxy for income aspiration, the authors used answers to questions like the following: “What income would you indicate as good or bad in your circumstances?” “What household income per month would you consider an absolute minimum in order to make ends meet and without running into debt even if you reduce your needs to a minimum?” (Stutzer, 2004, p. 94), and “Whether you feel an income is good or not so good depends on your personal life circumstances and expectations. In your case—the net household income \_\_\_ DM [Deutsche Mark] is just sufficient income” (Frey & Stutzer, 2005, p. 126). These are imperfect proxies for aspiration, however, since the questions only concern one domain of life, and since a person may aspire to make more (or less) than he or she considers the “absolute minimum” or “sufficient.”

### 1.2. Goal regulation

The effect of people's pursuit of goals on their health and subjective well-being is more directly explored in a growing body of work on *goal regulation*: the process of adopting, disengaging from, and reengaging in personal goals. Goal regulation researchers have argued that the pursuit of unattainable goals constitutes an important barrier to well-being and that the ability to disengage from unattainable goals can have a positive effect on health and subjective well-being (Miller & Wrosch, 2007; Wrosch, Miller, Scheier, & Brun de Pontet, 2007; Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, & Schulz, 2003; Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al., 2003). Hence:

The notion that persistence is essential for success and happiness is deeply embedded in popular and scientific writings. However, when people are faced with situations in which they cannot realize a key life goal, the most adaptive response for mental and physical health may be to disengage from that goal (Miller & Wrosch, 2007, p. 773).

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