



The influence of fear of happiness beliefs on responses to the satisfaction with life scale

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ABSTRACT

General life satisfaction scales are widely used to examine the degree to which people are satisfied with their lives. Previous research indicates that part of the variability in life satisfaction scores does not genuinely reflect individuals' life conditions, and that there are factors biasing people's responses to these scales. The present study provided initial evidence showing that the fear of happiness (a belief that happiness may have negative consequences) influenced people's responses to the items of a life satisfaction scale in an Iranian university student sample. Implications of the results are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The concept of life satisfaction refers to a cognitive judgment about one's life, as a whole (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Larsen & Eid, 2008). Life satisfaction is seen as one of the essential component parts of subjective well-being (with its other component being affect balance). This concept has been extensively used in the positive psychology literature, and recently it is receiving increasing interest in economics and national policy making (Diener, Inglehart, & Tay, *in press*; De Vos, 2012; Frey, 2008; Lucas & Diener, 2008). The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) is one of the most widely used life satisfaction scales, and has been translated into many languages (Larsen & Eid, 2008). This scale has five items, all positively worded, assessing general life satisfaction rather than satisfaction with specific life domains.

Previous research indicates that people consider various life domains important to them when making life satisfaction judgments (Diener & Lucas, 2000). As such, life satisfaction scores may actually show degrees of need satisfaction and goal achievement. However, it has also been established that part of the variance in life satisfaction scores does not genuinely indicate individuals' life conditions (for a review see Diener *et al.*, *in press*). For instance, people's life satisfaction judgments may be affected by situational cues. Oishi, Schimmack, and Colcombe (2003) provided an example of this effect. They found that when the category of "excitement" (vs. "peace") was experimentally primed, individ-

uals were likely to base their satisfaction judgments more heavily on the frequency of excitement (rather than peace), indicating that situational priming can influence the weight a person gives to certain life domains and emotional experiences when evaluating their life. Previous research also indicates that item order has an effect on life satisfaction judgements. For example, Strack, Martin, and Schwarz (1988) found that when a question about dating was asked first, life satisfaction scores were more strongly correlated with dating satisfaction than when the life satisfaction question was asked first. In sum, item order and situational factors may cause unwanted variability in life satisfaction scores.

However, previous research indicates that long term factors affect life satisfaction judgments more strongly than factors that are salient in the moment. For example, cultural values and personality traits which are relatively stable over time have been found to influence people's life satisfaction judgments (for a review see Diener *et al.*, *in press*). Suh (2002) found that identity consistency was a stronger predictor of life satisfaction in individualistic cultures than in collectivistic ones. Diener and Diener (1995) found that self-esteem was a stronger predictor of life satisfaction in individualistic societies. These findings indicate that part of the variability in life satisfaction scores are caused by stable personality traits and values.

It can be argued that various belief domains, including cultural, religious, and superstitious beliefs may also come to influence people's responses to life satisfaction items. Unfortunately, this important issue has not received enough research attention in the subjective well-being literature so far. The present study illustrates that this is possible by investigating the effect of one specific belief domain: the fear of happiness. Joshanloo (2012) reviews the

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empirical and theoretical evidence suggesting that, some individuals possess negative views on happiness and are sometimes afraid of it. His review suggests that this belief may be found across a wide range of cultures. For example, Minami (1971) points out that, in Japanese culture, to be in a state of happiness is considered to be negative in one way or another. Happiness can be considered hazardous in that it can cause suffering. It is prescribed in some Asian cultures that there should be a limit to one's happiness or one will encounter mishap. For instance, a Chinese proverb says: "extreme happiness begets tragedy" (Bryant & Veroff, 2007, p. 39).

The fear of happiness may assume different shapes in various cultural contexts. Considering that the present study uses an Iranian Muslim sample, a short discussion of the relevance of fear of happiness beliefs to this culture is in order. Generally speaking, Islam is critical of laughing (which is a sign of worldly happiness) and is fond of weeping. Prophet Muhammad is cited as saying that "were you to know what I know, you would laugh little and weep much" and "avoid much laughter, for much laughter deadens the heart" (Chittick, 2005, p. 133). From this perspective, "superficial" happiness is blamed for drawing us away from God. Good and Good (1988) note that ever since the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution, under the influence of the new ideology, happiness has been associated with shallowness, and is seen in a negative light in Iran. In contrast, sadness for Iranians is associated with personal depth. A serious and deep person is often defined as a sad one, whereas a happy person is seen as a person who is not able to sense the tragic in life, is shallow, noisy, foolish, talkative, vulgar, etc. Therefore, it is likely that some individuals in Islamic countries may be afraid of happiness. This belief in the association of worldly happiness with sin, shallowness, and moral decline when paired with the idea that moral decline and sin lead to bad consequences provides many reasons for fearing happiness. This is displayed in various forms in Iranian popular sayings such as "crying will come after laughing", "we laughed a lot, then we will come to its harms", or the common belief in the evil eye (which is thought to damage people who fail to hide their happiness and achievement, Moshiri Tafreshi, 2009).

The fear of happiness is a relatively stable belief domain with potentially significant real life consequences (e.g., how a person chooses to spend their leisure time). However, it can be hypothesised that the fear of happiness may influence people's responses to life satisfaction items. This prediction is based on the notion that those who think that positive states of mind such as happiness, joy, cheerfulness, and satisfaction have bad consequences may try not to express their true positive feelings to avoid these consequences. Other substantive psychological variables have also been suggested as factors affecting responses to psychological scales. For example, although self-esteem and affective dispositions (e.g., negative emotionality) are relatively stable traits with significant life outcomes, their biasing effect on responses to psychological scales (e.g., the scales of the Big Five traits and leadership behaviours) has been studied in previous research (e.g., Şimşek, 2012; Williams & Anderson, 1994). Therefore, it is likely that the relatively stable belief domain of the fear of happiness come to influence individuals' responses to the SWLS items.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 220 undergraduates at the University of Tehran. The sample consisted of 120 female (54.5%) and 100 male students who were recruited from different fields of study. The average age was 23.17 years ($SD = 4.15$). Participants responded to the Persian versions of the scales. Data collection was conducted

Table 1
Items of the fear of happiness scale (FHS).

1. I prefer not to be too joyful, because usually joy is followed by sadness.
2. I believe the more cheerful and happy I am, the more I should expect bad things to occur in my life.
3. Disasters often follow good fortune.
4. Having lots of joy and fun causes bad things to happen.
5. Excessive joy has some bad consequences.

Note: Item 3 was obtained from the social-oriented cultural conceptions of SWB (SSWB) scale (Lu & Gilmour, 2006).

by trained data collectors, and was in full conformity with institutional ethical guidelines. Participation was voluntary, and the participants' confidentiality was ensured.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Life satisfaction

The Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985) was used to assess global life satisfaction. The items are "1 – In most ways my life is close to my ideal", "2 – The conditions of my life are excellent", "3 – I am satisfied with life", "4 – So far I have gotten the important things I want in life", and "5 – If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing". Each item is rated on a 7-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7).

2.2.2. Fear of happiness

Based on the relevant conceptual and empirical literature, a 5-item fear of happiness scale (FHS) was developed to capture the fear of happiness (Joshani, 2012). Items were specifically generated to assess the core theme of the fear of happiness concept, which is the belief that happiness or good fortune is a sign of impending unhappiness or bad incidents. Therefore, content related to the causes of the fear of happiness (e.g., the fear of punishment in the afterlife and fear of the evil eye) were not included. The items are presented in Table 1. Each item is rated on a 7-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7).

2.2.3. Statistical analyses

Confirmatory factor analysis was used to evaluate the factor structure of the measurement instruments. Structural equation modelling was used to examine the relationship between the latent factor of the fear of happiness and the SWLS items. All models tested in the present study were based on the covariance matrix, and used maximum likelihood (ML) estimation as implemented in Amos 19. Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) was used to treat missing values (Brown, 2006). Multiple indexes were used to examine the models' fit, including Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and Root Mean-Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) (Bentler & Bonnett, 1980; Browne & Cudeck, 1993). For CFI and TLI, values higher than 0.95 are regarded as excellent. For RMSEA, values less than 0.05 are regarded as ideal, and values ranging from 0.06 to 0.08 are acceptable.

3. Results

The SWLS and the fear of happiness scales yielded Cronbach alphas of .87 and .88 respectively. Descriptive statistics and correlation matrixes for the items of these scales are demonstrated in Table 2. The Pearson correlation between the two scales was $-.21$ ($p = .002$).

Preliminary confirmatory factor analyses indicated that by allowing the residuals of items 4 and 5 to freely covary, the fit of the measurement model of the SWLS would be significantly improved (from $\chi^2 = 17.584$, $df = 5$ to $\chi^2 = 2.905$, $df = 4$). By making

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