The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire: a compact scale for the measurement of psychological well-being

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Abstract

An improved instrument, the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ), has been derived from the Oxford Happiness Inventory, (OHI). The OHI comprises 29 items, each involving the selection of one of four options that are different for each item. The OHQ includes similar items to those of the OHI, each presented as a single statement which can be endorsed on a uniform six-point Likert scale. The revised instrument is compact, easy to administer and allows endorsements over an extended range. When tested against the OHI, the validity of the OHQ was satisfactory and the associations between the scales and a battery of personality variables known to be associated with well-being, were stronger for the OHQ than for the OHI. Although parallel factor analyses of OHI and the OHQ produced virtually identical statistical results, the solution for the OHQ could not be interpreted. The previously reported factorisability of the OHI may owe more to the way the items are formatted and presented, than to the nature of the items themselves. Sequential orthogonal factor analyses of the OHQ identified a single higher order factor, which suggests that the construct of well-being it measures is uni-dimensional. Discriminant analysis has been employed to produce a short-form version of the OHQ with eight items. © 2002 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd.

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The Oxford Happiness Inventory (OHI, Argyle, Martin, & Crossland, 1989) was devised as a broad measure of personal happiness, mainly for in-house use in the Department of Experimental Psychology of the University of Oxford in the late 1980s. The development of the scale and some of its properties were reviewed by Argyle, Martin, and Lu (1995). The scale has been found to behave consistently, and other workers have reported its use both in the UK (Furnham & Brewin, 1990, Joseph & Lewis, 1998), in Spain (Sanchez, 1994) and the USA (Valiant, 1993). The OHI has

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also been used cross-culturally to compare students in Australia, Canada, the UK and USA (Francis, Brown, Lester, & Philipchalk, 1998). A Hebrew translation has been applied in Israel (Francis & Katz, 2000) and it forms the basis of the Chinese Happiness Inventory (CHI) which has been used in Taiwan (Lu & Shih, 1997).

The OHI follows the design and format of the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI, Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Hock, & Erbaugh, 1961) which provided, when reversed, a set of 20 multiple-choice items relevant to subjective well-being. Further items were added to cover aspects of happiness which were not otherwise included and 29 items were retained in the final scale. Each item was presented in four incremental levels, numbered from 0 to 3, for example:

I am not particularly optimistic about the future[1]
I feel optimistic about the future.
I feel I have so much to look forward to.
I feel that the future is overflowing with hope and promise.

The BDI was designed for clinical application with the purpose of diagnosing manic and depressive states of mind. In non-clinical populations, few are manic or depressive and the extremes of the corresponding OHI item alternatives are little used. In practice, "normal" participants mainly endorse one or other of the two central items. For a substantial minority of items the mean scores are less than, or do not comfortably exceed, their corresponding standard deviations. This suggests that answers to these items may be uniformly, rather than normally distributed, and might not be making their full contribution to the measurement of happiness. The statistical properties of the individual items would be improved if respondents could select answers from a wider range. The multiple-choice format also necessitates a bulky scale that can only be presented as a stand-alone instrument.

An alternative scale, the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ) has been devised which consists of single items that can be answered on a six-point Likert scale (Appendix). These items may easily be incorporated into larger questionnaires in random order, and the opportunity has also been taken of reversing about half of the items. These changes should reduce the probability of contextual and compliant answering (Hills & Argyle, 1998a). The purpose of this paper is to describe the improved scale and its psychometric properties and, by placing it in the public domain, to allow its wider use and further examination by others.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

One hundred and seventy-two undergraduate students of Oxford Brookes University and their friends and relations (66 men, 99 women, seven unspecified) took part in the study. Ages ranged from 13 to 68 ($M = 30.9$, SD $= 12.9$) years.

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[1] It could be argued that respondents might be averse to endorsing a multiple choice item with an apparent score of zero. In versions of the OHI used at, and distributed from, Oxford Brookes University since 1998, the items in the OHI have been identified as a, b, c, and d, and scored on a 1–4 scale.