



The academic rewards of socially-oriented happiness: Interdependent happiness promotes academic engagement

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ABSTRACT

Interdependent happiness has been found to be positively associated with optimal psychological outcomes in collectivist cultures. However, the association between interdependent happiness and key academic outcomes has remained unexplored. The current study examined the association of interdependent happiness with key academic outcomes such as autonomous motivation, engagement, and achievement using both cross-sectional (Study 1) and longitudinal (Study 2) approaches. Study 1 revealed that interdependent happiness positively predicted academic engagement (partly) via autonomous motivation. Study 2 showed that prior interdependent happiness positively predicted subsequent academic engagement even after controlling for autoregressor effects. In addition, reciprocal associations among the key variables were found. Taken together, results of the two studies suggest that interdependent happiness plays an adaptive role in the academic context especially in a collectivist cultural setting. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

School and educational psychologists have long been interested in the factors that promote academic achievement. They have usually focused on the role of social factors (Yuen et al., 2012), personality traits (Datu, Valdez, & King, 2016; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007; Poropat, 2009), and cognitive-motivational (Elliot, Shell, Henry, & Maier, 2005; Murayama & Elliot, 2009) constructs among others in predicting key academic outcomes (see Lee & Shute, 2010 for a review). More recently, there has been an increasing recognition that well-being can be a precursor of academic success (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). However, a limitation of existing studies on well-being is that researchers tend to focus on the associations of individualistic models of happiness (e.g., subjective well-being and subjective happiness) with educational outcomes while limited research has been done to assess the role of culturally-sensitive models of happiness especially in collectivist societies. Therefore, the current research aimed to address this gap through assessing the linkage of interdependent happiness to educational outcomes.

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1.1. Happiness and academic outcomes

Happiness has an important role to play in the academic context. Happy individuals are likely to have high levels of academic engagement (Heffner & Antaramian, 2016; King, McInerney, Ganotice, & Villarosa, 2015; Lewis, Huebner, Reschly & Valois, 2009), intrinsic motivation (Datu, in press; Isen & Reeve, 2005; Low, King, & Caleon, 2016), academic self-efficacy (Villavicencio & Bernardo, 2016), academic self-regulation (Villavicencio & Bernardo, 2013), and academic achievement (Heffner & Antaramian, 2016; Nickerson, Diener, & Schwarz, 2011; Oishi, Diener, & Lucas, 2007). Previous studies which measured the linkage between happiness and relevant academic outcomes have revealed that the effect sizes ranged from small to medium (e.g., Heffner & Antaramian, 2016; King et al., 2015; Ng, Huebner, & Hills, 2015).

1.2. Theoretical perspective

The broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001) provides a possible framework to interpret why and how happiness is linked to positive academic outcomes. It argues that positive emotions expand individuals' thought-action repertoires and facilitate the acquisition of durable intellectual, social, and psychological resources. In the present study, we operationalized resources as academic variables that are considered valuable in the context of schooling. These resources included autonomous motivation, academic engagement, and achievement which are all key indicators of optimal learning (Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2012; Ng et al., 2015; Reeve & Lee, 2014).

In this study, we focused on autonomous motivation as a key motivational construct. Autonomous motivation pertains to the drive to perform specific actions which are consistent with one's interests and values (Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). Self-determination theory proposes that autonomous reasons for performing specific actions are considered highly optimal for positive human functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2002). This is contrasted with controlled motivation wherein action is induced because of external pressures or introjected feelings. Controlled motivation is considered detrimental to well-being. Consistent with this perspective, previous studies have shown that autonomous motivation promotes key learning outcomes in the academic context. For instance, autonomous motivation has been linked to higher academic engagement (Caleon et al., 2015; Jang, 2008; Jang et al., 2012; Maulana, Helms-Lorenz, & van de Grift, 2016), and academic achievement (Guay, Ratelle, Roy, & Litalien, 2010; Jang et al., 2012; Kusurkar, Ten Cate, Vos, Westers, & Croiset, 2013).

Autonomous motivation has been found to be linked to greater academic engagement. Academic engagement pertains to the extent to which students' are involved in school-related endeavors (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). In the present research, we examined the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of engagement. Behavioral engagement refers to the degree to which students actively work on specific academic tasks (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009). Emotional engagement pertains to the extent to which students experience positive affect when working on academic activities (Skinner et al., 2009). Cognitive engagement refers to degree to which students use cognitive and metacognitive approaches in doing an academic endeavor (Wolters, 2004). Academic engagement, in turn, has been found to be a proximal predictor of academic achievement (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Fredricks et al., 2004; Greenwood, Horton, & Utley, 2002).

In collectivist cultures, interdependent happiness is more salient (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2010; Uchida & Ogiwara, 2012). It seems theoretically plausible to assume that interdependent happiness will be associated with more optimal academic outcomes in collectivist settings. Particularly, we argue that students who have higher levels of interdependent happiness are more likely to acquire durable academic resources such as autonomous motivation, academic engagement, and academic achievement.

It is probable that interdependent happiness will be related to greater autonomous motivation. Although there is no direct evidence that interdependent happiness is related to greater autonomous motivation, previous studies that focus on more individualistic models of happiness support this conjecture. For example, positive affect has been found to be positively associated with intrinsic motivation (Datu, in press; Isen & Reeve, 2005), academic engagement (King et al., 2015), and academic achievement (Nickerson et al., 2011). Furthermore, life satisfaction has been found to be positively linked to academic engagement (Lewis, Huebner, Malone, & Valois, 2011), and academic achievement (Ng et al., 2015).

Aside from interdependent happiness influencing autonomous motivation, it is also possible that the academic resources (e.g., autonomous motivation and academic engagement) built through frequent experiences of interdependent happiness may be related to subsequent interdependent happiness. This argument is consistent with the "upward spiral hypothesis" of Fredrickson (2001) which posits that happiness promotes positive resources which eventually enhance subsequent happiness. Previous studies have shown that happiness and key psychological resources are reciprocally related to each other. Previous studies seem to support the validity of this theoretical conjecture in the academic context (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002; Ouweneel, Le Blanc, & Schaufeli, 2011; Stiglbauer, Gnamb, Gamsjäger, & Batinic, 2013; Tian, Zhang, Huebner, Zheng, & Liu, 2015). For example, Fredrickson and Joiner (2002) have found that positive affect influenced broad thinking, which in turn, promoted subsequent positive affect. Moreover, Stiglbauer et al. (2013) found that happiness led to subsequent positive school experiences, which then led to subsequent enhanced happiness. Hence, in this study we examined the possibility that key academic resources (i.e., autonomous motivation, engagement, and achievement) may also be reciprocally associated with subsequent interdependent happiness.

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