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Is Valuing Happiness Associated With Lower Well-Being? A Factor-Level Analysis using the Valuing Happiness Scale

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Abstract

Recent studies suggest that valuing happiness is negatively associated with well-being. Most of these studies used the Valuing Happiness Scale (Mauss, Tamir, et al., 2011). In the present paper, we examined the factor structure of this scale using data pooled from six independent samples ($N_{\text{total}} = 938$). Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis showed that the Valuing Happiness Scale is not unidimensional and that only one of its three factors correlates negatively with various indicators of well-being, whereas non-significant or positive correlations were found for the other factors. These findings indicate that valuing happiness may not necessarily be bad for one's well-being, and call for a better definition, theoretical foundation, and operationalization of this construct.

Keywords

valuing happiness; subjective well-being; loneliness; factor analysis; validity

1 Introduction

Most people want to be happy (Diener, 2000) and view happiness as a central ingredient to the good life (King & Napa, 1998). However, while it is generally accepted that *being* happy is adaptive (Diener, Kanazawa, Suh, & Oishi, 2014; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005), the consequences of *valuing* happiness, that is, endorsing the goal of being happy (Ford & Mauss, 2014), are less clear.

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The data and R scripts for this study are publicly available on Open Science Framework (osf.io/uwbk5).

On the one hand, happiness can be improved intentionally through a number of well-evaluated interventions (for a meta-analysis, see Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009), especially if the participants actually want to become happier and are therefore committed to following the prescribed strategies (Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011). Additionally, several studies found that valuing happiness is positively correlated with experienced well-being. For instance, Peterson, Park, and Seligman (2005) reported a weak positive correlation between the extent to which people value pleasure (measured by items such as “the good life is the pleasurable life”) and life satisfaction. Similarly, Catalino, Algoe, and Fredrickson (2014) reported a positive correlation between prioritizing positivity in daily life (measured by items such as “A priority for me is experiencing happiness in everyday life”) and well-being. Using cross-cultural data, Bastian, Kuppens, De Roover, and Diener (2014) found that the average level of life satisfaction is higher in countries where positive emotions are more valued than in countries where positive emotions are less valued. In sum, these studies indicate that valuing happiness is, as one might naively expect, associated with experienced happiness.

On the other hand, several studies suggest that valuing happiness is negatively associated with experienced well-being. In experiments supporting this hypothesis, well-being is typically measured in terms of momentary mood experienced during a task (e.g., listening to music or watching a film clip) (Mauss, Tamir, Anderson, & Savino, 2011; Schooler, Ariely, & Loewenstein, 2003). Correlational studies seem to suggest that these experimental findings generalize beyond momentary mood effects produced in laboratory settings to more stable individual differences in valuing happiness and well-being. In the cross-cultural study by Bastian et al. (2014) mentioned above, the negative association between the experience of negative emotions and life satisfaction was particularly strong in countries where positive emotions are highly valued. Similarly, the experience of negative emotions is shaped by social expectancies such that people experience more negative emotions and lower levels of well-being in social contexts where it is expected to not feel negative emotions (Bastian et al., 2012). This effect did not apply to personal expectancies about negative emotions, however. Others measured the personal value of happiness rather than social expectations and found that valuing happiness was associated with lower well-being (Mauss, Tamir, et al., 2011), higher levels of loneliness (Mauss, Savino, et al., 2011) and depressive symptoms (Ford, Shallcross, Mauss, Floerke, & Gruber, 2014), and with more frequent diagnoses of bipolar disorder (Ford, Mauss, & Gruber, 2015).

In sum, the empirical evidence on whether valuing happiness is associated with higher or lower well-being is mixed. Reviewing the correlational studies, it is striking that most studies that found negative associations between the personal value of happiness and experienced well-being used the Valuing Happiness Scale (Mauss, Tamir, et al., 2011). Understanding what this scale measures is the key to reconciling the divergent findings on the association between valuing happiness and well-being.

2 The Present Paper

In the present research, we analyzed the factor structure of the Valuing Happiness Scale (Mauss, Tamir, et al., 2011) and reexamined the correlations between this scale and four

indicators of well-being (life satisfaction, positive affect, negative affect, loneliness) on the factor level. As this study is of exploratory nature, we need to note what we did *not* try to accomplish. To the best of our knowledge, the Valuing Happiness Scale was constructed as a unidimensional scale and has been used as such in previous research. Accordingly, we do not claim that this scale and its factors provide a complete measurement of all the different ways of valuing happiness that could be derived from theories on motivation and well-being. In addition, we did not intend to provide a validation of this scale such that the factors detected with our analyses can be used as reliable indicators of the underlying constructs. Rather, we intend to assess whether the Valuing Happiness Scale is multidimensional and, if so, whether the paradoxical effects of valuing happiness on well-being that had been established with this scale are driven by a few specific items that load on specific factors.

3 Methods

3.1 Samples

All data used in this study were collected for primary purposes not related to the goals of the present research, but have not yet been analyzed with respect to valuing happiness. Samples 1 through 4 consisted of participants from the United States recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Sample 5 was a sample of Germans who participated in a larger study where they were asked to play a social online game (Luhmann, Schönbrodt, Hawkey, & Cacioppo, 2014). Sample 6 was a sample of undergraduate students at an American university who were recruited for a four-week loneliness intervention study. Only the pretest data were used for the present analyses. The total sample size was $N = 938$ (for demographic characteristics, see Table S1). Data and R scripts for the following analyses are available on Open Science Framework (Luhmann & Schönbrodt, 2015).

3.2 Measures

Valuing happiness—Valuing happiness was measured using the seven items developed by Mauss, Tamir, et al. (2011). For Sample 5, this scale was translated to German (see appendix). Responses were given on a scale from 1 (*do not at all agree*) to 7 (*agree completely*). Based on its wording, we were concerned that Item 4 (“I would like to be happier than I generally am”) measures experienced unhappiness rather than valuing happiness. Preliminary analyses confirmed that this item (but not the other six items) was more frequently endorsed by individuals with low life satisfaction, low positive affect, and high negative affect (see Figures S1 to S3 in the supplemental material). Since one aim of this study was to examine the relation between valuing happiness and experienced well-being, it was important to take care that the correlations among these constructs are not inflated due to overlaps in item wording. We therefore excluded Item 4 for the present analyses. The remaining items are listed and enumerated in Table 1.

Well-being—Life satisfaction was measured in all samples with the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Positive and negative affect were measured with a 6-item version of the Scale of Positive and Negative Experiences (SPANE; Diener et al., 2010) in Samples 1 and 2 and with the full 12-item version of the SPANE in Sample 3. The Positive Affect Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, &

Tellegen, 1988) and the Positive Affect Negative Affect Valence (PANAVA) scale (Schallberger, 2005) were used in Samples 4 and 5, respectively. Finally, loneliness was measured with a 9-item version of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996; Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980) in Samples 4 and 6 and with the 20-item German version of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Döring & Bortz, 1993) in Sample 5. For all measures, the responses were averaged to yield summary scores where higher scores reflect higher levels of life satisfaction, positive affect, negative affect, and loneliness, respectively (for details on which measures were used in which sample, sample-specific response formats, and descriptive statistics, see Table S2).

4 Results

4.1 Factor structure

To analyze the factor structure of the scale, we pooled the data from all samples and randomly split the total sample into two halves (for subsample-specific item-level correlations, see Table S3). One half of the sample was used to determine the number of factors and to estimate the factor loadings using exploratory factor analysis. The scale was unidimensional according to the Kaiser criterion and scree plot; however, a parallel analysis (Horn, 1965) indicated that for three factors, the observed Eigenvalues were greater than the random Eigenvalues (Figure S4). Since parallel analysis is superior to the Kaiser criterion and scree plot (Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum, & Strahan, 1999), we extracted three factors (Table 1). Considering only factor loadings close to or greater than .40, Item 1 loaded on Factor 1, Items 5 and 7 loaded on Factor 2, and Items 2, 3, and 6 loaded on Factor 3. In addition, Item 3 had a weak loading on Factor 1 and Item 3 had a weak loading on Factor 3.

To cross-validate and to evaluate the fit of this factor solution, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis using the other half of the sample. We first estimated a one-factor model to test whether a multi-factor structure is warranted. The fit of this model was not optimal, $\chi^2(9) = 57.54$, $p < .001$, CFI = .825, TLI = .876, RMSEA = .11 with 90% CI [.08, .13], indicating that the Valuing Happiness Scale is not unidimensional. Next, we tested the fit of the three-factor model identified through the exploratory factor analysis. In this model, Items 1 and 3 loaded on Factor 1, Items 5 and 7 loaded on Factor 2, and Items 2, 3, 6 and 7 loaded on Factor 3 (Model 1 in Table 1). The fit of this model was good, $\chi^2(4) = 9.69$, $p = .046$, CFI = .991, TLI = .967, RMSEA = .06 with 90% CI [.007, .10], and significantly better than the fit of the one-factor model, $\chi^2(5) = 47.85$, $p < .001$.

One limitation of this model, however, is its lack of a simple structure (i.e., it has double loadings). A simple structure is preferable for several reasons. For instance, the interpretation of the factors is facilitated if each factor is described by a unique set of indicators. Furthermore, a simple structure corresponds to how multidimensional scales are usually scored, that is, items are averaged separately for each subscale, and one item only belongs to one subscale. For these reasons, we tested whether the model could be simplified without comprising its fit to the data.

The factor loadings of Items 3 and 7 for Factor 3 were low (Model 1 in Table 1), suggesting that these items are less reliable indicators of the underlying latent variable than the other

indicators. We therefore tested whether a model where these loadings are fixed to zero would fit significantly worse than the more complex model estimated previously. In the simplified model (Model 2 in Table 1), each factor was measured by two items: Factor 1 was measured by Items 1 and 3 (as above), Factor 2 was measured by Items 5 and 7 (as above), and Factor 3 was measured by Items 2 and 6. The fit of this model was also good, $\chi^2(6) = 10.30$, $p = .101$, CFI = .993, TLI = .982, RMSEA = .040 with 90% CI [$< .0001$, .08], and not significantly worse than the more complex model, $\chi^2(2) = 0.91$, $p = .634$. We therefore selected the simplified model as basis for following analyses. Specifically, we averaged the responses to the respective items to compute summary scores for the three factors.

4.2 Associations with well-being

Having established that the Valuing Happiness Scale is not unidimensional, we next examined the associations between valuing happiness and well-being on the factor level using random-effects two-step meta-analysis of individual data (Cooper & Patall, 2009; Riley, Lambert, & Abo-Zaid, 2010) implemented in the R package metafor (Viechtbauer, 2010). In this approach, the correlations between valuing happiness and well-being are first computed within each sample and then aggregated meta-analytically. One advantage of this approach is that it indicates the degree to which these correlations vary across studies (see Figures S5 and S6) and provides an aggregated correlation coefficient (Table 2) at the same time.

Our findings suggest that the previously reported negative associations between valuing happiness and well-being are mainly driven by those items loading onto Factor 3. The meta-analytic correlation coefficients for Factor 3 were negative for positive affect and life satisfaction and positive for negative affect and loneliness. These patterns could not be replicated for Factors 1 and 2. Factor 1 was positively associated with positive affect and life satisfaction and not significantly associated with negative affect and loneliness. Similarly, Factor 2 was positively associated with positive affect and not significantly associated with negative affect, life satisfaction, or loneliness. These findings indicate that valuing happiness is not good or bad for well-being per se but that it depends on how valuing happiness is measured.

5 Discussion

Is it counterproductive to value and pursue happiness? Several studies using the Valuing Happiness Scale found that people who score high on this scale are worse off on a range of well-being indicators (Ford & Mauss, 2014; Ford, Mauss, et al., 2015; Ford et al., 2014; Mauss, Savino, et al., 2011; Mauss, Tamir, et al., 2011). These findings stand in contrast to studies using alternative operationalizations of the construct of valuing happiness which have tended to find positive associations with well-being (Bastian et al., 2014; Catalino et al., 2014).

The present study showed that the operationalization is indeed one of the main explanations for these divergent findings. We identified several critical issues associated with the current version of the Valuing Happiness Scale. First, one of the items (Item 4) seems to measure

experienced well-being rather than valuing happiness, which presumably inflated the negative correlations between valuing happiness and various well-being indicators. We recommend dropping this item in future studies. Second, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses of the remaining six items indicated that the Valuing Happiness Scale is not unidimensional and that its negative correlations with well-being seem to be driven by one specific factor. Factor 3 was the only one that consistently correlated negatively with various well-being indicators across six independent samples. For the other two factors, these correlations were either non-significant or positive.

Before we discuss these findings in detail, we would like to reiterate that we do not claim that the three identified factors represent theoretically meaningful dimensions of valuing happiness nor that these dimensions can be measured reliably with the Valuing Happiness Scale. In fact, additional analyses showed that the items were not measurement-invariant and had low reliabilities in some samples, indicating that the psychometric properties of the Valuing Happiness Scale are not optimal. What our findings do indicate, however, is that the negative correlation between well-being and valuing happiness is mainly driven by two items loading on Factor 3. Understanding what these two items measure and what sets them apart from the remaining items is key to explaining why empirical studies using the Valuing Happiness Scale come to different conclusions about the link between valuing and pursuing happiness than studies using other operationalizations.

The two items loading on Factor 3 were “If I don’t feel happy, maybe there is something wrong with me” and “I am concerned about my happiness even when I feel happy.” Both items refer to how much people worry about the possibility of being unhappy. In contrast, the remaining items have a less negative focus and refer more to the general importance of happiness in life. One explanation for why Factor 3 but not the other factors correlated negatively with well-being is that people who constantly worry about their happiness may monitor their happiness more frequently, which may in turn hamper their experience of happiness (Mauss, Tamir, et al., 2011; Schooler et al., 2003). Alternatively, however, the direction of causality could also be reversed such that the experience of low well-being causes people to worry more about being happy.

In sum, our findings show that the previously reported negative correlations between valuing happiness and well-being are driven by two items (or three, if Item 4 is counted in). Correlational findings using the original version of the Valuing Happiness Scale should therefore be interpreted with caution. This does not mean that valuing happiness is always good for well-being. Indeed, several experimental studies have shown that valuing happiness or positive emotions may result in more negative mood (Mauss, Tamir, et al., 2011; Schooler et al., 2003; Schooler & Mauss, 2010). However, to study individual differences in valuing and pursuing happiness outside of the laboratory, the Valuing Happiness Scale should be improved.

The next step will be to use a theory-driven approach to develop a multidimensional scale of valuing happiness. Several literatures suggest that two possible ways in which people may value happiness are (a) valuing the presence of happiness and pleasure versus (b) valuing the absence of unhappiness and pain (e.g., Kämpfe & Mitte, 2009). This distinction is similar to

the distinction between promotion and prevention orientation as proposed in regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997). Promotion orientation is characterized by an orientation towards growth, gains, and advancement, whereas prevention orientation is characterized by an orientation towards stability and safety. The distinction between valuing the presence of happiness and valuing the absence of unhappiness is also consistent with models of emotion regulation and mood regulation. In emotion regulation theories, the (up-)regulation of positive emotions and the (down-)regulation of negative emotions are usually treated as different processes (Larsen, 2000). Similarly, strategies of mood regulation are sometimes divided into strategies directed at decreasing one's bad mood (mood repair) and strategies directed at maintaining one's current mood (mood maintenance) (Larsen, 2000; Lischetzke & Eid, 2006). Finally, it may be appropriate to distinguish between happiness as a positive hedonic state (i.e., mood) and happiness as the frequency of specific positive emotions because people differ in how they regulate their mood versus their emotions (Larsen, 2000).

A few limitations of our study need to be noted. First, our samples were composed of Westerners. Given that cultures around the world differ in how they define happiness (Oishi, Graham, Kesebir, & Galinha, 2013) and in their cultural norms for specific emotions (Eid & Diener, 2001), our results may not generalize to non-Western populations. Indeed, a recent study showed that valuing happiness is negatively associated with well-being in individualistic cultures but positively associated with well-being in collectivistic cultures (Ford, Dmitrieva, et al., 2015). Second, our data were correlational and cross-sectional and therefore do not allow conclusions about the causal direction of the relationships. Experimental research is needed to better understand the processes through which valuing happiness may lead to positive or negative well-being. In particular, it is important to study these processes not only in the laboratory, where the outcome variable is momentary mood, but also in field experiments which allow examining the effects of valuing happiness on well-being experienced in real life. Third, although the overall sample size was appropriate for the factor analyses, some of the individual samples were small and lacked statistical power to detect small correlations. This issue was partly resolved by using meta-analysis of individual data which provides more precise estimates of the correlation coefficients than do individual studies. Finally, while we are confident that future studies will confirm that the Valuing Happiness Scale is not unidimensional, it is possible that the exact factor structure found here will not be replicated as easily. This is due to the fact that our factor analyses were based on only six items which differed in their psychometric properties among the different samples.

6 Conclusion

Is happiness a choice or can it only be achieved if we do not search for it? This question has moved philosophers and lay people for millennia. Psychological research can contribute to answering this ancient question through well-designed empirical studies using well-validated measures. In the past years, a number of interesting studies with partly divergent findings have been published. Our findings indicate that to reconcile these findings and to move forward in this field of research, it is necessary to conceptualize and measure valuing happiness as a multidimensional construct. To date, whether valuing happiness backfires may depend on how it is measured.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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Appendix

German translation of the seven items of the Valuing Happiness Scale:

1. Der Sinn meines Lebens ist, so glücklich wie möglich zu sein.
2. Wenn ich nicht glücklich bin, stimmt etwas nicht mit mir.
3. Mir sind Dinge im Leben dann besonders wichtig, wenn sie zu meinem persönlichen Glück beitragen.
4. Ich würde gerne glücklicher sein als ich es im Moment bin.

5. Glücklich zu sein ist sehr wichtig für mich.
6. Selbst wenn ich gerade glücklich bin, mache ich mir Gedanken über das Glück.
7. Um ein sinnvolles Leben zu haben, muss ich möglichst häufig glücklich sein.

Highlights

- The factor structure of the Valuing Happiness Scale was examined.
- Data were pooled from six independent samples with $N_{\text{total}} = 938$.
- The results show that the Valuing Happiness Scale is not unidimensional.
- Only one out of three factors correlates negatively with well-being.
- These findings call for a better operationalization of valuing happiness.

Table 1

Standardized factor loadings and factor intercorrelations in the exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis.

No.	Item wording	Exploratory factor analysis			Confirmatory factor analysis for Model 1 (Model 2)		
		Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
1	How happy I am at any given moment says a lot about how worthwhile my life is.	1.00			0.65 (0.60)		
2	If I don't feel happy, maybe there is something wrong with me.		0.42			0.61 (0.61)	
3	I value things in life only to the extent that they influence my personal happiness.	0.25	0.38		0.50 (0.72)		0.23
5	Feeling happy is extremely important to me.		0.77			0.70 (0.69)	
6	I am concerned about my happiness even when I feel happy.			0.54			0.60 (0.60)
7	To have a meaningful life, I need to feel happy most of the time.		0.65	0.28		0.81 (0.85)	0.04
	Correlation with Factor 2	.46			.71 (.74)		
	Correlation with Factor 3	.32	.57		.71 (.80)	.68 (.70)	

Notes: For the exploratory factor analysis, factor loadings < .20 are not printed. For the confirmatory factor analysis, factor loadings and correlations estimated in Model 1 are printed without parentheses and factor loadings and correlations in Model 2 are printed with parentheses.

Table 2

Point estimates and 95 % confidence intervals for the meta-analytically aggregated correlations between four well-being indicators and three valuing happiness factors.

Well-being indicator	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Positive affect	.10 [.01, .19]	.11 [.05, .18]	-.21 [-.31, -.11]
Negative affect	.04 [-.08, .16]	.06 [-.05, .17]	.29 [.16, .43]
Life satisfaction	.09 [.01, .18]	.04 [-.05, .13]	-.15 [-.25, -.04]
Loneliness	-.05 [-.33, .23]	-.02 [-.18, .13]	.34 [.17, .51]

Notes. Factor 1 reflects the mean score of Items 1 and 3. Factor 2 reflects the mean score of Items 5 and 7. Factor 3 reflects the mean score of Items 2 and 6. Individual-study correlations are provided as supplemental material.