

Conceptualizing happiness using Choice Theory

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Abstract

This study looks at the basic needs that are predictive of happiness based on the choice theory approach to counseling and psychotherapy (Glasser, 1998). Two hundred college students (n=200) from a private university in Metro Manila answered the Choice Theory Rating Scale and Subjective Happiness Scale. It utilized descriptive-predictive research design in identifying basic needs that lead the respondents to a positive and joyous state. Results revealed that the needs for love and belongingness ($r=-.29$, $p<.01$), and need for fun and enjoyment ($r=-.19<.05$) were found to be significantly associated to happiness. Basic needs account for 10.7% of the variance in happiness while the need for love and belongingness ($\beta=.23$, $p<.05$) is the lone variable which significantly predicted inclination of the respondents to experience subjective well-being. Implications of the findings to the respondents and counseling services were discussed.

Keywords: adolescents; basic needs; Choice theory; happiness; quality world

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1. Introduction

With the emergence of the Positive Psychology movement, enhancement of well-being was prioritized more than reduction of psychological symptoms. Conceptualization of psychological wellness, therefore, was executed through highlighting happiness, either in the form of subjective well-being or psychological well-being. Subjective well-being emphasizes on factors that are cognitive (e.g. life satisfaction) and affective (e.g. positive affect and negative affect) in nature (Diener, 2000), while psychological well-being focuses on self-growth, meaning in life, positive interpersonal relationships, autonomy, environmental mastery and self-acceptance (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

The role of needs in living a happy and satisfying life cannot be easily discounted. For instance, in the multi-layered dimensions of subjective well-being (Sheldon, 2004), psychological needs are integrated in a model that explains happiness of individuals as involving culture, social relations, self, goals and personality traits. To exemplify the influence of needs on well-being, self-determination theory hypothesized that satisfaction of psychological needs, namely the need for autonomy, relatedness and competence, are pivotal in the achievement of positive psychological outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Rosce, & Ryan, 2000). It posits as well that intrinsically-motivated individuals are more likely susceptible to experience a state of satisfaction in life (Howell, Chenot, Hill & Howell, 2009). Despite the presence of evidences that established the significant link between needs and happiness, other frameworks that rest on the importance of needs in understanding behaviors were still understudied (Glasser, 1998).

Choice theory capitalizes on the significance of internal locus of control in the behavioral strategies employed by individuals (Glasser, 1998). In particular, human beings are driven to satisfy five basic needs along with some of its subcategories (Skeen, 2003): *survival* (e.g. *physiological needs, exercise*), *love and belongingness* (e.g. *companionship, friendship affection*), *power* (e.g. *achievement, competence, and recognition*), *freedom* (e.g. *autonomy, independence, option*), and *fun and enjoyment* (e.g. *relaxation, pleasure, learning*). Choice theory manifests some resemblance with theories that foster the role of internal motivation like the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Choice theory, however, extends beyond conceptual formulations to therapeutic practice. It has been applied in several psychological issues in adolescence due to the parental, social and contextual expectations stemming from their developmental task. For example, individuals from this phase are expected to establish their identities like in the form of vocational choices (Germeijs, & Verschueren, 2006; Arnett, 2000; Vondracek, Schulenberg, Skorikov, Gillespie, & Wahlheim, 1995).

Bearing these considerations in mind, we conceptualized the present study to examine the possible link between basic needs and happiness. This is a crucial step towards understanding the conceptual premises of choice theory and eventually applying them in therapeutic encounters. Recognizing the movement towards evidence-based practice in the field of counseling, we would like to understand psychological wellness in the lens of this framework. Consequently, empirically-supported interventions can be crafted based on the principles of choice theory.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

The present research utilized descriptive-predictive research design in answering the research questions. Sheperis, Young, and Daniels (2010) asserted that it endeavors to examine factors that influence specific outcomes. In the current study, basic needs served as predictors while happiness operated as the criterion

variable.

2.2 Participants

Two hundred college students ($n=200$) whose ages ranged from 15 to 21 ($M=17.15$, $SD=1.11$) in a private and sectarian collegiate university in Metro Manila were recruited and selected for the study. Most of the respondents were males (58%) while the rest were females (42%).

2.3 Measures

The present study employed Choice Theory Rating Scale for children and adolescents, which was adopted from the career needs assessment instrument of Mason and Duba (2009) that aims to examine levels of five basic needs hypothesized in Glasser's control theory. Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky, 1997) was also used to assess the degree to which participants experience positive and joyous states in their lives. Reliability coefficients of the said instruments were $\alpha=.81$ and $\alpha=.60$ respectively.

2.4 Procedures

After coordinating the study to the faculty members of the target classes and giving informed consent to the respondents, aforementioned instruments were administered to them in their respective classes by the research assistant. Then, the survey forms were encoded and analyzed using Statistical Packages for Social Sciences 17.0. Mean, standard deviations, Pearson-r and multiple R correlational coefficients and multiple regression coefficients were computed as well.

3. Results and Discussion

Based on the results of descriptive statistical measures, the *need for fun and enjoyment* ($M=5.58$, $SD=3.04$) is the most prevalent basic needs of the respondents. On the other hand, the *need for survival and health* ($M=5.07$, $SD=3.13$) is the least prominent psychological need of the respondents. These findings seemed to characterize distinct developmental characteristics of individuals in this stage as adolescents tend to engage in tasks that require them to establish their identities through vocational or career decision-making instead of prioritizing recreational endeavors (Germeijs, & Verschueren, 2006; Arnett, 2000).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the Variables used in the Study (n=200)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Need for Love and Belongingness	5.17	2.93
Need for Self-Worth	5.63	2.66
Need for Freedom	5.10	2.73
Need for Fun and Enjoyment	5.58	3.05
Need for Survival and Health	5.07	3.13
Happiness	20.74	3.58

3.1 Significant Correlates of Happiness

Though all of the basic needs showed negligible to slight magnitude of association to happiness, there are just two needs that manifested statistically-significant connections to the respondents' positive and joyous state. The basic *need for love and belongingness* appeared to be the most robust correlate of happiness, $r(200) = -.29$, $p < .01$. It implies that as adolescents' necessity to gain affection heightens, it becomes more difficult to satisfy

that need to achieve happiness. Perception of the need to establish socially-meaningful relationships (e.g. gaining friends, keeping in touch with siblings), therefore, is a salient indicator of happiness (Howell, Chenot, Hill & Howell, 2011; Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith; Ganesan & Reyes, 2011). In a culture that rewards socially-motivated behavioral outcomes, it is not difficult to realize the significant influence of social and contextual variables in the attainment of a psychological well-being (Reyes, 2005).

The *need for fun and enjoyment* $r(200) = -.19, p < .05$, also exhibited statistically-significant correlation with happiness. It signifies that as individuals under this developmental phase recognize the necessity to experience more time for leisure and recreation, it becomes more difficult to achieve higher levels of happiness. Several factors may be looked at in examining susceptibility of adolescents to a greater acknowledgment of this need. For instance, given that they are expected to establish and implement their respective vocational identity (i.e. selection of course in college, passing the subjects taken in one's degree), they might opt to set aside doing chores that give them more enjoyment. In addition, since adolescence is a crucial stage in one's professional development (e.g. initial entry to the professional field one has chosen), individuals from this phase may be overwhelmed with the duties and responsibilities that arise from parental and societal expectations. Such circumstantial possibilities strengthen the likelihood of recognizing the stressors more than the rewards of this existential stage.

Table 2

Significant Correlates of Happiness based on Participants' Responses (n=200)

Basic Needs	r	p
Need for Love and Belongingness	-.29**	.00
Need for Self-Worth	-.09	.20
Need for Freedom	-.10	.18
Need for Fun and Enjoyment	-.19**	.00
Need for Survival and Health	-.13	.06

Note. **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

3.2 Significant Predictor of Happiness

To identify predictors of happiness among the basic needs, multiple regression analysis through enter method was executed. Findings revealed that the basic needs of the respondents accounted for 10.7% of the variance on their levels of happiness, which is the magnitude of positive and joyous state that can be attributed to their basic needs while the rest of variation can be explained by other factors (e.g. personality traits, life circumstances, positive affect, negative affect and etc.). The regression model was found out to be significant, $F(5, 194) = 4.67, p < .01$.

Table 3

Regression Analysis of Basic Needs and Happiness (n=200)

	Unstandardized B	Std. error	B	Sig.
Constant	22.39	.63		.00
Love and Belongingness	-.44	.11	-.36**	.00
Self-Worth	-.07	.12	.05	.59
Freedom	-.13	.13	.10	.33
Fun and Enjoyment	-.20	.12	-.17	.10
Survival Health	.14	.12	.12	.25

Note. *Significant at the 0.05 level

The *need for love and belongingness* is the lone significant predictor of happiness ($\beta = -.23, p < .05$). The necessity of adolescents to interact with others and to solicit affection from other people, therefore, can impact their levels of subjective well-being. This finding exhibited consistency with the results from previous empirical

studies that established linkage between socially-related variables and happiness (Howell, Chenot, Hill & Howell, 2011; Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith; Ganesan & Reyes, 2011). As pinpointed from the previous segment of this paper, understanding happiness as a socially-construed variable is easy to recognize since individuals from collectivistic cultures reward behaviors that optimize social-connectedness through interdependent self-construal (Reyes, 2005). Hence, conceptualizing happiness of Filipino adolescents may involve assessment of their innate psychological needs to engage in socially-purposeful relationships and to seek warmth from others.

3.3 Happiness in the context of Choice Theory

From the results of the present study, the theoretical assumption that psychological needs constitute to the over-all level of subjective well-being of individuals was validated (Sheldon, 2004). Specifically, happiness of Filipino adolescents can be substantially linked to their *needs for love and belongingness* and *needs for fun and enjoyment*. It also divulged the predictive value of the *need for love and belongingness* in attaining a positive and joyous state. Survival needs of the respondents may be lower as this need may have already been satisfied, It is not as salient as the other needs. Same may also account for the non-prevalence of freedom needs.

Choice theory posits that our actions are motivated by the satisfaction of five basic needs. The actions that we make to satisfy those needs are a result of the choices that we make. External factors are not seen as relevant contributors to the satisfaction of our needs. It implies as well that in a collectivistic society like the Philippines, happiness is achieved in a social context. Happiness is less derived from gaining freedom or autonomy but more with the sense of connection they experience with significant others. Results of the current inquiry present the implicit connections among happiness, love and fun though love and belongingness appeared to be the most robust indicator of happiness.

Implications of the findings can be charted on the practice of counseling and psychotherapy, especially in the use of choice theory. It provides an insight not just on the probable *quality world* but also on the possible locus and object of externalizing tendencies of Filipino adolescents. In choice theory, the quality world is the term used to describe the collection of beliefs, people and experiences that satisfies the individual's basic needs (Glasser, 1998). Social and relational factors, therefore, may constitute to the way quality world will be construed by adolescents which can be surmised in the choices they are making. It is imperative to closely examine interpersonal variables that either nurture or impede them from living a life full of happiness and satisfaction. Hence, formulating counseling interventions that enhance social skills of adolescents is highly encouraged to optimize susceptibilities of these individuals to a positive, joyous and satisfying state.

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