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A Study of Happiness

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Abstract

In the fall of 2012, I undertook a two-week study to test the impact friendships have on my happiness. My overall intention for this experiment was to change how I approached and treated my friendships. The experiment consisted of focusing my attention on my friend's happiness before my own and to track my behavioral changes towards others. Throughout the two weeks, I tested multiple theories to see if, in fact, they affected my happiness. The most interesting finding in this study was that a variety of social groups are the most influential and important aspect to increasing my own happiness. Only through conducting my own experiment could I confirm other author's theories are true. Overall, I learned that through hard work, planning and determination happiness is accessible for everyone. Though I realize that happiness is subjective to each individual, my research and experiment proved that friendships are the most influential on one's happiness.

Author Biography

Rachel Mills grew up in Shawnee, Kansas where she attended Mill Valley High School. Following graduation she attended Grand View University where she studied Graphic Design. After discovering she had a strong interest in math, she decided to fuse her love for art and math together and change her major to Urban Planning and Design. She now attends the University of Missouri, Kansas City to study said major with a minor in Philosophy. In the future she hopes to develop cities around the world and eventually partner with Habitat for Humanity.

Mentor Biography

Dr. Brittany Cottrill is an Assistant Professor of English at Grand View University where she teaches writing courses. She is also the Co-Coordinator of the First-Year Seminar and has taught seminar classes on the pursuit of happiness and monsters and monstrosities. Her research focuses on the teaching of writing, writing assessment, and digital literacies.

> I believe that the very purpose of our life is to seek happiness. That is clear. Whether one believes in religion or not, whether one believes in this religion or that religion, we are all seeking something better in life. So, I think, the very motion of our life is towards happiness. (The Dalai Lama and Cutler 13)

Humanity has always been searching for the secret of what makes one truly happy, but what really does make one happy? Philosophers, such as Aristotle and Saint Thomas Aquinas, believe that religion has a large influence on one's happiness. They have written that devotion and commitment to a religion has an effect on happiness because of the comfort, safety and community aspects (Aristotle 12; Aquinas 11). Though following a religion has a strong impact on many people's happiness, does one aspect that Aristotle and Aquinas mention have a bigger influence than the other? Being a part of a tight-knit community can make one feel wanted. The emotions of feeling needed and a part of something can increase one's happiness; therefore, philosophers suggest that one may find increased happiness by surrounding one's self with community, such as in a church setting.

Agreeing, authors Rodney Stark and Jared Maier also believe that the community feel that comes with religion is an important aspect to one's happiness. They purport that, "Religion provides much more accessible and supportive social relations . . . the 'social' bonds can be to God as well as to fellow congregants" (Stark and Maier 125). In other words, not only does the social aspect of religion influence one's happiness, but also, having faith in a higher power, or a God-like figure, leads to a heightened sense of happiness. An influence from a higher power can also be a factor that makes one feel protected and comfortable.

The Dalai Lama claims that the feeling of closeness and compassion between two people creates a genuine connection, both through a church community and in general life. He writes, “I think that if one is seeking to build a truly satisfying relationship, the best way of bringing this about is to get to know the deeper nature of the person and relate to her or him on that level, instead of merely on the basis of the superficial characteristics” (The Dalai Lama and Cutler 102-103). He claims that casual conversation, or “superficial characteristics,” does not create a strong bond between two people because of the lack of interest in the other. But I wondered how this applied to the average person. If I focused less on casual small talk like the Dalai Lama suggests and actually concerned myself with how someone’s day was going, could I increase the connection between others and myself? Could that also increase my happiness?

Just a genuine care for others can help; negative conversation or assumptions can bring up negative memories, leading to a decrease in happiness. Understanding this, I knew that changing how I approached or treated others could strengthen bonds between friends. Establishing a stronger bond between people creates the feeling of closeness, and this increases happiness. I wanted to test the truth of this theory in my own happiness experiment by blocking out the negativity in my life: leaving out negative conversations with friends, listening to others and simply caring about how others’ days are going. Regardless of stress, time constraints or the struggles of my own day, I challenged myself to put my emotions second and care for others first. The hope was to increase my happiness, but more so the happiness of those around me. At the heart of this study was the Dalai Lama’s belief that by increasing compassion and keeping an open mind one can

appreciate another's suffering and experience; therefore, creating a strong relationship between two people and increasing happiness (The Dalai Lama and Cutler 88-89).

By changing the genuine concern I have towards others and reducing the amount of negative thoughts and conversations that go on, I predicted that my happiness would increase. This prediction was further supported by Gretchen Rubin's book *The Happiness Project*, which describes her yearlong experience attempting to change her own happiness. Rubin states that one needs long-term relationships to be happy. One also needs to be able to confide in others and needs to feel as if they belong (Rubin 142). Overall, she claims, that people tend to be happier when they are with and feel compassion from other people. If this is true, Rubin's results suggest that my experiment would be successful because of the amount of attention to others' happiness I intended to offer.

If these philosophers and authors are correct, then the community aspect of religion is the main factor for one's happiness, with the belief in a higher power being secondary. This can be hard to accept for some especially when that belief in a God-like figure plays directly into many people's sense of happiness, belonging and safety. In an attempt to test this theory, I took up a two-week study where I endeavored to change the quality of my friendships to see if my own happiness would also be affected. Additionally, being religious myself, I wanted to confirm that the emphasis on community really does play a vital role in the happiness people gain from following a religion.

My overall intention for this experiment was to change how I approached my friendships. The philosophers and authors suggested that if one's friendships are strong

and the people around them are happy, then said person would be happy as well. With this in mind, my experiment consisted of focusing my attention on my friends' happiness before my own. In theory, I suspected the result of this experiment would be an increase in my happiness and theirs.

I decided to test whether I could, in fact, increase my happiness over a given period of time. This experiment took place over two weeks near the end of my first semester at college. The first week of the experiment ended with the Thanksgiving holiday, where I was able to go home and finally see friends and family I had been away from for several months. The second week was nearing the end of the semester. To track my happiness I kept a daily journal about each day and how my happiness fluctuated. But before I was able to do that, my process began with deciding where my happiness set point was. On a scale of one to five – one being unhappy, three being neutral and five being happy – I rated the average happiness of my life overall and my happiness on day one of the experiment.

Generally, I have had an above average life. I have been fortunate enough to have a generous family, wonderful education and supportive friends. To answer, on the scale of one to five, I would rate my overall life happiness at a four. Others with similarly high happiness set points have still worked to increase their happiness. Rubin says she felt she "had much to be happy about . . . I wasn't depressed and I wasn't having a midlife crisis, but I was suffering from midlife malaise – a recurrent sense of discontent and almost feeling of disbelief. I had everything I could possibly want – yet I was failing to appreciate it" (1-2). Like Rubin, I was not unhappy; however, I did not always appreciate all of the happiness surrounding me. I took for granted the happiness that my friendships

brought me. This study forced me to become aware of the situation at hand, which was the lack of appreciation I had for my friends; that is how the idea of treating people with more respect came to mind. Allowing my friendships to develop could increase my general happiness, possibly raising my happiness to a five on the scale.

Unlike the happiness of my life overall, my happiness at the beginning of the experiment was lower. I rated it as a two. My rate for the first day was upsetting. However, Claudia Wallis writes that "even the happiest of people feel blue at times and even the bluest have their moments of joy," which reassured me of my ability to complete the experiment (3). After the first day I realized how much harder it was going to be to commit to the experiment each day for the next two weeks because maybe simply trying to do the right thing was not enough. Although I tried solely to be nicer to people I ended the day lower than where I started off. The hardest task was gossiping – it was difficult to avoid. But still I wondered if completely removing gossip from my life could actually make me happier? Rubin writes, "Despite its bad reputation, gossip plays an important social role by reinforcing community values: it makes people feel closer to each other, it unifies people who play by the rules, [and] it helps people get a sense of the values of their community," but she continues to say, "Although gossip may serve an important social function and it's certainly fun, it's not a very nice thing to do" (Rubin 155). From experience, gossiping can be a form of stress release in a dramatic situation, but personally I have learned that nothing good comes from gossiping and in the end it only fuels the fire. But, Rubin assured me that gossip does not have to be completely removed, just done in moderation.

The second day of my experiment was even more disappointing. The issue that occurred was that I was letting my emotions from previous days affect how I treated others later in my experiment, whether they were an attribution to my unhappiness or not. This was also something I needed to work on: not carrying my anger or frustration from one experience with me throughout the day. For example, if I found out a friend of mine was gossiping about me behind my back, then my anger toward said individual should not affect how I treat the friend she was gossiping to because it was not the second friend's fault for merely listening to the gossip. Overall, I realized if I carried my negative mood with me throughout the day it would affect anything else that could bring me happiness.

On the third day, I tested if avoiding people that usually caused my unhappiness would change my results. This trial within my experiment caused loneliness that led to me being unhappy, ending the day with a two rating. The next day I tested the opposite extreme on the spectrum. I spent all of my free time with my friends. At the end of day four, I rated my happiness using the 1-5 scale and ended the day with a rating of a five. Showing the contrast between spending no time to all of my time with people proved that "almost everyone is happier when they are with other people" (Wallis 7). Due to spending time with friends, the next three days my happiness was at a constant high. The continuation of my happiness could have been a result of my improvement of being nicer or me seeing friends from high school. After being away from home for three months, seeing old friends gave me a happiness boost that attributed to my five rating. Regardless of the reasoning, my happiness was at or above my baseline; therefore, verifying that the

experiment was going well thus far. I was realizing that focusing on others and being around people I cared about directly impacted my day-to-day happiness.

The next week averaged out to be a 2.7 on the scale of one to five. Looking back through the journals I wrote each day, I saw that each one of them stated that it was just an "average" day. Were my days beginning to turn into just average? Once again, I read through the journals to see if there was a constant factor that was causing me to be unhappy. It seemed that the more time I spent with the same people the less exciting each day became. Could regularly seeing the same people – no matter how good of friends they are – make someone unhappy?

Rubin believes "new friends expand your world by providing an entrance to new interests, opportunities, and activities and can be an invaluable source of support and information – and, just as happiness-inducing, you can play the same role for them" (156-157). The frequent presence of the same friends can eventually become unappealing because of the lack of new excitement in one's life. Therefore, surrounding one's self with a variety of friends, a church or social groups, for example, can increase happiness. My happiness was at its peak when I saw my friends from college and from home in the span of a couple of days, due to the excitement of seeing old friends and eventually returning back to new friends. According to Dan Gilbert, narrator for an episode of *This Emotional Life*, social relationships are what we depend on as human beings to make us happier: "When they are strong, we are happier and when they are destroyed, we are devastated" ("Rethinking Happiness"). Gilbert claims that friendship is the key to happiness ("Rethinking Happiness"). Discovering that my friendliness towards others depends on the constant change between friend circles helped how I approached my

happiness experiment for the remaining time. If I made interactions with certain groups of friends more rare then it would make the encounter with them more exciting and valuable, which would ultimately increase my happiness.

At the end of the two weeks I tallied my day-to-day happiness journal scores and calculated that my average happiness was a 3.1, almost a whole degree lower than what I considered my overall life happiness to be at the beginning of the experiment. I was disappointed with the results. However, the last day of my experiment ended with the rating of a five, exponentially higher than the two on my first day; likely due to the realizations I had throughout the two weeks of what could increase my happiness. Noticing this proved to me that my experiment was a success.

Although statistically my results proved to be successful I did not physically and mentally feel happier. Some of the relationships with my friends strengthened, but I did consistently practice all of changes I intended on making. I could have done a better job being kinder to other people apart from my immediate friend group. Even so, I did learn a lot from the experiment.

I realized that first and foremost, the people we surround ourselves with do directly impact our happiness. I also learned that it is possible to work to increase one's happiness, but that happiness is also relative. It can increase or decrease because of situations beyond our control.

I made multiple discoveries throughout the two weeks that improved my score at the end, but there were always more changes I could have made to improve my overall rating. For example, Wallis proposes that "what you remember of an experience is particularly influenced by the emotional high and low points and how it ends . . . the

average person remembers the peak moments and how he or she felt at the end of [an experience]" (4). This made me wonder if writing the journal entries only at the end of the day affected my experiment and whether or not it accurately displayed my happiness. There were exciting events that happened each day, but did I let the negative ones overshadow the good? Instead of missing important events and possibly inaccurately recording one's happiness, people studying happiness should look at each event throughout the experiment and not just the reflection, due to the amount of information that can escape a person (Wallis 4). I was left wondering if my results would have been closer to what I originally identified my happiness set point to be if I had recorded each event throughout the two weeks. Still, "studying moment-to-moment experiences puts too much emphasis on transient pleasures and displeasures. Happiness goes deeper than that" (Wallis 4). My recording and reporting may have been problematic because of when I reflected, but focusing on the moment-to-moment may not have been less problematic. Like Wallis, I question whether or not one can actually determine which events to put the most emphasis on. Regardless of the many experiment designs possible, the results of my study were surprising and successful because I ended with a better sense of how social connections impact happiness. Furthermore, I realized that Rubin was right when she said anyone could conduct his or her own happiness project and succeed. With dedication and specific goals, happiness is obtainable.

Whether it is in a church setting or general life, a community or a group of friends can provide one with happiness. Through the feelings of closeness and acceptance, one's happiness can increase. If the purpose of life is to find happiness (The Dalai Lama), and wealth, power and pleasure are not ways to happiness (Aristotle 2-5; Aquinas 2-11), then

it seems highly likely that only through deep connections can we be happy. But what is the real reason religion is said to be the factor to happiness? Is it the belief in the higher power or the community aspect I researched for the last two weeks? Though the power of faith cannot be denied, my experiment suggests that the affiliation with a strong group of people is an equally important factor to one's happiness. Although a higher power has an impact, the community is the overall reason for happiness. Overall, each person is looking to be happier, and a community or friendship circle is the path to increasing one's happiness.

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