

# Searching for happiness at work

**H**APPINESS is very important to us, professionally as well as personally. In personal terms, we all seek to achieve happiness in some way; for many people, it is the basis of a 'good life'. Happy individuals act differently from others, and this can lead to activities and reactions from people that in turn encourage more happiness. For practitioner members of the profession, the reduction of unhappiness is a primary concern; for academics, scientific understanding in this area is crucial both in its own right and for underpinning professional actions and organisational policies.

Many members of the Society are unaware of progress made by work and organisational psychologists. Aspects of happiness and unhappiness have long been primary targets of occupational investigation, and the nature, sources and consequences of worker happiness are becoming defined (e.g. Judge *et al.*, 2001; Kinicki *et al.*, 2002; Warr, 2007). Given that people and their mental processes are similar across different kinds of settings, occupational research themes are widely applicable in other fields of psychology.

Happiness might be studied through positive states, such as cheerfulness, enthusiasm, joy, pleasure, satisfaction or contentment; the perspective might be more negative – on anxiety, depression, dissatisfaction, stress, strain or tension; or broader constructs, labelled for instance as affect or well-being, might be examined. Whatever the focus, it would be helpful if investigators and practitioners, in organisations and elsewhere, could develop



**PETER WARR** with his framework for research and practice.

thinking in the six ways outlined in this article:

- Consider multiple aspects
- Examine a wide range of environmental sources
- Look for non-linear patterns
- Explore mental processes as well as environmental features
- Recognise the importance of personal baselines
- Acknowledge that unhappiness is essential to happiness

## Multiple aspects

Rather than envisaging a single indicator of happiness, it is essential to think in terms of multiple aspects. A principal axis runs from feeling bad to feeling good, and two others (distinguished in terms of degree of activation as well as pleasure) extend from negative feelings of anxiety to experiences of happiness as tranquil contentment, and from states of depression to happiness as energised pleasure.

Although themselves intercorrelated, these different axes of experience are differently related to several variables of interest. For example, high demands from the environment are more associated with unhappiness of the anxious sort than with depressed unhappiness. People in senior jobs exhibit more happiness than junior employees in terms of less depression, but they are less happy in terms of raised anxiety; and women tend to be less happy than men in terms of anxiety and depression, but they are also usually equally or more happy in their job satisfaction. Differences in links with behaviour are also expected; for example, activated

pleasure may more strongly predict initiative-taking than does happiness of a low-arousal kind.

It is also essential to look separately at different levels of scope. We can talk of 'context-free' happiness, with a general reference; or 'domain-specific' happiness, covering only feelings in a targeted domain (e.g. family satisfaction). At a third level, 'facet-specific' happiness is about particular aspects of a domain, such as your pay or your boss. Many publications appear to be based on the assumption that causes and consequences are the same at each level of scope. They are not, and must be distinguished from each other.

Some happiness is not actually accompanied by feelings of pleasure, or the satisfaction of desires. This second form of happiness invokes reference standards of some kind, perhaps some realisation of personal potential. This kind of 'happiness

## WEBLINKS

Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship:

[www.bus.umich.edu/Positive](http://www.bus.umich.edu/Positive)

World Database of Happiness:

[www.worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl](http://www.worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl)

European Network for Positive Psychology:

[www.enpp.org](http://www.enpp.org)

Journal of Happiness Studies:

[www.springerlink.com/content/104910](http://www.springerlink.com/content/104910)

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as self-validation' could valuably be considered more by research psychologists.

### Environmental sources

Happiness depends on a wide range of environmental features, and to develop understanding we need an appropriate classification system. Any categorisation is in part arbitrary, and we have to balance conceptual richness against practical convenience. One useful framework (Warr, 2007) is shown in the adjacent box. A psychologically 'good' job scores well across those 12 features. Other kinds of setting can be viewed in the same terms; for example, unemployment may be 'good' or 'bad' in these respects; and 'good' forms of unemployment might be psychologically better than a 'bad' job.

### Non-linear patterns

There is evidence, and a strong logical argument, that some of these desirable environmental features become undesirable at high levels. That inverted-U pattern is most noticeable in respect of demands (E3 in the box), which are troublesome at both very low and very high levels. In general, some levelling-off is expected; happiness does not continue to increase at the same rate with more and more of a job feature. For example, take income (E7): a standard increment, which can have a major impact on people in poverty, yields a smaller benefit to the happiness of wealthy individuals.

One possibility is to view the impact

## ENVIRONMENTAL SOURCES OF HAPPINESS

- E1 Opportunity for **personal control** – discretion, decision latitude, participation, etc.
- E2 Opportunity for **skill use and acquisition** – a setting's potential for applying and developing expertise and knowledge
- E3 **Externally-generated goals** – ranging across job demands, underload and overload, task identity, role conflict, required emotional labour, and work-home conflict
- E4 **Variety** – in job content and location
- E5 **Environmental clarity** – including role clarity, task feedback and low future ambiguity
- E6 **Contact with others** – in terms of both **quantity** (amount of contact, irrespective of its personal value) and **quality** (illustrated negatively and positively as aggression or social support)
- E7 **Availability of money** – the opportunity to receive income at a certain level
- E8 **Physical security** – has different forms in different roles; in job settings, it concerns working conditions, degree of hazard, and similar themes
- E9 **Valued social position** – in terms of the significance of a task or role
- E10 **Supportive supervision** – the extent to which one's concerns are taken into consideration
- E11 **Career outlook** – a matter either of job security or of the opportunity to gain promotion or shift to other roles
- E12 **Equity** – as justice both within one's organisation and in that organisation's relations with society

of environmental features on happiness as analogous to the effect of vitamins on physical condition (Warr, 2007). Vitamins are important for health up to but not beyond a certain level. A deficiency of vitamins gives rise to physiological impairment, but after a moderate level of intake there is no benefit from additional quantities, and some of them instead cause harm. Non-linear happiness patterns of this kind deserve more consideration than they have received.

### Happiness-related thinking

Employment researchers have so far paid most attention to happiness sources in the environment. This focus is helpful; through addressing aspects of job content or organisational practice we might improve employees' experiences by modifying their work settings. However, person-centred approaches are also essential; happiness derives strongly from individuals themselves.

Influential mental processes can be explored in terms of the judgements made when appraising a situation. The framework below brings together 10 themes that have been examined separately in different research areas:

### Comparisons with other people

'How does my situation compare with that of another individual or of the average person?' It is regularly found that 'downward' social comparisons (judgements made relative to people who are worse-off in the relevant respect) tend to enhance a person's own happiness.

### Comparisons with other situations

These can be of two kinds. Firstly, expected situations: 'How does my situation compare with the situation I expected?' Laboratory studies have confirmed that events that are unexpected have a greater impact on happiness or unhappiness than those that were expected; similar processes are likely in organisational and other settings. Secondly, counterfactual situations: 'How might the situation have developed in other ways?' As with social comparison, downward and upward mental comparisons with other possible events have corresponding effects on a person's happiness.

### Comparisons with other times

These can be either retrospective or prospective. In terms of previous trends, a judgement might be: 'Up to now, has the situation deteriorated, improved, or remained unchanged?' For example, progress towards a goal is pleasing, but movement away (or even remaining static) can be unpleasant. The happiness consequences of a current situation may thus depend on the perceived direction and pace of movement. For likely future trends, the judgement might be: 'From now on, is the situation likely to deteriorate, improve, or stay the same?' This kind of judgement is influential through, for instance, perceptions of the probability of success.

### Personal salience

Three levels of judgement need to be examined more closely than usual.

First, rated importance of role

membership: 'Do I want to be in this role?' This kind of appraisal (for example, in terms of an individual's 'employment commitment') has been shown to affect unhappiness during unemployment (Paul & Moser, 2006), the happiness of non-working women (Klumb & Lampert, 2004) and that of job-holders in general (Miller *et al.*, 2002).

Next, how important is the role characteristic: 'Do I value this feature?' Happiness is more strongly correlated with a particular environmental feature if that is viewed as more personally significant. So significance ratings should be incorporated in research analyses.

Differences in these judgements are also relevant to comparisons between groups or between individuals with different dispositional characteristics. For example, a substantial difference in the average rated importance of a job feature between men and women or between high- and low-scorers on extraversion is likely to be accompanied by a difference in the strength of association between that feature and happiness for the two groups.

Finally, what is the rated attractiveness of core tasks in the role: 'Do I like the things I have to do?' This kind of salience judgement is almost completely ignored in the job design literature, although it is central to vocational counselling and

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everyday life. Over and above environmental features of the kind examined in the literature, people differ in their liked and disliked task activities, with major implications for their happiness in particular settings.

**Situation-related self-efficacy** 'Was/is my performance effective in this situation?' Experiences of happiness or unhappiness can depend on judging that one has or has not coped well in a situation, and that one is or is not likely to be effective in the future. This process has almost never been investigated in organisations.

**Novelty or familiarity** 'Is the situation unusual or is it routine?' Affective responses to a novel situation tend to be greater than when that situation is familiar. People adapt to continuing inputs from the environment, such that environmental influences can be short-lived or become less strong over time. Once again, these processes of adaptation have rarely been studied in organisations.

The general point here is that judgements of these kinds need to be explored in all psychological research areas. The influence of environmental characteristics (apart from at extreme levels) is strongly dependent on how they are interpreted in these terms.

**Happiness baselines**

A further issue to be developed arises from the fact that people are consistent in their

behaviours and mental processes across time and settings. Traditional investigations have concentrated on personality traits, cognitive ability and similar continuing attributes, but it is clear that stable differences are also present in respect of happiness or unhappiness. Furthermore, those baselines may be largely inherited, and processes of adaptation (linked to the novelty/familiarity judgement above) might lead people to return to their baseline soon after environmental disruption (negative or positive) to their happiness.

Such within-person stability is of course troublesome if we wish to modify happiness by altering aspects of the environment. Will changes in, say, job content make any lasting difference to people's happiness? Or what about self-help exercises to enhance one's own happiness? Can they have an extended impact, or will people soon return to baseline? Questions of that kind clearly deserve more attention than they have received.

We also need better understanding of differences linked to demographic or cultural characteristics. For example,

**ONLINE EXTRA**

An article on employee well-being, by Chris Athanasiades and Allan Winthrop, is published in the online issue of *The Psychologist* this month. See [www.thepsychologist.org.uk](http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk).

**DISCUSS AND DEBATE**

General themes:

- Do we worry too much about happiness?
- How can we study ambivalence?
- Can we be happy without experiencing pleasure?
- How can we study the judgement processes outlined here?

Job-specific themes:

- Should employers aim to improve their staff's happiness?
- Can the redesign of jobs have more than a brief impact on employees' well-being?
- Are psychologists too concerned with the job environment instead of the individual?
- How does employee happiness or unhappiness affect the performance of an organisation?

Have your say on these or other issues this article raises. E-mail 'Letters' to [psychologist@bps.org.uk](mailto:psychologist@bps.org.uk) or contribute (members only) via [www.psychforum.org.uk](http://www.psychforum.org.uk).

women in some recent research tend to report greater overall job satisfaction than do men, despite the fact that they have on average lower pay and other benefits. Older employees also report more job satisfaction than younger ones, and temporary workers are not as unhappy as some have expected.

### **Unhappiness and happiness**

Much thinking by psychologists derives from the assumption that happiness is always to be desired and unhappiness is to be avoided. Removal of unhappiness thus becomes the goal. Yet in many settings people can only experience happiness in relation to its converse; one is dependent on the other.

Working towards personal goals can require substantial effort and often prevents a person from enjoying other activities. Associated with that, negative episodes in many personal projects involve failure, boredom, discouragement or pain. Of course, a person's experiences depend importantly on each state's intensity and duration, but most people have to struggle through difficult activities of some kind to meet their needs and to sustain happiness. This has two major implications for understanding happiness in work and elsewhere.

First, we need to obtain a much better understanding of the sources and nature of

ambivalence. Within a short period people can be both happy and unhappy, and to understand the overall experience we must learn more about its multifaceted nature. What forms of ambivalence occur in (for instance) work settings, how do they arise, and how are they handled? What are the causal relationships between a person's happiness and his or her unhappiness? Our focus has been almost entirely on what is in effect a person's average experience, with inadequate attention being paid to variations around that within-person average.

Second, it is unrealistic to divorce experiences of happiness from task-oriented activities in a role. For example, work and organisational psychologists have almost always examined job satisfaction separately from job performance, but each

of those can derive from a compromise with the other. We regulate our engagement in effortful activities in part by responding to feelings and expected feelings. Working less hard in a difficult job can thus sometimes reduce job-created unhappiness; conversely, striving to perform well can in some cases lead to negative feelings accompanying overload or failure. We need to learn more about this trade-off between effort and affect, its causes, and its consequences. Rather than restricting attention to either happiness or performance on its own, the two should be studied simultaneously.

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