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Eavesdropping on Happiness: Well-being is Related to Having Less Small Talk and More Substantive Conversations

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Is the happy life full of shallow, happy-go-lucky moments and trivial small talk or full of reflection and profound social encounters? Both notions exist – the happy ignoramus and the fulfilled deep thinker – but little is known about which everyday life is actually associated with greater happiness (King & Napa, 1998). We report findings from a naturalistic observation study that investigated whether happy and unhappy people differ in the amount of small talk and substantive conversations they have.

Although the macro-level and long-term implications of happiness have been extensively studied (Eid & Larsen, 2008; Howell & Howell, 2008), little is known about the daily social behavior of happy people, primarily due to the difficulty of objectively measuring everyday behavior. Many behavioral measures (e.g., experience sampling, day reconstruction method) rely on self-reports and so cannot disentangle true associations between happiness and behavior from biases or idealized self-views. This is especially true for evaluatively-loaded behaviors such as the substance, or lack thereof, of one's conversations. To address this difficulty, we used the Electronically Activated Recorder (EAR; Mehl, Pennebaker, Crow, Dabbs, & Price, 2001), a digital audio recorder that unobtrusively tracks real-world behavior by periodically recording snippets of ambient sounds while participants go about their daily lives.

Methods

Seventy-nine undergraduates (47 females) wore the EAR for four days (Vazire & Mehl, 2008). The EAR recorded for 30 seconds every 12.5 minutes, providing 23,689 waking recordings ($M = 300$ per participant). For each recording, coders identified whether a participant was alone, talking with others, and whether a conversation was small talk or substantive. Small talk was defined as an uninvolved conversation of a banal nature (i.e., only trivial information is exchanged; e.g., “What do you have there? Popcorn? Yummy!”). A substantive conversation was defined as an involved conversation of a substantive nature

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Portions of these data were used in Mehl, Vazire, Ramirez-Esparza, Slatcher, and Pennebaker (2007), Hasler, Mehl, Bootzin, and Vazire (2008), and Vazire and Mehl (2008). The present analyses do not overlap with those reported in these papers. This project was supported by NIH grant R03CA137975. We thank John Doris for his helpful comments.

(i.e., meaningful information is exchanged; e.g., “She fell in love with your dad? So, did they get divorced soon after?”). See Table 1 for reliabilities.

The EAR codings were converted into relative frequencies (i.e., percentage of waking recordings in which a category applied). To account for differences in number of conversations, we also computed the percentage of conversations that were small talk or substantive. Across all participants, 17.9% ($SD = 15.4\%$) of conversations were small talk and 35.5% ($SD = 24.7\%$) were substantive. Substantive conversations were significantly related to time spent socializing ($r = .38$), eating ($r = .33$), and watching TV ($r = -.22$). Small talk was unrelated to all standard EAR activity categories.

We assessed well-being with several methods. Participants completed the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985; $\alpha = .93$) and the single-item happiness measure “I see myself as someone who is happy, satisfied with life” twice three weeks apart. The single-item self-report of happiness was combined with 2-3 informant-reports on the same measure ($\alpha = .80$). To obtain a multi-method well-being index, we combined the self- and informant-based happiness measure with participants’ self-reported life satisfaction.

To obtain a multi-method measure of personality, we averaged two self-reports (three weeks apart) and 2-3 informant-reports on the Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999; $\alpha \geq .92$).

Results and Discussion

Consistent with prior research (Diener & Seligman, 2002), higher well-being was associated with spending less time alone, $r = -.35$, and more time talking to others, $r = .31$. Further, higher well-being was associated with having less small talk, $r = -.33$, and more substantive conversations, $r = .28$. To illustrate the magnitude of these effects, compared to the unhappiest participants ($-2.0 SD$) the happiest participants ($+1.5 SD$) spent 25% less time alone (58.6% vs. 76.8%) and 70% more time talking (39.7% vs. 23.2%). They also had roughly one third as much small talk (10.2% vs. 28.3%) and twice as many substantive conversations (45.9% vs. 21.8%; Figure S1). The effects for the well-being index were comparable to those for the life satisfaction and happiness measures separately and emerged for weekdays and the weekend (Table 1).

To test whether personality differences accounted for these effects, we residualized the well-being index for participants’ scores on all Big Five dimensions (Steel, Schmidt & Shultz, 2008). Using this residualized well-being index, the effects for time spent alone, talking to others and substantive conversations were basically unaffected and the effects for small talk were diminished (Table 1). These analyses indicate that participants who were happier than one would predict from their personality had more, and more substantive, conversations.

Together, the findings demonstrate that the happy life is social rather than solitary and conversationally deep rather than superficial. What makes these findings especially compelling is the lack of method overlap between the well-being measures (self- and informant-reports) and the interaction measures (direct observation). Also, the replication of findings across measures of well-being and across weekday and weekend behavior is encouraging.

Naturally, our correlational findings are causally ambiguous. On one hand, well-being may be causally antecedent to having substantive interactions. Happy people may be “social attractors” that facilitate deeper social encounters (Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006). On the other hand, deep conversations may actually make people happier. Just like self-disclosure can instill a sense of intimacy in a relationship, deep conversations may instill a sense of

meaning in the interaction partners. Therefore, our results raise the interesting possibility that happiness can be increased by facilitating substantive conversations (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Future research should examine this possibility experimentally.

Remarking on Socrates' dictum, "the unexamined life is not worth living," Daniel Dennett wrote, "the overly examined life is nothing to write home about either." (1984, p. 87). While we hesitate to enter such delicate philosophical disputes, our findings suggest that people find their lives more worth living when examined--at least when examined together.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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Table 1

EAR-derived daily interaction variables: Reliabilities and correlations with well-being

EAR-derived variables	Intercoder reliability	How was participants' well-being related to their daily interactions?			Did the effects differ on weekdays and weekend?		Did personality differences account for the effects?
		Well-being index	SWLS measure	Happiness measure	Well-being index		
					Weekdays	Weekend ^b	
Alone	.97	-.35**	-.36**	-.27*	-.29**	-.35**	-.40**
Talking to others	.95	.31**	.31**	.26*	.30**	.30**	.39**
Small talk	.76	-.07	-.03	-.10	-.01	-.09	.08
% of all conversations	--- ^a	-.33**	-.25*	-.35**	-.30**	-.34**	-.17
Substantive conversations	.84	.31**	.26*	.30**	.27*	.31**	.36**
% of all conversations	--- ^a	.28**	.20	.31**	.28**	.27*	.22*

Note: N = 79

the variables are expressed as proportions of the total number of sampled sound files; %-variables are expressed as proportion of total number of conversations (i.e., the variable "Talking to others"); intercoder reliabilities were computed from a training set of 221 EAR sound files which were independently coded by all coders (ICC[2,k]); the happiness measure is the average of self- and informant-ratings of happiness; the well-being index is the aggregate of participants' self-reported life satisfaction (SWLS) and the happiness measure; resid. = residualized; SWLS = Satisfaction with Life Scale; Big Five = composite of self- and informant-reports of all five Big Five dimensions

* $p \leq .05$ (two-tailed)

** $p < .01$ (two-tailed)

^a no reliability reported because the variable is a quotient of two coded variables

^b defined as Friday 6:00 pm to Sunday at midnight.