The Pursuit of Happiness and Its Relationship to the Meta-experience of Emotions and Culture

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Abstract

In this commentary, I provide a brief background of the meta-experience of emotions, the philosophical and psychological literature on happiness, and further discuss the influence of culture on happiness. The meta-experience of emotions implies that there are primary and secondary emotions (i.e., emotions about emotions), similar to the concept of meta-cognitions. Primary and secondary emotions are closely associated with one's cultural background and happiness. Most scholars throughout history believe that happiness per se cannot be taught. However, it is possible to teach practices that lead to the path toward happiness. Promising strategies include loving-kindness and compassion meditation. These strategies are based on Buddhist teachings, which are deeply rooted in a collectivistic culture. This illustrates the close association between emotions, approaches towards happiness, and cultural background.

Introduction

The thought-provoking article Normative Influences on Secondary Disturbance: The Role of Social Expectancies" by Bastian (this issue) presents an interesting discourse into the influence of social norms on the experience of emotions. The author begins with the premise that accepting unpleasant emotional states is an important strategy in the reduction of secondary distress and improving emotional and psychological well-being. The article continues to examine whether acceptance is influenced by social factors. The author summarizes his programmatic line of research that explores the contribution of social and normative factors on emotional experiences. The author posits that certain cultures (e.g., Australia) place a particular value on happiness, whereas others (e.g., Japan) consider negative emotions to be unacceptable, which paradoxically result in more (secondary) negative emotions and poor well-being. In this commentary, I want to take the opportunity to make a few additional points, some of which are offered in support of the author's argument, where others are offered as extensions.

The Meta-Experience of Emotions

Emotions are complex, multidimensional, and multilayered. For this discussion, the multilayered aspect is of particular importance. We not only feel an emotion, such as fear, anger, sadness, or happiness as a response to a stimulus, but we also feel emotions about the emotions. This has been an important focus of a psychodynamically-oriented treatment that has become known as Emotion Focused Therapy (Greenberg, 2011). Emotion Focused Therapy distinguishes between primary emotions, secondary emotions, and instrumental emotions. *Primary emotions* are the initial and basic responses to an event or situation. These primary emotions can be adaptive or maladaptive, depending on the consequences.

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Primary adaptive emotions prepare the individual for an adaptive response and usually subside when the situation changes or when the basic needs are met. In contrast, primary emotions are maladaptive if they persist even if the situation changes, the basic needs are met, or if they are excessive and destructive in nature. Greenberg (2011) assumes that maladaptive secondary emotions are often connected to earlier traumatic experiences. *Secondary emotions* are responses to those primary emotions or cognitions rather than to the eliciting situation or event per se. For example, a divorce may lead to sadness in the divorced wife (the primary emotion), but also to feelings such as anger for being sad (the secondary emotion). Secondary emotions can serve as a defensive function (e.g., being angry at herself for being sad may protect her against experiencing feelings of guilt). In addition, Emotion Focused Therapy assumes that secondary emotions can also be activated in response to thoughts. For example, a person might feel anxious in response to worries or ashamed in response to certain thoughts. It should be noted that the emphases of EFT have been incorporated in therapies that have demonstrated empirical support.

Perceptions and appraisals of emotional experiences have long been recognized and described as meta-experiences of emotions (Mayer & Gaschke, 1988). A person might perceive an emotion as problematic or aversive, which in turn can influence the way the person regulates his or her emotional states. This can also cause confusion about ones emotional state and lead to avoidance strategies to manage these confusing emotional experiences. An example might be the case of a teenager who is using alcohol or drugs following the divorce of her parents. More complex cases may occur when strong positive and strong negative emotions coexist as in the example when love towards a father or mother compete with hate and anger due to sexual abuse by the same parent when the patient was a child. This can leave the person in a state of confusion and desperation.

A related phenomenon is the concept of meta-cognition (Wells, 2011). Meta-cognitions are thoughts about thoughts. In the case of generalized anxiety disorder, for example, the maladaptive cognitions are not only the worries themselves, such as worries about the future, minor matters, health, etc, but also the worries about these worries. Accordingly, Wells (2011) distinguishes between two types of worries. The Type I worries are the worries about minor matters, finances, the future, etc.), whereas the Type II worries are the worries about that those worries. For example, a person might believe that worrying a lot might lead to a mental crisis. As a result, this person might worry about the worrying. However, these meta-cognitions are not always perceived negatively. Especially in the case of generalized anxiety disorder a patient often believes that worrying about the future might somehow prevent future catastrophes from happening. This superstitious belief can then reinforce the Type I worry process and by doing so maintain the disorder. This is also consistent with the notion of *emotional reasoning,* (i.e., the tendency to use ones emotions as the basis of one's cognitive appraisal; Beck, 1979) and *emotional schemas*, (i.e., one's beliefs about the dangerousness of emotions; Leahy, 2007). As noted by Bastian, this meta-experience of emotions might be, at least in part, associated with ones social expectancies that are determined by one's culture and one's pursuit of happiness.

Pursuing the Elusive Thing Called Happiness

Although the positive psychology movement and research on positive emotions, well-being and happiness became a mainstream research agenda in psychology fairly recently (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), these constructs have a very long history. Especially happiness has been the subject of many philosophies and religions throughout human history for millennia. It is a central theme of Buddhist teachings. Ultimate happiness, defined as *Nirvana* (or *Bodhi*), the state of everlasting peace, is the state free from suffering, anger and cravings. Buddhists believe that this state is achieved through the *Noble Eightfold Path* that

is often separated into three into basic divisions: Wisdom, ethical conduct, and concentration. Maintaining good friendships, are recognized as worthy goals, but are of secondary importance and are considered more mundane forms of happiness in Buddhist teachings.

Similarly, the Chinese Confucian disciple Mencius, who lived in the 3rd century BC, taught that human nature was such that all people were born with the innate capacity to be good and happy. In contrast, Aristotle (a contemporary of Mencius), posited that human must learn to acquire goodness and happiness through experience and practice. However, similar to Buddhist philosophy, he also proposed that happiness is the only state that humans desire for its own sake, as compared to friendships, wealth, etc, which serve other goals.

More than a millennium later, Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274) laid the foundation of the modern view of happiness. He directly linked happiness to willful actions and assumed that, in order to reach happiness, a person's will must serve the right goals and virtues. Aquinas agreed with Aristotle in that happiness requires a pursuit of good causes for acts that are governed by natural or divine laws (see for example, Saddon, 2005)

British ethicists, such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill and (Bentham's student) later argued that happiness is closely associated with one's actions and their consequences. The philosophical principle known as *utilitarianism* specifically states that we should always act in such a way that brings the most happiness and least unhappiness to oneself and other people. Bentham (1789) even formulated an algorithm, the *felicific calculus* to estimate the degree of pleasure a specific action is likely to cause. The variables that are considered in this algorithm include intensity and duration of the pleasure consequence, as well as how certain it is that the pleasurable consequence will happen, how quickly it will occur, how likely it is that the pleasurable consequence will be repeated in the future, and how many people will be affected by it. Bentham treated all forms of happiness as being basically equal. In contrast, Mill (1861) argues that intellectual and moral pleasures are superior to the lower, more physical, forms of pleasures. This brief history into the enormous history of the philosophy of happiness should provide contemporary researchers a vast theory base for conducting psychological research on happiness.

Psychological research on happiness of the 20th century has taught us that happiness is a very elusive state. People quickly adapt to new technologies, fortune, fame, luxury, etc. Therefore, a person who wins the lottery will only report a high degree of happiness soon after winning, and considerably less happiness afterwards. This is consistent with the notion of the *hedonic treadmill* (Brickman & Campbell, 1971), which turns happiness into an elusive state because expectations rise with one's possessions and accomplishments.

Given the importance and long history of positive emotions and happiness, surprisingly little has been done to incorporate techniques to specifically enhance positive emotions in treatment. The vast majority of research on emotions has dealt primarily with negative mood states, such as anxiety, depression and anger (Beck, 1999). We recently proposed a transdiagnostic emotion dysregulation model of emotion disorders that posits that emotion disorders are the result of emotion dysregulation of negative affect, coupled with deficiencies in positive affect (Hofmann, Sawyer, Fang, & Asnaani, 2012). Some of the specific techniques to enhance positive affect include practices consistent with Buddhists meditation, such as loving-kindness and compassion meditation practices. The aim of loving-kindness meditation is to develop an affective state of unconditional kindness to all people, whereas compassion meditation aims to cultivate a deep, genuine sympathy for people who encountered misfortune, together with an earnest wish to ease this suffering. These meditation practices are believed to broaden attention, enhance positive emotions, and

lessen negative emotional states (Hofmann, Grossman, & Hinton, 2011). They are believed to shift a person's basic view of the self in relation to others and increase empathy and compassion (The Dalai Lama & Cutler, 1998). These practices are consistent with Beckian and other CBT therapies (see, for example, the discussion between Dr. Beck and the 14th Dalai Lama, http://www.tpccpg.com/beck/MeetingOfTheMinds.html).

The Influence of Culture on Emotions

As noted by the Bastian, happiness is strongly influenced by cultural factors (Hofsted, 1984). An important aspect in which cultures differ on is individualism and collectivism. Collectivism emphasizes the interdependence of its members and places much value on harmony within the group rather than individual gains. In contrast, individual achievements and success receive a much greater reward and social admiration in individualistic societies.

Social contacts serve different purposes in individualistic versus collectivistic cultures (Lucas, Diener, Grob, 2000). Whereas in individualistic cultures, individual feelings and thoughts more directly determine behaviour, in collectivistic cultures, harmony within the group is the highest priority. Therefore, well-being and happiness is more dependent on social contact in collectivistic than in individualistic societies. Similarly, self-esteem is more highly correlated with life satisfaction in individualistic cultures than in collectivistic cultures (Diener & Diener, 1995). Similar cultural differences are observed in the association between happiness and congruence (i.e., acting consistently across situations and in accord with one's self). In South Korea, for example, congruence is much less important than in the US (see Hofmann, Asnaani, & Hinton, 2010). Moreover, people in collectivistic cultures more often rely on social norms to decide whether they should be satisfied and consider the social appraisals of family and friends in evaluating their lives (Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). People in collectivistic cultures, as compared to individualistic societies, are more likely to remain in marriages and jobs that they consider unhappy, possible because they attempts to conform to social norms and perhaps because people in troubled marriage and jobs are more likely to get support from others (Diener, 2000). Interestingly, the most promising strategies to approach happiness and to enhance positive affect is rooted in Buddhist teachings, which is deeply rooted in a collectivistic culture.

Implications for Clinical Practice

Culture and emotions should become an integral part of clinical practice. Both factors influence the delineation *normal* from *abnormal* and have a direct impact on treatment implementation. Specifically, we provided earlier the following recommendations toward a culturally responsive therapy (Asnaani & Hofmann (2012): (1) Conduct a thorough culturally-informed but person-specific functional assessment of presenting problem; (2) engage in self-education about specific cultural norms and consult the literature for culture-specific treatment techniques; (3) ensure adequate and effective training of therapists in cross-cultural competency; (4) explore the patient's perspective on both seeking psychological treatment, and the nature of the therapeutic relationship; (5) be aware of the importance of respect in the cross-cultural therapy setting; (6) identify and incorporate client's culturally-related strengths and resources into treatment; and (7) identify and utilize technique-specific cultural modifications.

Conclusion

Despite a very long tradition dating back to the ancient Greek and Buddhist philosophers, contemporary psychologists have only recently begun to systematically examine positive emotions, including happiness. Positive and negative emotions interact, but are not simply the opposite of one another. Psychiatry has similarly focused on reducing negative emotions,

but very little effort has been made to raise positive emotions. Positive emotions are not simply the absence of negative emotions but also associated with vitality, well-being, and happiness.

Happiness is closely associated with social support, which in turn, is closely associated with the cultural background. Social support is considerably more pronounced in collectivistic cultures than in individualistic cultures. In general, social support and a general disposition to be happy are the primary predictors for positive emotions and happiness. Money, age, religion, marital status, etc. contribute very little to one's happiness. The social and cultural context is important for understanding positive (as well as negative) emotions. In collectivistic societies, social contact has a greater influence on one's happiness than in individualistic societies. For this reason, social expectancies play an important part in emotional experiences, including primary or secondary emotions. The time is ripe for contemporary psychologists to systematically examine positive emotions and to integrate these techniques to enhance them toward the path to happiness into Western individualistic culture.

Acknowledgments

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