

SOCIOLOGY FINAL PROJECT



Happiness and Romantic Relationships

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Spring 2013

Introduction

Romantic relationships may be considered the foundation for every matured human's existence. While this rather polar view is by no means unanimously adopted, relationships undeniably take a central role in the majority of Americans' lives¹². Because many studies have shown that relationships, and the components they consist of such as emotional security and companionship³, form a causal link with happiness, and because relationships are so pervasive and engrained in American's lives and culture, the analysis of this link is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the sources of human happiness.

In order to analyze this link, we must determine how to quantify a person's happiness (using tools of measurement, such as tests) and how to quantify a person's relationship quality. From these results, we must perform statistical analysis to determine correlation, and provided we fully eliminated confounding variables, we may label our correlation as evidence for causation.

Well, what's the link?

Before an examination of the connection may begin, it's important to explore possible inter-linking between ingredients (such as happiness and extroversion) so that our analysis accounts for the appropriate factors. For instance, in measuring the correlation between romantic

¹ <http://www.statisticbrain.com/dating-relationship-stats/>

² Melikşah Demir, (2008)

³ Melikşah Demir, (2008)

relationship quality and happiness, it's essential to control for personality, as personality has been shown to account for as high as 50% of the variance in happiness⁴ and may obfuscate our results if it's not properly held constant. More specific to our interests, extroverts have been observed to be more sensitive to reward (which is purported to be why they are generally happier), and it may be that an extrovert's close romantic relationship with their partner is a consequence of this sensitivity to reward, which would mean that the *happiness* observed in this individual may not be strictly causally related to their romantic relationship, but is rather a direct or secondary consequence of their personality.

Finally, in the studies explored, it was not deemed that control for gender was necessary based on prior literature⁵, but in some cases was controlled for despite this recognition.

Studies and corresponding results

The first study conducted was on 246 college students involved in a relationship (marriages were later excluded in the data collection) at Midwestern university by Demir (2007). This study emphasized the importance of controlling for personality in measuring the effects of romantic relationships on happiness. Each subject evaluated their relationship with The Perceived Relationship Quality Component (PRQC), which is used to gauge global perceived romantic relationships quality by measuring six components of relationships (relationship satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust, passion, and love). To account for personality, each subject also

⁴ Lyubomirsky, S., Sheldon, K. M., & Schkade, D. (2005)

⁵ Diener, E., Suh, E. M., Lucas, R. E., & Smith, H. L. (1999)

completed the Big Five Inventory (BFI), which assessed extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness. Finally, happiness was assessed using the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS).

All of the researchers' literature-based hypotheses were upheld by the results, including the primary results that: romantic relationship quality was positively related to happiness and this positive relation extended "above and beyond" the influence of one's personality.⁶ An extra finding, supporting prior research, was that women reported closer and more intimate relationships compared to men. It was not explained, however, if this difference in perception explained differences in reported happiness levels. However, it was briefly mentioned that there were no major differences in happiness between the male and female groups, so it would be reasonable to assume that this observed discrepancy in the PRQC results did not account for any significant happiness variation between genders.

The second study, conducted by the same researchers on students of the same school, desired to validate the previous study's findings by reproducing the same results using different tools to assess different areas of happiness. This study focused on romantic relationships' effects on global life satisfaction, and positive and negative affect. Mention was made of existing research indicating that negative affect varies over individuals' lifetime (decreases with age) in order to prevent generalization of results to different age groups (the range of the age group studied was 18-29). It was also mentioned that life satisfaction has been found to be stable across lifespan⁷, however this note of consistency would later become null as the researchers combined

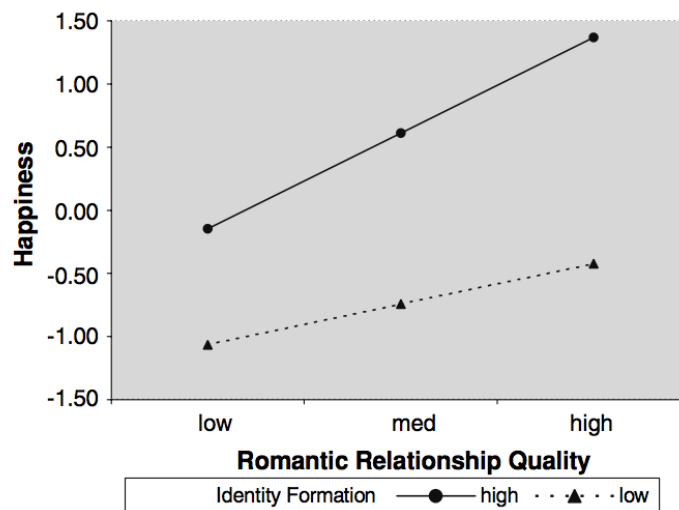
⁶ Melikşah Demir, (2008)

⁷ Diener, E., & Suh, E. (1998)

negative and positive affect results with the life satisfaction results to make data analysis easier. The McGill Friendship Questionnaire (MFQ) was modified to apply to romantic relationships in order to allow the researchers to distinguish what the most important feature of romantic relationships predicted happiness, which was a secondary goal of this study. The MFQ assessed stimulating companionship, help, intimacy, reliable alliance, emotional security and self-validation. A tertiary goal was validating the literature-purposed notion that individuals in high identity formation (those in early adulthood who have a strong and actively developing sense of identity) would benefit most from a romantic relationship. Once again, personality was controlled for using the BFI. In this iteration, happiness was rated using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), positive and negative affect was measured using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), and identity formation was measured by taking a subset of identity related questions from the Erikson Psycho-Social Index (EPSI).

Once again, the researcher's major hypotheses were upheld, and the results of their first experiment were reproduced. It was found that, in a romantic relationship, emotional security and companionship emerged as the strongest predictors of happiness. Additionally, "high levels of romantic relationship quality was related to higher levels of happiness at high levels of identity formation."⁸ That is, the study suggested that emerging adults who are successful at forming their own identity benefited more from a high, medium, or low relationship quality than those with low identity formation in the same category of relationship quality. A summary of the results can be found in the graph below, where the "happiness" axis represents combined scores from the PANAS and SWLS.

⁸ Melikşah Demir, (2008)



In another study conducted by Karyn Krawford, in which three individuals, all in romantic relationships, were interviewed and asked to fill out a questionnaire, Krawford found that “humor and open communication” were the most universally important, and “emotional support was the most common gain from the relationship”. This study, while of a much different caliber than the previous two, does provide us with some new insight as it yields less filtered data with which we can match and enhance the previous studies’ results. Krawford found that humor and open communication were the most important factors in *a relationship*, but that emotional support provided the individuals with the most gain (presumably, the most gain in happiness). The latter of these two results corroborates the findings of the previous studies, while the former provides us with information that was neglected in the first two studies, but can assist us in understanding what’s necessary to form a relationship that provides individuals with a boost in happiness.

In a study conducted by phone interviewing 691 randomly selected people, measurements were conducted to examine the link between relationship status, relationship happiness, and subjective well-being. Conducted by Dush and Amato (2005), after establishing their relationship status (married, cohabiting, dating one person steadily, dating multiple people, etc) individuals were asked to rate their level of happiness with various aspects of their relationship (e.g. the extent to which their partners understand them), and rate their satisfaction with various aspects of their life, their general happiness, their distress, and their self esteem. These results were used to represent the individuals relationship status, relationship happiness, and subjective well-being respectively. Note that this study did not account for personality traits in data analysis and discussion.

It was found that relationship happiness was positively related to self-esteem, life satisfaction, and general life happiness, and negatively related to distress. Marriage was associated with higher self-esteem, greater happiness, greater life satisfaction, and less distress. Additionally, those who were not in stable romantic relationships (single or dating multiple people) reported lower self-esteem, less life satisfaction, less happiness, and more distress.

Discussion and Conclusion

It may be that as adulthood is entered and the role of the family is forced to diminish, engaging in a romantic relationships is necessary for maintaining things like emotional security, which may be necessary for consummate happiness. It may also be that romantic relationships can provide an unparalleled experience of companionship, which has been shown to be the

strongest feature of close relationships in predicting happiness.⁹ Regardless of the cause and independent of whether happiness is taken to be life satisfaction, positive affect, well-being, or some combination of the three, the results of numerous studies provide well-constructed evidence that happiness is positively influenced by a romantic relationship.

This result provides us with great insight into understanding what happiness is itself, as we've found through these studies and their results that companionship and emotional security are additive elements in an individual's happiness. We understand through literature and related studies that this happiness can be actualized whether this companionship and emotional security be delivered by a romantic relationship, family, or a best friend. Moreover, our investigation provides us with a framework around which we can continue to examine other factors in our lives that may contribute to happiness, as well raises questions for further investigation, such as: do relationships that score low quality have a negative effects on happiness? And to what extent, if any, is the connection between high quality romantic relationships and happiness codependent? That is, asking the converse of the question we have answered, to what extent are those who are happy more likely to be in a relationship?

⁹ Baldassare, M., Rosenfield, S., & Rook, K. S. (1984)

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