

Psychology & Life I: Happiness & Humor

Happiness

“We hold these truths to be self-evident;
that all men are created equal; that they are
endowed by their creator with certain
unalienable rights; that among these are life,
Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness ...”

Happiness as a fitness indicator?

- Healthy, well-fed, comfortable, safe, prosperous, knowledgeable, respected, sexually satisfied, loved.
- “If happy, do what you’ve been doing.”
- “If unhappy, change something about your life.”

Calibrating success in life: When should we be satisfied?

1. Compare yourself with others.
 - Importance of *relative* rewards (self vs. others)
 - Happiness in different historical periods
 - Happiness in different places where they do and don’t know about how the other half lives

2. Compare your situation now with what it used to be.

- The importance of *gains* and *losses* versus *steady states*.
- Happiness baseline: partly heritable
- Increase → happy; decrease → sad

The stability of happiness

- Measuring happiness with rating scales.
- Checking validity of scales.
- Myers & Diener: happiness surveys:
 - 80% in industrial world at least “fairly satisfied with life”; 30% “very happy”
 - Men = women; black = white; young = old; 1950s = 1990s

“Compared with 1957, Americans have twice as many cars per person—plus microwave ovens, color TVs, VCRs, air conditioners, answering machines, and \$12 billion worth of new name-brand athletic shoes a year. So, are Americans happier than they were in 1957? They are not.”

Can money buy happiness?

- Within industrialized societies: not much.
 - Sophie Tucker: “I’ve been rich and unhappy and I’ve been poor and unhappy. Rich and unhappy is better.”
- In India & Bangladesh: much more.
- Across countries: higher GNP/capita → happier

9.00 Introduction to Psychology - Professor S. Pinker

Week 14, Lecture 1:

Psychology & Life: Happiness & Humor

- Money is like health: not having it can make you miserable, but having it does not make you happy
- More evidence on the stability of happiness:
 - Lottery winners: briefly happier, then return to baseline
 - Paraplegics: briefly depressed, then return to baseline

The Greater Potency of Misery than Happiness:

- More than 2 X number of negative emotion words and positive emotion words
- How many things could make you happier today? How many things less happy?
- How much happier could you be? How much sadder?
- Jimmy Connors: "I hate to lose more than I like to win."
 - Imagine your grades going up one grade
 - Imagine your grades going down one grade
 - Imagine starting a new relationship
 - Imagine ending an existing relationship

How to be happy:

- Money, looks, athletic ability, privilege? NOT!
- Friends, marriage, religion, meaningful work: Yes.
- Values other than happiness
 - Thought experiments: gain happiness BUT lose intelligence, family members, knowledge?
 - Happiness drugs?

What's So Funny?

- The puzzle of humor. Arthur Koestler:

"What is the survival value of the involuntary, simultaneous contraction of fifteen facial muscles associated with certain noises which are often irrepressible? Laughter is a reflex, but unique in that it serves no apparent biological purpose; one might call it a luxury reflex. Its only utilitarian function, as far as one can see, is to provide temporary relief from utilitarian pressures. On the evolutionary level where laughter arises, an element of frivolity seems to creep into a humourless universe governed by the laws of thermodynamics and the survival of the fittest.

What's So Funny? continued

"The paradox can be put in a different way. It strikes us as a reasonable arrangement that a sharp light shone into the eye makes the pupil contract, or that a pin stuck into one's foot causes its instant withdrawal -- because both the 'stimulus' and the 'response' are on the same physiological level. But that a complicated mental activity like the reading of a page by Thurber should cause a specific motor response on the reflex level is a lopsided phenomenon which has puzzled philosophers since antiquity."

The Ingredients of Humor

- Laughter is involuntary
 - Say “ha ha ha” versus “laugh”
- Laughter is contagious
- Laughter exists in apes: tickling, rough & tumble play, chasing

Chimps' play face & laughter:



Figure 8.3 Contrast of human and chimpanzee laugh production. The sounds of human laughter, such as “ha,” are produced by interrupting a single expiratory jet (arrow). In contrast, chimpanzees produce only one burst around a peak or plateau “ah,” for every expiratory or inspiratory jet (arrow). Human laughs as they speak by modulating an outburst of breath. The close similarity between breathing and vocalizing in chimpanzees may partially explain the failed attempts to teach these animals to speak English. (Panksepp, 1995)

- Aggressive nature of humor (cf. chimps' play fighting)
- Humorous aggression: reduces the victim's dignity & status.
 - “Butt of a joke”
 - “Laughing at vs. laughing with”
- Universality of sexual, scatological, and slapstick humor.

Humor as an anti-dominance weapon?

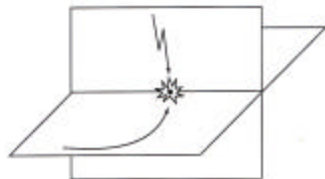
- Foibles of the exalted.
- Experiments: people laugh more when target of humor is obnoxious
- Role of involuntary, contagious laughter: safety in numbers.

The anatomy of a joke:

- “Mr. Fields, do you believe in clubs for young people?”
- “Only if kindness fails.”

Koestler: “Bisociation”

- Incongruity
- Resolved by switching to a new reference frame
- Second reference frame involves aggression



Research on the funniness of jokes:

- Incongruity
 - Compare: “I think they’re a healthy way for them to spend their free time”
- Resolution
 - Compare: “What do you think of social groups for young people”?
- Indignity
 - Compare: “I’m against physical punishment of any kind.”

What about convivial humor?

- Self-deprecating humor.
- Friendly teasing.

Research on Laughter in Real Life:

- Robert Provine: Typical laugh lines in real conversations:
 - I'll see you guys later.
 - What is that supposed to mean?!
 - I try to lead a normal life.
 - I was completely horrified!
 - We can handle this.
 - Look, it's Andrew!
 - Oh, Tracey, what's wrong with us?
- Only 10-20% of prelaugh comments were humorous (barely)

Greatest hits: Funniest Pre-laugh comments in 1,200 examples

- He didn't realize he was sitting in dog shit until he put his hand down to get up.
- Look at that hunk of burning love.
- I never eat anything that moves. [dorm food].
- Now you know what happened to Jimmy Hoffa. [dorm food].
- Did you find that in your nose? [dorm food]

- She even makes my tongue hard!
- He tried to blow his nose but he missed.
- I'd pay a hundred dollars to wade through her shit. [expression of endearment]
- You don't have to drink, just buy us drinks.
- She's working on a PhD in horizontal folk dancing.
- Is that considered clothing or shelter?
- Do you date within your species?
- You just farted!

Provine: "The frequent laughter heard at crowded social gatherings is not due to a furious rate of joke telling by guests. Most pre-laugh dialogue is like that of an interminable television situation comedy scripted by an extremely ungifted writer."

Humor as an Anti-Dominance Weapon, cont.

- Aggressive humor against people outside the group: reduce their dominance & status
- Self-deprecating humor and friendly teasing: signals of a friend-friend versus dominant-inferior relationship.