Happiness (well-being) research is increasingly prominent within many disciplines. This work addresses issues of happiness measurement, specifically, the inherent potential for unintentional and systematic variance due to respondents’ interpretation of how happiness is conceptualized. We examine two common interpretations of happiness, local (happy right now) and global (happy overall), and demonstrate how subtle cues (including priming, context, and wording) can trigger either interpretation. This can lead to surprisingly different responses to seemingly identical happiness measures.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14289/volumes/v36/NA-36

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The diversity of measures used in recent research illustrates that many researchers take different approaches to measuring happiness. While many of these approaches are logical given specific research questions, a lack of discussion about inherent measurement differences slows the progress we make in knowledge building because it keeps us from knowing how to compare results from disparate measures or, worse, leads us to make inappropriate comparisons between results. In this research, we assess the potential for measurement differences to arise from the respondent’s own interpretation of what the researcher means when s/he asks “How happy are you?”

Here, we investigate two common interpretations of happiness that may be equally normatively appropriate for respondents, and yet, may be conceptually distinct (i.e., rely on inputs that do not perfectly overlap). These two interpretations originate in differences in temporal orientation—happiness that is perceived as an enduring or overarching assessment and happiness that is perceived as immediate and transitory pleasure Kahneman and Krueger (2007). We use the terms, global and local, to describe these two interpretations. Many cultures understand happiness as two related but distinct concepts—the temporary enjoyment of positive affect (local happiness) and a more static disposition suggestive of positive life choices and satisfaction (global happiness). Individuals may understand this difference as “Am I feeling happy right now?” versus “Am I happy overall?” Importantly, we propose that very similar response items may prompt either interpretation. In other words, people may understand the simple direction to “rate your happiness” as an injunction to report on their current short-term pleasure or the degree to which they have good lives. In this work, we investigate (1) the methodological and conceptual implications of these two interpretations, (2) how measurement vehicles may prompt one versus the other, (3) how the assessments may rely on different inputs and, (4) how the assessments may be differentially correlated with common well-being measures.

In this research, we present five studies that demonstrate consistent differences in the evaluation of happiness and provide process evidence that differences are due to one’s temporally-oriented interpretation of happiness. This evidence offers behavioral researchers a better understanding of what existing (and future) findings from happiness and well-being studies may be validly compared.

Because the word “happiness” is used in common parlance to capture both global and local interpretations of happiness, we suggest that respondents are impacted by the nature of the item or the context in which the item is asked in determining whether they should respond in terms of their long-standing global well-being or their more changeable short-term enjoyment. In order to investigate this, we consider the influence of three context factors that may influence local/global interpretations: (1) the existence of local/global primes, (2) the temporal context of other items, and (3) the item language itself. Finally, we consider the process of temporal orientation through which these influences impact happiness ratings.

Our empirical data suggest that respondents use surprisingly subtle cues in happiness measures to determine whether they are being asked how happy they are now or how happy they are in general and that this distinction leads to consistent differences in reported happiness. Study 1 examines whether priming respondents with the concept of “local” versus “global” can influence their subsequent report of happiness. Respondents report lower happiness when primed with a local cue than those who are primed with a global cue. Study 2 is to replicate the priming effect found in study 1 and to additionally test the influence of item wording on reported happiness (Wierzbicka 2004). We observe lower reported happiness with the use of the word “pleased” versus the word “happy.” Additionally, in replicating the main effect found in study 1, we observe lower reported happiness (with either wording) in the Local Prime condition. Study 3 tests the effect of survey context on local versus global interpretations of assessed happiness and finds that manipulating the type of survey questions that surround the item measuring happiness (e.g., local items such as “hungry” versus global items such as “stingy”) prompts respondents to interpret happiness as local and to report lower happiness ratings than global contexts. Study 4 replicates the context effect (H3) found in study 3 and additionally examines process evidence (cognitive responses that capture inputs) that differences in responses may be due to differences in the respondents’ local (immediate situational) or global (enduring/static) inputs to the rating. Finally, Study 5 examines process evidence that differences in correlations to life satisfaction may be due to differences in the respondents’ local or global interpretation. When participants responded to a cognitive response task after evaluating their happiness, those in the local context condition expressed more immediate reasons for their evaluation (e.g. “It’s sunny today,” or “I had a good breakfast”) and those in the global context condition expressed more static reasons (e.g. “I have a good family,” or “I like my job”).

In conclusion, cues that signal a local (happy now) interpretation lead to lower ratings of happiness in lab settings than do global (happy overall) interpretations. Cues can consist of unintentional priming, context, or wording differences in the scale/item. Local interpretation leads respondents to consider more immediate short-term inputs (e.g., good day, not hungry) and global interpretation leads respondents to consider more long-term inputs (e.g., family, career) when assessing their happiness.

REFERENCES