



# ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

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## **Balancing Ideal Affects in the Pursuit of Happiness**

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We show that balancing ideal affects increases life happiness. While Affect Valuation Theory suggests that European- (Asian-) Americans' ideal affect are upbeat (calm) experiences, we find that greater life happiness resulted from Euro-Americans keeping a journal of calm (vs. upbeat) experiences for a week. The reverse occurred for Asian-Americans.

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happiness more as feeling calm than excited. Furthermore, participants' choices between non-caffeinated teas indicated as either calming (i.e., chamomile) or exciting (i.e., peppermint) reflected how they defined happiness.

The previous experiment showed that young people could be influenced to define happiness like older people by increasing their focus on the present moment. The goal of experiment 2 was to examine whether older people could be influenced to define happiness like young people by increasing their focus on the future. Thus, a sample of older participants (50-71 years old) was first presented with a sentence unscramble priming task that exposed them to either future-focused words or neutral words. We then manipulated the extent to which participants felt excited and calm and measured how happy they felt. Specifically, participants were made to feel excited or calm by listening to either an exciting or calming version of the song, "Such Great Heights," and they rated how happy they felt while listening to each song. Participants listened to both songs, the order of which was counterbalanced between participants. The results revealed that those in the control condition felt happier when feeling calm than when feeling peaceful, whereas those in the future-focused condition felt happier when they felt excited than when they felt calm. Participants were then asked to choose which song they'd like to receive an MP3 of, and their choice of MP3 reflected their associated levels of happiness. These results imply that our finding young adults to define happiness in terms of excitement (rather than calm) in experiment 1 may be the result of their tendency to think about the future. Therefore, older adults who are influenced to shift their focus away from the present and towards the future are more likely to experience a "young" form of happiness and to choose products accordingly.

In the final experiment we relied on age to determine participants' temporal focus, and we used the same procedures as in the previous experiment. The results revealed that younger adults felt happier when they felt excited than when they felt peaceful, whereas older adults felt happier when they felt peaceful than when they felt excited. Furthermore, participants' experiences of happiness mediated their decisions between receiving an MP3 of the calming song and exciting song.

Together, these findings show that the meaning of happiness can shift both moment-to-moment and over the life course, and that one's definition of happiness predictably impacts choice.

### Balancing Ideal Affects In the Pursuit of Happiness

#### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The ability to understand how people can durably increase their happiness has received considerable attention in the literature (e.g., Seligman 2005). In particular, techniques such as writing about happy events were showed to have long-lasting effects on self-reported happiness.

What *type* of happy events people should focus on remains unclear. Affect Valuation Theory (Tsai 2006; Tsai et al. 2007) suggests that the desirability of different positive affect states varies across cultures. Americans seem to desire experiencing high-arousal positive (HAP) emotions (e.g., excitement), while Asians seem to prefer low-arousal positive (LAP) emotions (e.g., peacefulness). Theoretically, then, focusing on one's culturally defined ideal affect should lead to greater happiness (e.g., Lewin 1935). We question this intuition. While invariably focusing on a single type of ideal affect will positively influence happiness by moving one's actual state closer to their ideal state, it is possible that the increments in happiness will be less the longer people focus on the same ideal state, because only one

dimension of their affective spectrum is evolving (Tsai et al. 2007). For this reason, people focusing on their culturally defined ideal affect (HAP or LAP emotions) may benefit from switching their focus to the alternative ideal affect.

We tested this prediction in an experiment in which European- and Asian-Americans kept a journal of good experiences. Participants focused on either exciting good things, peaceful good things, or good things (control). We predicted that European-Americans would be happier after focusing on peaceful emotions, while Asian-Americans would be happier after focusing on exciting emotions. In addition, we predicted that the closer our participants would actually be to their culturally defined ideal affect in the beginning of the study, the more they would benefit from focusing on the alternative ideal affect.

Ninety-three European- and Asian-American students (age = 20.4 years, 71 women) participated in our study in exchange for \$15. In a first session, participants reported whether they were European- or Asian-American, the extent to which they had felt a number of positive emotions (e.g., elated, enthusiastic) during the past week and indicated their current mood. All participants were then instructed to keep a journal every night for a week. Instructions for the exercise varied in that participants were asked to write about three (a) exciting things, (b) peaceful things or (c) things that went really well on that day, and why they went well. A week later, participants returned their completed journal, and reported the same measures as in the first session, and a seven-item scale assessing general life happiness (e.g., "My life could be more cheerful than it is now," "These are the best years in my life,"  $\alpha = .67$ ), before being debriefed, thanked and paid.

After averaging the items measuring general life happiness, an Ethnicity x Exercise ANOVA on this index revealed a significant two-way interaction,  $F(1, 87) = 5.81, p < .004$ . Euro-Americans<sub>peaceful</sub> reported being happier than Euro-Americans<sub>exciting</sub> ( $M = 2.98$  vs.  $M = 2.37$  respectively,  $t(87) = 2.06, p < .04$ ). Conversely, we found that Asian-Americans<sub>exciting</sub> were happier than Asian-Americans<sub>peaceful</sub> ( $M = 2.59$  vs.  $M = 2.08$  respectively,  $t(87) = 1.97, p = .05$ ).

Focusing on participants' positive emotions and mood, a series of factor analyses revealed two recurrent factors at the end of both sessions: an HAP and an LAP emotions factor. After averaging the items for the HAP and the LAP emotions separately for each session, we computed the difference in each of these scores to create an HAP and an LAP index. An Ethnicity x Exercise ANOVA on the HAP index revealed a significant two-way interaction,  $F(1, 86) = 3.56, p < .04$ , such that Asian-Americans<sub>exciting</sub> reported a more positive difference in high arousal over the week, compared to Asian-Americans<sub>peaceful</sub> ( $M = 0.32$  vs.  $M = -0.38$  respectively,  $t(86) = 2.21, p < .03$ ).

An Ethnicity x Exercise ANOVA using the LAP index as the dependent variable also revealed a significant two-way interaction,  $F(1, 86) = 3.04, p = .05$ , such that Euro-Americans<sub>exciting</sub> experienced a more positive difference in LAP emotions than Asian-Americans<sub>exciting</sub> ( $M = 0.54$  vs.  $M = -0.21$  respectively,  $t(86) = 2.28, p < .03$ ), and than Euro-Americans<sub>control</sub> ( $M = -0.14, t(86) = 2.17, p < .04$ ).

Next, we centered the high- and low arousal data at the end of the first session by transforming them into deviation scores (Aiken & West 1991). Life Happiness was regressed on high arousal, low arousal, type of happiness exercise for European-Americans and type of happiness exercise for Asian-Americans (both effects coded 1 for exciting exercise and -1 for peaceful exercise), the interaction of each type of exercise with high arousal, and the interaction of each type of exercise with low arousal. There were four significant effects: (1) an effect of high arousal, such that the greater the high arousal in the beginning of the study, the greater the eventual life happiness index,  $b = .55, t(83) = 4.84, p < .001$ . There was a negative

effect of type of exercise for European-Americans, such that those who worked on the peaceful exercise had a more positive life happiness index compared to those who worked on the exciting exercise,  $b = -.27$ ,  $t(83) = 1.97$ ,  $p = .05$ . Third, the reverse occurred for Asian-Americans,  $b = .28$ ,  $t(83) = 2.29$ ,  $p < .03$ . Finally, supportive of our prediction, there was a significant interaction effect between type of exercise for European-Americans and their HAP score in the beginning of the study. It was such that the greater European-Americans' HAP score initially, the greater difference in life happiness they experienced when they did the peaceful exercise rather than the exciting exercise,  $b = -.45$ ,  $t(83) = 2.30$ ,  $p < .03$ .

Our findings reveal that people may have a "happiness capital" associated with each type of ideal affect they focus on as a result of their culture. As people's actual affect gets closer to their ideal affect, this capital gets exhausted, and it becomes increasingly beneficial to switch to the alternative ideal affect.

### Fate or Fight?

#### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This research compares people's hedonic experiences in two resource allocation systems: binding assignment and free competition. In the binding assignment system, superior and inferior resources are unequally and irrevocably assigned to different individuals so that some can enjoy the superior resource without risks of losing it whereas others can only access the inferior resource. In the free competition system, each individual can compete equally for the superior resource but the winner may lose it if he/she does not stay competitive.

We seek to make two contributions here. One is methodological: to introduce an experimental procedure that mimics the two systems and allows researchers to compare people's hedonic experiences in the two systems while holding objective outcomes constant. The other is empirical: to explore whether binding assignment can be hedonically better than free competition.

#### The Method

Our method consists of two between-participant conditions: fate (simulating binding assignment) and fight (simulating free competition). In the fate condition, two participants are run at a time. They are seated in isolated cubicles separated by a divider, each facing a computer. The "resources" are a video and a book. The video is pretested to be more enjoyable than the book, so the video is the superior resource and the book the inferior resource. The experiment lasts a fixed period (e.g., 8 minutes), during which only one participant can watch the video and the other cannot. Who can watch the video is randomly determined at the outset and cannot be changed. The book is available to both participants, with one copy on everyone's table. Either participant can read it at any time. Participants are not allowed to do anything else.

The fight condition is similar to the fate condition except that the participants can compete equally for the video. At the beginning of the experiment, half of the video image is displayed on one participant's screen and the complementary half on the other's. Any time during the experiment, either participant can drag more of the video image toward his/her screen (and thereby away from the other's screen) by pressing a dedicated key on the computer. If the other participant does not press his/her key in response, the first participant can watch the video fully on his/her screen without having to press the key further. If both participants press their keys simultaneously, the video will move toward the participant who presses his/her key at a faster rate. As in the fate condition, each participant also has the

book and can read it at any time. Participants report their feelings during the experiment.

Note that the method is zero-sum in terms of objective outcome, in the sense that relative to fate, fight neither increases nor decreases the duration or the image size of the video. Nevertheless, fight is not zero-sum in terms of hedonic experience. This is what we discuss next.

#### The main finding

We have conducted several experiments using this paradigm and the main finding is:

The fate participants – even the disadvantaged fate participants, who cannot watch the video, are happier than the fight participants.

This finding is counter-normative. Normatively the disadvantaged fate participants are in an absolutely worse situation than the fight participants, because the former have no opportunities to watch the video and the latter do. The worst scenario for the fight participants is to stop fighting for the video and read the book instead, which is no worse than the situation of the disadvantaged fate participants. Yet they are happier.

#### Explanation

In the fate condition, both the advantaged and the disadvantaged members can enjoy what they have with peace of mind: The advantaged members can enjoy the video without disruptions, real or imagined. The disadvantaged members, because they have no hope of accessing the video, accept their fate, ignore the video and just enjoy the book. On the other hand, participants in the fight condition lack such peace. They are not able to enjoy the video because their rivals are competing with them; nor are they willing to enjoy the book, because the video is tantalizing them. Our finding echoes recent research showing that the opportunity to ameliorate one's state can undermine one's ability to adapt to the state (e.g., Gilbert & Ebert, 2002; Smith et al., 2009).

#### Boundary Conditions

The reason why even the disadvantaged fate participants were happier than fight participants is that they were able to ignore the superior resource (the video) and enjoy the inferior resource (the book). This suggests two pre-conditions for the fate-better-than-fight effects: (a) that the disadvantaged and the advantaged members are isolated from each other so that the disadvantaged members cannot easily compare with the advantaged members and thereby can ignore the video they are enjoying, and (b) that the disadvantaged members can amuse themselves with the book. These two pre-conditions in turn suggest two moderators: (a) whether comparison between the disadvantaged and advantaged fate participants is inhibited or facilitated, and (b) whether the book is available or unavailable.

Consistent with the theory, we found evidence for two moderators:

The fate-better-than-fight effects are stronger when comparison between the members is inhibited than when it is facilitated.

The fate-better-than-fight effects are stronger when the inferior resource (the book) is available than when it is unavailable.

#### General Discussion

The current research suggests that an unequal assignment system may make people happier than does a free competition system

I've been writing, tweeting, and snapping a lot about Purpose, Happiness and Meaning recently. One example is Naval Ravikant's Thoughts on Hacking Happiness and the other is Parker Palmer on "Can you separate financial security from the pursuit of happiness and purpose? And even bigger question "Was I dispensing dangerous advice? If you don't take care of yourself, you can't take care of others. It all starts with the self. We must care for ourselves physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It is the foundation that percolates into all of our relationships, from our spouses and kids, to our colleagues, and to strangers in the street. The Pursuit of Happiness is a 2006 film about a struggling, on and off-homeless salesman-turned-stockbroker as he takes care of his 5-year-old son as he's poised to begin a life-changing professional endeavor that will eventually become his path to success. Directed by Gabriele Muccino. Written by Steve Conrad, based on the book by Chris Gardner. This part of my life...this little part...is called "happiness". Christopher is staying with me. Repeated line, referring to his son. Is happiness something that one can pursue? Fortunately, the movie "The Pursuit of Happiness," reveals the answers to these questions through a touching story of how far one man goes to provide for his family. Recently I had the pleasure of viewing, "The Pursuit of Happiness," a film directed by Gabriele Muccino and written by Steve Conrad. The film has been available since December 15, 2006, so I was able to view it from the comforts of my own home. Although this movie lacks the fast paced action, special effects, and no stop comedy that will keep you laughing all night, it will definitely have you feeling happy, sad, and then happy again. In a rating scale of one to ten, I would give this movie an eight.