

Happiness of University Employees: Past, Present & Future

T.K. Mandal & Upinder Dhar

Although employees of higher education institutions are equally, if not more, exposed to burnout and stress like their corporate counterparts, research studies are only a few on their well-being and happiness. This study examines if employees perceive their past, present, and future happiness to be inter-related and whether one predicts the other. The study also attempts to establish if happiness differs between genders, cadres, and education levels. Responses of 224 employees of a state private university were collected on an anchoring scale. Data were analyzed by partial correlation and linear regression analyses. Z-test and t-test were carried out to check if differences in mean happiness levels were significant. The results showed that there is a curvilinear relationship between happiness and time in terms of past, present, and future.

T.K. Mandal (tusharmandal@svvv.edu.in) is Professor & **Upinder Dhar** is Vice Chancellor, Shri Vaishnav Vidyapeeth Vishwavidyalaya, Indore, India.

Introduction

Happiness has remained the life goal for human beings since time immemorial. Happiness touches every heart of mankind as one coins the term “Happy” to wish someone on any occasion. Alongside, pursuit of happiness has remained the longest journey to some, while some seem to be born with happiness. Some believe happiness can be bought with money and expect to attain happiness once they are amply wealthy. Easterlin (2001) studied the impact of income on happiness and concluded that people are happier when their income is higher as compared to people with lower income. However, this relationship follows the principle of diminishing returns. Some people need true affection or spiritual attainment to feel happy. Quite a few others think happiness is a myth – it is very often elusive (Alcorn, 2015). One thing is common among all the people – most of them know that they are happy or that they are not.

The concept of well-being and happiness is inherent in ancient Indian

philosophy like Yoga and in scriptures like Upanishads. According to Indian rationalities, happiness and unhappiness of an individual in this materialistic world rotate around four central ideas - honesty (dharma), wealth (artha), wants (kâma), and liberation (moksha), that represent the significant life objectives as mentioned in *C'araka Samhita*, *Su-traStha-na: 11* (Antonovsky, 1987). It is additionally imperative that in the Indian theory, both happiness and unhappiness ('sukha' and 'dukha') run connected and are an integral part of a typical life. Hitopadeœa (Verse 172 of the "Companion Acquisition" book) mentions that happiness and unhappiness rotate as a wheel.

In the past several decades, research on happiness saw an exponentially increasing trend. A majority of researchers, philosophers and thinkers believe that happiness is a state of mind. Numerous theories have evolved to identify the causes of this extremely important possession of life. Today, more people are talking about happiness around the world cutting across religious faiths, human races and cultures, as 'absolute' happiness eludes them.

Happiness has been defined in many ways by researchers. Veenhoven (1984) defined happiness as the degree to which a person favorably evaluates his overall quality of life. It is also referred to as subjective well-being (SWB) or life satisfaction (Kalmijn & Veenhoven, 2005). Happiness or subjective well-being has also been defined as more frequent positive affect, less frequent negative affect and a high level of satisfaction with life

as a whole (Diener & Myers, 1995). As per David (2013), happiness is identified by three different pathways. Hedonia or Pleasant Life stands for positive experiences in life which include contentment, hope and sensory enjoyment. Eudaimonia or Engaged Life stands for a person's ability to use his talent or strengths so that it makes the person feel engaged. Meaningful Life is the third pathway for happiness, which essentially means being part of something which is larger than life viz., being a part of building an institution.

In today's dynamic and fast changing world, human life is facing unprecedented stress to cope up with the vagaries of the social, political and economic environment, resulting in psychological upheaval. It is believed that the researchers from social science and behavioral science can play a tremendous impactful role to articulate what is good life. These scientists have an important role to play in this situation to lead humanity to well-being, positive individuals, and thriving communities. The importance of positive psychology has been articulated by Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000) through three different levels of experience.

In the subjective level, it is -

1. In the past: well-being, contentment and satisfaction,
2. In the present: flow and happiness, and
3. For the future: hope and optimism

In the individual level, it is about the various positive individual traits viz., the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom.

At the group level, positive psychology is all about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship, which typically consists of responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethics.

As in the case of definition of happiness, there have been several approaches for measuring happiness. Many scales have been developed in the countries across globe to measure SWB (subjective well-being) of individuals. Lyubomirsky & Lepper (1999) attempted to incorporate a measure of overall subjective happiness into the previous measures of affective and cognitive well being, calling the scale as subjective happiness scale. The subjective happiness scale was tested for sex or age differences and found to have no differentiation there of.

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) is a widely known 20-item scale used to measure the intensity of positive affect vis-à-vis negative affect in individuals (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). The “Satisfaction with Life Scale” developed by Diener et. al. (1985) is a global cognitive assessment of life satisfaction requiring a person to rate five statements about his/ her life.

The authors tested this scale on different subjects from undergraduates to elderlies and established that the scale has favorable psychometric properties. Quite a few instruments are also available to track life satisfaction of people across the world. According to Frey & Stutzer (2002), the World Values Survey is a global research project that explores people’s values and beliefs, how they change over time and what social and political impact they have. For European Union member countries, there is Euro Barometer, which serves similar purpose (Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999).

Literature reports several studies on various social groups, especially from education sector, as to what makes them happy besides their happiness level, whether happiness differs among different demographics, etc. In one of the oldest studies involving students at University of Western Australia, the roles that economic and social factors play in determining the happiness levels experienced by university students was investigated (Chan, Miller, & Tcha, 2005). A survey of over 1300 students attending core economics lectures at the University of Western Australia in June 2003 were administered a questionnaire. The findings indicated that the most important factors of satisfaction level of students are school work, time management and relationships formed in university.

Inspired by the Gross National Happiness Index (GNHI), Applasamy et. al. (2014) developed a measure for Gross Institutional Happiness Index (GIHI) and implemented it for measuring the happi-

ness and well-being of both staff and students at the institutes of higher education. The methodology enlists nine key areas which are considered as the key components under GIHI. These are psychological well-being, health, use of time, education, cultural diversity, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity, and living standard.

Kun & Gadanecz (2022) carried out a study on Hungarian teachers to investigate the relationship between teachers' psychological resources through the concept of psychological capital, workplace well-being and perceived workplace happiness. The outcome of this research suggested that at workplace, there is a strong correlation between well-being and happiness with inner psychological resources, hope and optimism. This also corroborates the fundamental principle of positive psychology, mooted by Seligman.

Seligman (2002) also stated that happier faculties are more effective particularly in terms of teaching, as compared to unhappy faculties. Happy employees in general and faculties in particular are more motivated, focused on their goal and ready to accept challenges, which helps overall student development better. In a study in one of the private universities in Gujarat, the happiness level among the employees was measured using a validated scale (Gandhavi, Parikh, Patel, Joshi, & Thacker, 2021). The contribution of four factors of well-being viz., life satisfaction, interpersonal relationship, self-affirmation, and physical and mental health were examined for the asso-

ciation with happiness level. Life satisfaction, and physical and mental health were found to be strong predictors of happiness, while the remaining two factors were insignificant predictors.

An attempt has been made through this study to investigate into happiness in a different way. The intent was to look at the perception of employees about happiness in the past, present and future; and to look for any linkages in happiness over time, besides examining if perception about happiness levels differs in terms of gender (males and females), cadre (Professors, Associate Professors, Assistant Professors and Non-teaching), and education (PhD degree holders and non-PhD).

Method

To fulfill the objectives of this research, an instrument was administered through Google Form on 338 staff members of a state private university in central India, having about 500 employees. A total of 224 responses were received after 3 reminders. The instrument used is a simple self-developed 7-point Anchor scale to measure the happiness of respondents at three points of life as a reflection of their perception about past, present and future. The instrument also captured the socio-demographic details such as designation (Faculty - 193, Non-Teaching staff - 31); gender (Male - 118, Female - 106); highest qualification (Ph.D. - 75, Postgraduates - 144, Graduates - 5); age (average = 37.7 years); number of

years in the university (average = 6.4 years); and total years of experience (average = 12.6 years). Partial Correlation analysis was carried out to study the extent of happiness at various points of life with an equal span of time i.e., five years back, present, and five years from now. Regression analysis was done to establish predictability of happiness at three points of time i.e., 5 years ago, now, and 5 years later, considering the other two as independent variables. Z-test was used to examine if there exists a significant difference in happiness level between male and female staff, cadre (Professor, Associate Professor, Assistant Professor, and Non-Teaching), and qualification (PhD and Post-graduates).

Results & Discussion

The outcome of the study has been elaborated in this section in the form of results of various analyses. The results have been presented and discussed first in terms of the correlations between happiness levels in the past, present, and future, followed by development of a linear regression model covering the three variables. Subsequently, the mean differences in happiness levels across demographics have been presented and discussed.

Correlations

The results of the total and partial correlation analysis are presented in Table 1:

Table 1 Pearson Correlations Coefficients (n=224)

	PRESENT Happiness Level	Happiness Level after 5 YEARS
Happiness Level 5 YEARS Ago	.417**	.423**
PRESENT Happiness Level	1	.511**

** . Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

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As can be seen, there exists a moderate correlation which is significant between each pair of the variables (correlation coefficients of 0.417, 0.423 and 0.511). Since these are simple correlations, the effect of the third variable is not nullified while comparing two other variables.

The results of partial correlations, i.e., correlation coefficient between two variables, controlling the impact of the third variable, indicate that ‘present happiness level’ and ‘happiness before 5 years’, are positively correlated with a correlation coefficient of 0.258. Similarly, ‘happiness level five years ago’ and ‘happiness level after five years’ are also positively correlated (correlation coefficient = 0.268), as are ‘present happiness level’ and ‘happiness level after five years’ (0.407). All the three pairs of correlations were found to be significant. The above correlations indicate that for the

employees of the university, happiness has a curvilinear relationship with time in terms of past, present, and future. Or in other words, one who was happy five years ago is likely to be happy now as well as in the future. A happy employee was, is, and will be happy as perceived by the employees. Further, it is very much evident that the perception about present state more strongly predicts the future state of happiness. The employees perceive that they are likely to be happier 5 years later.

The above results point towards the level of optimism of the university employees. According to Gallagher & Lopez (2009), positive perceptions of personal agency (i.e., hope) and generalized positive expectancies (i.e. optimism) are both important contributors to positive psychological functioning. However, hope is different from optimism. By being an emotion, hope represents more important but less likely outcomes, and can have less personal control (Bruininks & Malle, 2006). Carver & Scheier (2019) defined optimism as the extent of one's favorable view about his/ her future. Optimism is related to a sense of higher level of well-being, besides other positive aspects of life (Forgeard & Seligman, 2012). The perception of the employees of the university 5 years back seems to have been optimistic. Similarly, their perception towards present level of happiness is also filled with some amount of optimism towards their well-being. Since workplace well-being and happiness have a strong correlation with various psychological resources, hope and optimism in particular (Kun & Gadanez, 2022), interven-

tions that increase hope and optimism among academic staff are likely to lead to better sense of well-being and happiness, and turn higher performance and productivity.

Regression

After examining the relationship between happiness level at two different points of time, partial linear regression was carried out. The results of all three partial regressions were found to be significant. The regression results also indicated that the goodness of fit in each regression model is significant, and thus these can be accepted. Similarly, the collinearity among the independent variables was found to be insignificant, indicating that there exists weak linear relationship between them. Therefore, it can be said with confidence that the estimates of the coefficients will truly reflect the effect of each predictor variable.

If we denote the variables as

x = Happiness Level 5 YEARS Ago

y = PRESENT Happiness Level

z = Happiness Level after 5 YEARS,

the regression equations can be represented as:

$$r_{xy,z} : z = 2.319 + 0.254x + 0.406y$$

$$r_{xz,y} : y = 1.106 + 0.244x + 0.408z$$

$$r_{yz,x} : x = 2.481 + 0.272y + 0.284z$$

In other words, the perceived Happiness Level 5 years ago (x) and perception of present Happiness Level (y) together predict perception about Happiness Level after 5 years (z). Similarly, the perception of Happiness Level in the past (x) and Happiness Level in future (z) can together predict the perception of Happiness Level at present (y). Further, perception of present Happiness Level (y) and Happiness Level after 5 years (z) predict the perception of Happiness Level in the past (x).

Effect of Demographic Variables

The survey carried out as part of the research also captured various demographics of the respondents. An effort was made to investigate the influence of these demographic factors on happiness at three different points of time – 5 years ago, now, and 5 years later.

There is no significant difference in the means of perceived happiness levels 5 years ago, now, or 5 years later, between male and female employees.

Between Genders: As the sample size was large (more than 30 respondents for each of the 2 genders), z-test was carried out to test the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference in the mean happiness levels between males and females. It was observed that p-value (0.66) being higher than alpha (0.05), the null hypothesis was accepted. Therefore, it can be deduced that there is no significant difference in the means of perceived

happiness levels 5 years ago, now, or 5 years later, between male and female employees. This is in contrast with most studies conducted, in which it has been reported that gender indeed is related to subjective well-being. As such, these studies established that women tend to demonstrate higher happiness level than men (Wood, Rhades, & Whelan, 1989). In a study covering college students in China, the women scored significantly higher in subjective happiness than men (Yue, Jiang, Hiranandani, Jia, & Su-Xia, 2017).

Since job satisfaction has a strong impact on happiness (Aziz, Mangestuti, & Wahyuni, 2018; Bota, 2013), it is worthwhile to look at whether job satisfaction and gender are related to each other. In the context of overall job satisfaction, a study in the United States back in 1974 observed that overall job satisfaction did not depend on “sex”, despite the large wage gap between men and women (Brennan, 1974). Irrespective of gender of the employees of the university, the happiness level has not changed over the time horizon of 5 years. They perceive that the state of happiness is likely to be better after 5 years. It appears that employees have perceived stability in the environment over the last 5 years and are seeing extension of the same in future.

Between Cadres: To test if there existed a significant difference in mean happiness levels between different cadres of employees, following analyses were carried out:

- i) Professors (n=13) vis-à-vis Associate Professors (n=18):

An independent sample, 2-tailed t-test revealed the “p” value of 0.44, 0.19 and 0.69 for happiness levels 5 years ago, present, and perceived after 5 years respectively, signifying that both the cadres perceive that the mean happiness level is not different.

- ii) Professors and Associate Professors (n=31) vis-à-vis Assistant Professors (n=162):

z-test results revealed that the present happiness level significantly differs between these two experimental groups, whereas it neither differs for past happiness level (5 years ago) nor perceived happiness in future (5 years from now). Therefore, Professors and Associate Professors combined are happier than Assistant Professors, at present.

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- iii) Teaching (n=193) vis-à-vis Non-Teaching Staff (n=31):

The z-test results for these two groups indicate that the happiness level does not significantly differ between Teaching and Non-Teaching Staff. The phenomenon as explained in case of genders, can be generalized to these two groups as well. That is, the conditions leading to happiness are largely same and hence are unable to differentiate in terms of happiness.

Professors & Associate Professors have already accomplished the professional requisites and have been rewarded accordingly after covering a reasonable distance in their career path, whereas the Assistant Professors being younger, have yet to demonstrate their accomplishments for getting rewarded in terms of career advancement. Their expectations from the institution are higher as they want to equate with the senior colleagues at the earliest. It can be deduced that recognition makes the difference. In other words, recognition contributes to the state of happiness of an individual.

As reported earlier, gender does not significantly impact job satisfaction and in turn happiness. However, gender and cadre of university teachers have been found to interact with job satisfaction as reported by Oshagbemi (2000), female academics at higher ranks namely, Professors and Associate Professors are likely to be more satisfied with their jobs than male academicians of similar cadres.

Difference of happiness between faculty with PhD (n=72) and without PhD (n=120):

The z-test results between these two groups suggest that there exists a significant difference in happiness level between them at present, though there was no difference 5 years ago and they do not perceive it to be same 5 years later. As regards overall job satisfaction is concerned, it depends on education as observed in the U.S. study cited earlier (Brennan, 1974). However, education

level and job satisfaction were found to be non-linear, i.e., an incremental increase in education is not matched by an equivalent increase in job satisfaction.

In Indian higher education system, PhD degree is an essential requirement for career advancement from Assistant Professor onwards. The academic reforms have endorsed the same. The career advancement brings financial gains too on higher scales of compensation. Thus, Assistant Professors may be experiencing anxious moments which reduce the state of happiness in them. Those without PhD might be feeling insecure in comparison to those having doctoral degree. However, since most of them have registered for PhD, they hope to cover the distance at the earliest and be at par with those with PhD. Here also, it is the state of recognition that makes the difference.

Conclusion

The mean happiness level five years ago was found to be 5.20 on a scale of 1 to 7. The happiness level now is slightly lower at 4.71. However, the employees of the university feel that their mean happiness level is likely to rise to 5.70 after five years. These differences in means of perceived happiness have been checked for significance with the help of z-tests, results of which indicate that the differences are indeed significant with $P(Z \leq z)$ less than 0.05. It is natural that the current level of happiness would come down for everyone due to circumstances arising out of 2 years of Covid pandemic, wherein almost every small

and middle-class household suffered in one or the other way. The fascinating part of the study, however, is that the employees perceive that they would be happier after 5 years, even happier than what they were 5 years ago! This perhaps, is due to the hope that people nurture in themselves.

Happiness is a positive and valuable emotion for everyone. However, the aspect of happiness in academic and non-academic employees has not drawn much attention of researchers. The faculty and staff, particularly of higher educational institutions, undoubtedly are important enablers of nation building through youth as they can positively influence the students to be successful in life.

The results of this study reveal two interesting phenomena. By establishment of valid positive correlations among past happiness (5 years ago), present happiness, and future happiness (5 years later), it can be concluded that there is continuity in happiness in the lives of the employees of the university. The second noteworthy finding of the study is the predictability of happiness. By development of linear regression models, it is possible to measure happiness level. The employees may be experiencing lower level of happiness at present in view of contemporary challenges. However, when they look back, their perception changes as the past appeared happier. Similarly, going forward, they are likely to look back to the present days as happier days. According to Dhar & Dhar (2021), this perception of the past being happier than present has been found

prominent among aged people. In fact, with ageing, people tend to recall happier experiences faster than unpleasant experiences. This indicates that happiness is an outcome and is a function of time.

This study also establishes that employees of the higher educational institutions actually do nurture hopes on their satisfaction in life.

Finally, the results of this study are expected to encourage the management of universities and other academic institutions to look into the implementation of aspects that can create a happy atmosphere by improving not only the welfare of employees - economically, socially, and psychologically, but also the motivators for drawing higher level of satisfaction at workplace.

Since this study is based on the data drawn from a single university, the study needs to be replicated in other universities to validate the results. Further studies may also be carried out to assess the impact of hope on the state of happiness vis-à-vis the impact of optimism on happiness.

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