

The Pursuit of Unhappiness: The Ground Theory to Explain Why People Choose to Be Unhappy Rather Than Happy

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This article presents a ground theory to explain why some individuals choose to be unhappy rather than happy, supported by empirical data collected from a sample of 750 professionals in Greece's public and private sectors. We begin by reviewing the existing literature on happiness and well-being, highlighting the debate between hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives. We then introduce our research questions and rationale, and describe our methods, sample, and psychometric tools used to measure happiness and other variables of interest. Our results indicate that various factors, including cultural influences, past experiences, and personal values, contribute to individuals' pursuit of unhappiness. We conclude with a thorough discussion of our results and their implications for future research and interventions aimed at promoting well-being.

Keywords: unhappiness, happiness, ground theory, empirical data, public sector, private sector, Greece, X2 Models, R squared

Introduction

Happiness is an essential component of life, and people strive to achieve it. However, research has shown that some individuals seem to choose to be unhappy rather than happy. This phenomenon is puzzling and has received little attention in the literature. The current study aims to develop a ground theory that explains why people pursue unhappiness instead of happiness. This study focuses on professionals in Greece, both in the public and private sectors, to determine if the findings are universal or context-dependent. The study used a sample of 750 professionals from Greece, and statistical analyses such as descriptive statistics, X2 models, and R squared indexes were conducted to support the theory.

Basic Framework

Happiness is often considered the ultimate goal of human existence, with countless self-help books, courses, and seminars devoted to achieving it (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003). Yet, despite the widespread belief that happiness is universally desirable, many individuals seem to actively pursue unhappiness. This pursuit of unhappiness is evidenced by the high rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems worldwide, which have been on the rise in recent years (World Health Organization, 2020) despite the fact that life conditions, lifestyle, technology, safety, medicine, and leisure are at a historic high (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005). Furthermore, studies have found that individuals often make choices that lead to short-term pleasures but long-

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term negative outcomes, such as substance abuse, procrastination, and unhealthy eating habits (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007; Kahneman, Wakker, & Sarin, 1999).

This phenomenon raises a critical question: Why do some people choose to be unhappy rather than happy? In recent decades, researchers have attempted to answer this question by investigating the different perspectives on happiness and well-being. The hedonic perspective, which focuses on pleasure and the absence of pain, and the eudaimonic perspective, which emphasizes meaning and self-realization, have been the most commonly studied (Waterman, 1993). The debate between these two perspectives has been ongoing, with some arguing that pursuing hedonic pleasure is not sufficient for long-term well-being, while others claim that the pursuit of eudaimonic goals can also lead to negative outcomes (Ryff, 1989; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

In light of this debate, it is crucial to explore why some individuals choose to pursue unhappiness and what factors contribute to this choice. Empirical research has identified several variables that may influence the pursuit of unhappiness, including past experiences, cultural influences, and personal values. For example, individuals who have experienced trauma or abuse may develop negative self-concepts and beliefs that lead to self-sabotaging behaviors (Norris & Vella-Brodick, 2009). Additionally, cultural norms that emphasize stoicism or the importance of work over leisure may contribute to the acceptance of unhappiness as a necessary part of life (Suh, 2000).

Based on the recent findings in the literature the basic reasons why some people may choose to be unhappy rather than happy are the following:

1. Fear of the unknown: People may feel more comfortable staying in unhappy situations because the idea of change and the unknown can be scary (Diener, 2000; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Diener & Lucas, 1999).
2. Familiarity: Some people may choose unhappiness because they are more comfortable with what they know, even if it is unpleasant (Harter, 2002; Hills & Argyle, 2002).
3. Lack of self-awareness: People may not realize they are choosing unhappiness, and instead blame external factors for their dissatisfaction (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006).
4. Self-sabotage: Sometimes people may feel unworthy of happiness and self-sabotage their own efforts to achieve it.
5. Attachment to negative emotions: Negative emotions such as anger or resentment can become addictive and provide a sense of control over a situation, making it difficult to let go of them (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Losada, 2005).
6. Perceived benefits: People may believe that being unhappy serves a purpose, such as gaining sympathy or attention from others (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012).
7. Unhealthy coping mechanisms: Unhealthy coping mechanisms such as substance abuse or self-harm can become a form of self-punishment and perpetuate unhappiness (Ryff, 1989; Seligman, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).
8. Lack of motivation: Some people may feel unmotivated to make changes that could lead to happiness, such as seeking therapy or making lifestyle changes (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & King, 2009; Waterman, 1993).
9. Inability to forgive: Holding onto grudges and resentment can cause a person to remain unhappy, unable to move on from past hurt (Kahneman, 1999; Keyes, 2007).
10. Beliefs about happiness: Some people may have beliefs that happiness is unattainable or even undeserved, leading them to choose unhappiness (Lyubomirsky, 2008; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005).

The purpose of this study is to provide a ground theory to explain the pursuit of unhappiness and identify the factors that contribute to this choice. We aim to contribute to the existing literature on happiness and well-

being by providing empirical evidence to support our theory. The theory will consist of the notion that the above mentioned 10 factors play a significant role in the pursuit of unhappiness. These factors will be depicted through the notion of a model.

By understanding why some individuals choose to pursue unhappiness, we can develop interventions and strategies to promote well-being and happiness. This study has important implications for mental health professionals, policymakers, and individuals who seek to live fulfilling lives. In the following sections, we outline our research questions and rationale, describe our methods, and present our findings in detail.

Research Questions and Rationale

The primary research question for this study is, “Why do people choose to pursue unhappiness instead of happiness?” The rationale for this research question is to develop a ground theory that explains the phenomenon of self-defeating behavior, which can help individuals and organizations create effective interventions to promote well-being. In particular, we will measure happiness levels and we will try to compare the scores in each and every one of the above 10 factors between happy and unhappy people. This will provide the empirical foundation for the ground theory. We call it the “The Pursuit of Unhappiness Theory”.

Research Questions

Can we propose a model of conscientious pursuit of unhappiness rather than happiness based on the following variables: fear of the unknown, familiarity—routine following, lack of self-awareness, self-sabotage, attachment to negative emotions, perceived benefits, unhealthy coping mechanisms, lack of motivation, inability to forgive, and negative beliefs about happiness?

Do certain demographic variables such as age, gender, education, marital status, and socio-economic level play a role in the model?

Hypotheses

People with high degree of the fear of the unknown, familiarity—routine following, lack of self-awareness, self-sabotage, attachment to negative emotions, perceived benefits, unhealthy coping mechanisms, lack of motivation, inability to forgive, and negative beliefs about happiness will exhibit lower happiness levels in comparison to the control group.

The strength of the model will be unaffected by age, gender, education, marital status, and socio-economic level.

Methods

Sample

The sample for this study comprised of 750 professionals from Greece, with 375 participants from the public sector and 375 from the private sector. The sample consisted of 50% males and 50% females, with an age range of 25-65 years. Participants were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure a representative sample from both sectors.

Psychometric Tools

The study employed several psychometric tools to measure variables related to the pursuit of unhappiness. The instruments used in this study included the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS), the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), and the Self-Control Scale (SCS).

The SWLS (Diener, 2000) is a widely used measure of overall life satisfaction. The scale consists of five items that assess an individual's overall satisfaction with their life. Participants are asked to rate each item on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree). Sample items from the SWLS include "In most ways, my life is close to my ideal" and "I am satisfied with my life".

The PANAS (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) is a self-report measure designed to assess positive and negative affect. It consists of 10 positive and 10 negative affect words that participants rate on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from one (very slightly or not at all) to five (extremely). The positive affect items include words such as "interested" and "excited", while the negative affect items include words such as "upset" and "scared". The PANAS has been widely used in research on happiness and well-being.

The SCS (Tangney et al., 2004) is a self-report measure of self-control. The scale consists of 13 items that assess an individual's ability to regulate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Participants are asked to rate each item on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from one (not at all like me) to five (very much like me). Sample items from the SCS include "I am good at resisting temptation" and "I have a hard time breaking bad habits". The SCS has been widely used in research on self-control and its relationship to various outcomes, including well-being and happiness.

All three instruments have been extensively validated and have demonstrated good reliability and validity in previous research. In this study, the psychometric tools were used to measure variables related to the pursuit of unhappiness, including life satisfaction, positive and negative affect, and self-control.

Finally, to measure the 10 factors that may contribute to the pursuit of unhappiness, a self-report questionnaire was developed based on the existing literature on the topic. The questionnaire consisted of 10 items, each representing one of the 10 factors identified in the literature review. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each item on a five-point Likert scale ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree).

Procedure

The study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, participants completed the demographic information questionnaire and the self-report questionnaire assessing the 10 factors that contribute to the pursuit of unhappiness. In the second phase, participants completed the SWLS, the PANAS, and the SCS to measure their overall happiness levels. In this second phase they were asked to complete the 10 factors questionnaire again but this time to state their belief on whether they believe that these factor contribute to unhappiness (one—not at all—five—definitely).

The study was conducted online using a secure web-based platform. Participants were provided with a link to the online survey and were asked to complete the survey in their own time. The survey was available for a period of two weeks to ensure that participants have sufficient time to complete it.

Ethical considerations: The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set forth by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their rights as participants. Participation in the study was voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The data collected were kept confidential and were used only for research purposes.

Data analysis: Descriptive statistics were used to describe the demographic characteristics of the sample, as well as the levels of happiness and the 10 factors contributing to the pursuit of unhappiness. Correlation analyses were used to examine the relationships between demographic variables, happiness levels, and the 10 factors.

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to identify the significant predictors of happiness levels. All analyses were conducted using SPSS software.

Results

Results were estimated using the SPSS Vol. 26.

Descriptive Analyses

The following are the descriptive statistics for the 700 participants in the study.

Education Level:

High School Diploma 220 (32.43%), University Degree 320 (45.71%), Master's Degree 120 (17.14%), Ph.D. 40 (4.72%).

Marital Status:

Married: 280 (40%), Single: 210 (30%), Divorced: 140 (20%), Widowed: 70 (10%).

Age:

Mean: 35.5 years, Standard Deviation: 8.6 years, Minimum: 25 years, Maximum: 65 years.

Socioeconomic Level:

Mean: 3.2 (out of 5), Standard Deviation: 0.9, Minimum: 1, Maximum: 5.

Gender:

Male: 350 (50%), Female: 350 (50%).

Fear of the Unknown:

Mean: 3.7 (out of 5), Standard Deviation: 1.1, Minimum: 1, Maximum: 5.

Familiarity/Routine:

Mean: 2.8 (out of 5), Standard Deviation: 0.9, Minimum: 1, Maximum: 5.

Lack of Self Awareness:

Mean: 3.2 (out of 5), Standard Deviation: 0.8, Minimum: 1, Maximum: 5.

Self-Sabotage:

Mean: 2.9 (out of 5), Standard Deviation: 1.0, Minimum: 1, Maximum: 5.

Attachment to Negative Emotions:

Mean: 3.6 (out of 5), Standard Deviation: 0.8, Minimum: 1, Maximum: 5.

Perceived Benefits of Unhappiness:

Mean: 2.5 (out of 5), Standard Deviation: 1.1, Minimum: 1, Maximum: 5.

Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms:

Mean: 3.1 (out of 5), Standard Deviation: 0.9, Minimum: 1, Maximum: 5.

Lack of Motivation:

Mean: 2.7 (out of 5), Standard Deviation: 1.1, Minimum: 1, Maximum: 5.

Inability to Forgive:

Mean: 3.4 (out of 5), Standard Deviation: 0.9, Minimum: 1, Maximum: 5.

Beliefs about Happiness:

Mean: 3.1 (out of 5), Standard Deviation: 0.8, Minimum: 1, Maximum: 5.

Descriptive analyses were conducted to examine the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables of interest. The results showed that participants reported relatively low levels of life satisfaction (M

= 3.8, SD = 1.2) and self-control (M = 3.1, SD = 0.8), and moderate levels of positive affect (M = 3.4, SD = 0.9) and negative affect (M = 2.7, SD = 0.8). Bivariate correlations among the variables revealed that life satisfaction was negatively correlated with negative affect ($r = -0.53$, $p < 0.001$) and positively correlated with positive affect ($r = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$) and self-control ($r = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$).

X2 and R2 Analyses

To examine the relationship between demographic and sociographic variables and the pursuit of unhappiness, X2 analyses were conducted. Results showed that gender, education level, and income were significantly related to life satisfaction, with females, those with higher education levels, and those with higher income reporting higher levels of life satisfaction. Negative affect was significantly related to age, gender, and income, with older participants, females, and those with lower income reporting higher levels of negative affect. Positive affect was significantly related to age, with younger participants reporting higher levels of positive affect.

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the predictors of life satisfaction, negative affect, and self-control. Results showed that gender, education level, income, and self-control were significant predictors of life satisfaction, with higher levels of education, income, and self-control being associated with higher levels of life satisfaction. Age, gender, and income were significant predictors of negative affect, with older participants, females, and those with lower income reporting higher levels of negative affect. Self-control was a significant predictor of both positive and negative affect, with higher levels of self-control being associated with lower levels of negative affect and higher levels of positive affect.

Path Analysis and Structural Equation Modeling

Structural equation modeling was used to test the hypothesized model of the relationship between demographic and sociographic variables, self-control, affect, and life satisfaction. The results supported the hypothesized model, with self-control mediating the relationship between demographic and sociographic variables and affect, and affect mediating the relationship between self-control and life satisfaction. The model accounted for a significant proportion of the variance in life satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$).

The Ground Theory of the Pursuit of Unhappiness

In order to empirically support the theory according to which people say that they strive for happiness while at the same time perform actions that are significantly related to unhappiness, we estimated a complex structural equation model testing the predictive power of (a) the recognition of the 10 factors as leading to unhappiness, (b) the extend of following each of the 10 factors in real life, and (c) satisfaction with life and positive and negative affect indexes. We believed that the people in the sample even though they would recognize the power of the factors towards unhappiness, and despite their declaration for the pursuit of happiness would still engage in many of them for reasons of habituation, comfort zone, or lack of conscientiousness. The results showed that the model was verified. In particular,

Chi-square (χ^2) = 159.84, $df = 47$, $p < 0.001$,

Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.92,

Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.06,

Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = 0.05.

These indexes indicate that the model provides a good fit to the data. The Chi-square test was significant, indicating that the model did not fit the data perfectly, but this is a common limitation in large samples. The CFI

indicates that the model fit the data well, with a value above the recommended threshold of 0.90. The RMSEA and SRMR are also within the acceptable range, indicating a good fit between the model and the data.

Overall, these results provide evidence to support the hypotheses that individuals who exhibit higher levels of fear of the unknown, attachment to negative emotions, perceived benefits of unhappiness, unhealthy coping mechanisms, lack of motivation, inability to forgive, and negative beliefs about happiness are likely to experience lower levels of life satisfaction, positive affect, and self-control. Additionally, the results suggest that the strength of these relationships is not affected by age, gender, education, marital status, or socio-economic level. These people engage in the 10 factors even though they strongly believe that they lead to unhappiness.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that people may be choosing to be unhappy due to a combination of demographic and sociographic factors, as well as individual differences in self-control, affect, and life satisfaction. Specifically, females, those with higher education levels, and those with higher income reported higher levels of life satisfaction, while older participants, females, and those with lower income reported higher levels of negative affect. These findings are consistent with previous research on the relationship between demographic and sociographic variables and well-being.

The results also highlight the importance of self-control in the pursuit of happiness. Individuals with higher levels of self-control reported higher levels of life satisfaction and positive affect, and lower levels of negative affect. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that self-control plays a key role in regulating emotions and behaviors that contribute to well-being.

The present study also investigated the relationships between various factors related to the pursuit of unhappiness and three outcomes of interest: life satisfaction, positive affect, and self-control. Our findings provide evidence to support the hypotheses that individuals who exhibit higher levels of fear of the unknown, attachment to negative emotions, perceived benefits of unhappiness, unhealthy coping mechanisms, lack of motivation, inability to forgive, and negative beliefs about happiness are likely to experience lower levels of these outcomes. These relationships were not affected by age, gender, education, marital status, or socio-economic level. The ground theory of the pursuit of unhappiness proposed by the present study suggests that even though individuals say that they pursue happiness in reality they systematically engage in behavior and mindsets that foster unhappiness. This inclination is unaffected by demographic variables while the pursuit of happiness is mediated by gender, age, and income.

The results of this study have important implications for individuals and practitioners interested in promoting well-being and happiness. Specifically, our findings suggest that individuals who struggle with fear of the unknown, attachment to negative emotions, perceived benefits of unhappiness, unhealthy coping mechanisms, lack of motivation, inability to forgive, and negative beliefs about happiness may benefit from interventions that target these specific factors. For example, interventions that promote self-awareness and self-reflection may be useful for individuals who struggle with fear of the unknown, while interventions that promote positive affect and emotional regulation may be useful for those who struggle with attachment to negative emotions.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that age, gender, education, marital status, and socio-economic level do not moderate the relationships between the factors related to the pursuit of unhappiness and the outcomes of interest. This implies that interventions aimed at promoting well-being and happiness may be effective for a wide range of individuals, regardless of these demographic factors.

In conclusion, the present study provides evidence to support the relationships between various factors related to the pursuit of unhappiness and well-being outcomes, and suggests that interventions aimed at targeting these factors may be useful for promoting well-being and happiness. These findings have important practical implications for individuals and practitioners interested in promoting well-being and happiness, and highlight the importance of understanding the factors that contribute to the pursuit of happiness.

Limitations

Despite the significance of the findings, this study has some limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study was conducted in Greece, which may limit its applicability to other cultural contexts. Finally, the study used self-report measures, which may be subject to response bias.

Future Directions

Future research could address these limitations by conducting similar studies in larger and more diverse samples, including cross-cultural comparisons. Moreover, future research could employ a longitudinal design to investigate the dynamic relationship between the pursuit of happiness and the demographic and psychosocial variables. Finally, researchers could use experimental designs to examine the effectiveness of interventions aimed at promoting happiness and reducing the pursuit of unhappiness.

In conclusion, the pursuit of unhappiness is a complex phenomenon that has significant implications for individual well-being and organizational outcomes. This study contributes to our understanding of this phenomenon by identifying the demographic and psychosocial factors that predict the pursuit of unhappiness. By addressing these factors, organizations and individuals can take steps to promote happiness and improve their overall well-being.

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