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REVIEW ARTICLE

IN PURSUIT OF NIRVANA

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We can all identify individuals who are always happy, never feeling down and shine with optimism in the most adverse of circumstances. Yet we must also have encountered people who always feel down, always declare that they are suffering from misfortune and that bad things are meant to happen to them, fulfilling the role of a stereotyped pessimist. But why are people so different? What causes them to be happy or sad? Who are these happy people? Why are they happy? What is the defining property of a person's personality that can be used to predict when he/she will be happy? All these are necessary tools required to aid psychologists in prevention of mental illnesses and diseases rather than later alleviation from suffering (after the initial induction of the illness). Very little literature is present in the Pakistani context of this nature, and thus happiness of people has been severely undermined. In this essay entitled 'In Pursuit of Nirvana' several of the above questions have been addressed by defining the predictors of happiness that may be found in Pakistani societies.

"If you feel that you are happy," noted Freedman (1978), "you are happy-that's all we mean by the term". Sometimes, without categorizing this strange phenomenon, which occurs to all humans and animals alike, we presume that happiness is just a term for temporary elevation of mood or a feeling that makes you feel good about life. Happiness and well-being are used interchangeably to indicate a psychological construct "the meaning of which everybody knows, but the definition of which nobody can give" (Jones, cited in Freedman, 1978). Although human suffering understandably focuses much of our attention onthe understanding and eventual alleviation of misery, it is just as important to understand the positive aspects of human behavior and tendencies.

The capacity of some people to be remarkably happy, even in the face of adverse circumstances or hard times is striking. We can all identify individuals who appear to have a talent for happiness, to see the world around them through rose-colored glasses, to make out the silver lining even in misfortune, to live in the present, and to find joy in the little things from day to day (Ryff, Singer, Love, & Essex, 1998). Similarly we are all familiar with people who, even in the best of times, seem chronically unhappy, peering at the world through gray colored spectacles (Eysenck, 1990), always complaining, accentuating the negative, dwelling on the down side of both the trivial and the sublime

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(Lyubomirsky, Kasri, & Zehm, 2000), and generally deriving little pleasure from life.

Indeed, the dawn of the new millennium finds increasing research evidence supporting Aristotle's (trans. 1974) two millennia-old argument that happiness is the whole aim and end of human existence. The literature regarding the degree of happiness in people indicates that happiness is more abundant than is generally believed and also that most people report a semi-elated mood most of the time (Diener, Sandvik, & Pavot, 1991). Various other surveys and reports across the world reveal people having a similar satisfaction in life. In Western Europe and North America, 8 in 10 people describe themselves as more satisfied than dissatisfied (Inglehart, 1990; Myers, 2000). The literature aimed at assessing the cross-cultural differences in degree of satisfaction with life indicates that most nations average above 5.5 on a 1 to 10 scale, with a range of 5.03 to 8.36 (Diener, 2000), Pakistan coming in at 7.07 (Suhail & Chaudhry, 2004). Myers and Diener (1996) concluded after aggregating data from 916 surveys of 1.1 million people in 45 countries, that the average response was 6.75 on a well-being scale of 0 to 10 (where 0 is the low extreme, 5 is neutral and 10 is high extreme). Self-reports of being happy are also reasonably consistent over time. For example, in the periodic National Opinion Research Centre Survey 3 in 10 Americans say they are very happy. On the contrary only 1 in 10 say that they are 'not too happy'. The remaining 6 in 10 rate themselves as 'pretty happy' (Myers, 2000). It is important to note that because it is presently neither methodologically feasible nor ethical to manipulate an individual's chronic levels of happiness and unhappiness, all models and research have been based on correlational studies, examining the associations between happiness and a host of diverse proximal and distal causes.

In a classic article, Brickman and Campbell (1971) suggested that all people labor on a "hedonic treadmill". As they rise in their accomplishment and possessions, their expectations also rise. Soon they habituate to the new level, and it no longer makes them happy. On the negative side, people are unhappy when they first encounter misfortune, but they soon adapt and it no longer makes them unhappy. On the basis of this reasoning, Brickman and Campbell proposed that people are destined to hedonic neutrality in the long run. Although an early study by Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman (1978) on lottery winners and people with spinal cord injuries produced equivocal support for the notion of a hedonic treadmill, later data have accumulated to support adaptation. For example, Silver (1982) found that persons with spinal cord injuries were extremely unhappy immediately after the accident that produced their disability but quickly began to adapt. She found that within a matter of only eight weeks, positive emotions again seem to predominate over negative ones. During this pe-

riod, respondents experienced a downward trend in unpleasant emotions and an upward trend in pleasant emotions, suggesting a return to a *baseline* condition of mood and happiness experienced by any human. Costa, McCrae, and Zonderman (1987) also suggested that happiness appears to be relatively stable over time and consistent over situations.

There seems to be in place a general consensus regarding the degree of happiness in people from the world over, but it is rather difficult to determine which among the many predictors should be regarded as the essential components of positive psychological functioning since the criteria of well-being are diverse and extensive. What can be said with certainty, however, is that there are certain determinants of happiness that may or may not be under our control.

Although many people believe there are unhappy times of life – times of adolescent stress, midlife crisis, or old age decline, repeated surveys across the world reveal that no time of life is notably happiest or most satisfying (Myers & Diener, 1995). Like age, gender gives us little clue to happiness. Depressed men more often act antisocial or become alcoholic, women often ruminate and get anxious, however, men and women are equally likely to declare themselves "very happy" and "satisfied" with their lives. Similarly, surveys of 170,000 adults in 16 countries did not show significant gender differences in experiencing happiness (Inglehart, 1990) nor did a Meta Analysis of 146 other studies (Haring, Stock, & Okun, 1984). Certain traits and temperaments also appear to predispose one to experience happiness. Some of these traits, notably extraversion, are known to be genetically influenced, which help explain Lykken & Tellegen's (1996) finding that about 50% of the current variation in current happiness is heritable but not genetically fixed. Compared with those who are depressed, happy people are less self-focused, less hostile and abusive, and less vulnerable to disease. They are also more loving, forgiving, trusting, energetic, decisive, creative, sociable and helpful (Veenhoven, 1988).

Determinants of happiness that do give us the flexibility of controlling them include work satisfaction, wealth, religion and social support. Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1999) observed that work satisfaction seems to be driven less by extrinsic monetary rewards than by intrinsic rewards felt by creating the work and finding of a personal identity through work, and said that "when work is pleasure life is a joy and when work is duty life is slavery". He also gave strong evidence for an increased quality of life when work and leisure engage one's skills. Congruent with this notion, the only systematic study reported from Pakistan on the issue of well-bring maintained that work satisfaction served as the most significant predictor of happiness, with wealth coming in at second (Suhail & Chaudhry, 2004). One example of a cobbler from the sample of above 900 respondents indicated that his satisfaction with life

came from the appreciation of his work that he received from people of neighboring streets. This negates the popular held belief that wealth is the only strong predictor of happiness.

Even if money can't buy happiness, is there nevertheless an association between wealth and well-being? It does stand that, in comparison with poorer countries, increase in wealth matters less in affluent countries, where most people can afford life's necessities and where evaluative standards rise in the same proportion to those of an income increase. Inglehart (1990) disclosed that in the USA, Canada and Europe, the correlation between income and personal happiness is surprisingly weak. On the other hand, in areas such as the Indian subcontinent where low income threatens basic human needs more often, being relatively well off predicts greater satisfaction with life (Argyle, 1999). Coupled with the findings of Suhail and Chaudhry mentioned above, it is natural to suggest that a balance between wealth and work satisfaction are needed to maintain a unanimous positive life style, and increased personal well-being in Pakistan.

The positive association between religiosity and well-being have also been demonstrated in surveys conducted in the USA and 14 European nations where it was found that reported happiness and life satisfaction rise with the strength of religious affiliation and frequency of attendance at worship services (Inglehart, 1990; Witter, Stock, Okun, & Haring, 1985). The sense of meaning and purpose that many people derive from this religious support may act as a buffer against negative emotions. In Pakistan having a strong religious affiliation is strongly promoted in the common populace who are mostly middle class or white collar. This trend declines as you go into the elite class, perhaps because wealth becomes a readily available tool to increase happiness. Thus religion and wealth are often used interchangeably as substitutes to promote well-being. However in poorer countries, religion does seem to have an edge as a more reliable predictor of happiness as it does not require material resources, just time and effort, which, to the person practicing it, increases him in stature in the eyes of his Lord. The teachings of Islam in particular, can induce satisfaction in those who practice it. Prof. Ajmal, a renowned psychologist in Pakistan, and many other Muslim therapists considered mental illnesses a result of distance from God. The Holy Quran discusses mental illness in terms of dissociation, doubt, envy, and deceit of others, and that they can be treated with the fundamental teachings of Islam-patience, tolerance, kindness, agreeableness, contentment, faith, etc.

Social support seems to be another strong predictor of general well being. Studies have reported that being attached to friends and partners with whom we can share intimate thoughts promotes positive feelings (Pavot, Diener, & Fajita, 1990) and also outweighs stress and strain (Cohen, 1988). Mastekaasa (1995) concluded that the marriage-happiness

correlation is mainly due to the beneficial effects of marriage. It has been pointed out that marriage offers people new roles, additional rewards and sources of identity and self-esteem (Crosby, 1987). In close-knit Eastern societies like Pakistan, a supportive and intimate marital relationship is especially important as couples depend on each other for dealing with most family affairs. For women especially, marriage is like a secure bond and marital integrity can guarantee them respect in society. On the contrary, divorce or separation can lead to an avalanche of continuous suffering.

The above collected research does suggest that a number of variables are important in making people happy and satisfied, though some of them contribute more than others. Pursuit of money cannot completely guarantee enhancement in happiness. Despite the fact that majority of the Pakistani population belongs to either low or middle classes the populace seems reasonably happy. It may seem surprising that despite all economic hardships, weak economy, socio-political turmoil and unrest in Pakistan, well-being of the nation comes close to other western countries (Suhail & Chaudhry, 2004). It may be thus hypothesized that happiness is not restricted to affluent nations, and that in Pakistan, the major reason for happiness is a mix of work satisfaction, wealth enough to ensure basic necessities of life, a strong religious affiliation and social support. All these factors are inherently available in the culture and their inculcation should be promoted to increase overall happiness.

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