Can happiness boost self-worth? : Exploring the impact of subjective well-being on the global self-esteem

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Can Happiness Boost Self-worth?:
Exploring the Impact of Subjective Well Being on the Global Self-esteem of Filipino Adolescents

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Consistent with the contention that happiness leads to desirable outcomes (Diener, 2012), the current study examines the relationship of subjective well-being (SWB) to self-esteem of Filipino adolescents. The cognitive and affective domains of SWB were utilized as determinants of global self-esteem through regression analyses. Findings of the study showed that gender, and all dimensions of SWB significantly predicted the appraisal of self-worth among the respondents, with life satisfaction as its strongest predictor. From these results, premises of the broaden-and-build theory was confirmed as it elaborates how adolescents’ appreciation of self profits from positive emotions and satisfaction with life. Implications of the results are discussed.

Keywords: broaden-and-build theory, self-esteem, subjective well-being

The establishment of Positive Psychology upholds empirical and theoretical formulations that focus on what makes individuals psychologically well (Diener, 2000). It gives importance to the personal, social, and psychological factors that contribute to human happiness and flourishing. In other words, happiness serves as a fundamental construct in this paradigm. Happiness or subjective well-being (SWB) pertains to subjective evaluation of one’s life (Diener, 2000; 2012). It also involves cognitive (i.e., life satisfaction) and affective (i.e., positive affect and negative affect) components (Diener, 2000).

The potential contributions of happiness in the promotion of psychological health were validated in past research (Cohen & Pressman, 2006; Lyubomirsky, King & Diener, 2005). For instance, subjective well being was linked to better levels of mental health (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Koivumaa-Honkanen, Koskenvuo, Honkanen, Viinamaki, Heikkilä & Kaprio, 2004) and even physical health (Mroczek & Spiro, 2005). As such, previous empirical investigations looked at the predictors of SWB. Particularly, social support (Ganesan & Reyes, 2011), forgiveness (Hill & Allemand, 2011), self-esteem (Cheng & Furnham, 2003; Diener & Diener, 1995; Ganesan & Reyes, 2011; Quevedo & Abella, 2011; Schimmack & Diener, 2003); self-efficacy (Datu, in press); and meaning in life (Datu, 2013; Shrir, Palgi, Ben-Ezra & Shmotkin, 2011) were found to be robust predictors of SWB. These findings substantiate that various individual, social, and psychological variables
may significantly lead to greater levels of subjective well-being.

However, a recent conceptualization of SWB contends that happiness is not just an outcome but also an essential precursor of psychological constructs that reflect effective functioning (Diener, 2012). For instance, previous empirical studies showed that happiness predicted physical health (Cohen & Pressman, 2006; Diener & Chan, 2011), work productivity (Oishi, 2012), and charitable behaviors (Aknin, Sandstrom, Dunn & Norton, 2011). This reinforces the contention that happiness can effectively lead to desirable cognitive, motivational, and behavioral outcomes.

To the extent that people feel happy and contented with their lives, they acquire psychological resources that allow them to combat the negative impact of life’s challenges (Fredrickson, 2001). One of the psychological resources that may profit from happiness is self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to “a global feeling of self-worth or adequacy as a person, or generalized feelings of self-acceptance, goodness, and self-respect” (Lyubomirsky, Tkach & Dimatteo, 2006, p. 366). Given that it encompasses an individual’s view of self-importance and value, high levels of self-esteem were implicated with greater levels of subjective well-being across cultures (Cheng & Furnham, 2002, 2003; Ganesan & Reyes, 2011; Kwan, Singelis & Bond, 1997) and reduced levels of depression (Tennen & Affleck, 1993). Yet, the evidence merely pointed to SWB as an outcome of self-esteem rather than an antecedent of perceived self-worth.

The beneficial impact of happiness on self-esteem may be considered as a conceptually acceptable assertion. Based on the broaden-and-build theory, positive emotions enhance “people’s momentary thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources, ranging from physical and intellectual resources to social and psychological resources (Fredrickson, 2001, p. 219). Experiencing SWB can foster enhancement of self-worth, a durable psychological resource that may be potentially developed and built when individuals experience frequent positive affect. Conversely, this would also explain why negative emotions restrict or narrow the crystallization of positive psychological strengths which lead to dysfunctional psychological conditions like depression. Put simply, positive emotions (i.e., happiness, joy, love, gratitude, etc.) are conceptualized as essential factors of positive individual resources.

Despite the promising utility of SWB in facilitating extrinsic and intrinsic personal resources (Diener, 2012), there is still a marked scarcity of empirical research that looks at the outcomes of a happy and satisfying life in the Philippines. In fact, previous studies on Positive Psychology in this context primarily focused on happiness as an outcome of self-esteem (Ganesan & Reyes, 2011; Reyes, 2004) rather than as a determinant of SWB. Since Schmitt and Allik (2005) highlighted marked differences on global self-esteem with individuals in individualist cultures scoring higher than those in collectivist contexts, it may not always be safe to assert that SWB exerts a significant influence on self-esteem. The cultural differences on self-esteem can be associated with the distinct construal of self among people in individualist and collectivist cultures since individuals with independent self-construal prioritize personal achievement and self-enhancement as primary cultural tasks (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This would explain why individuals in Western cultures express greater inclination to positive self-evaluation or self-esteem.

However, given that Schmitt and Allik (2005) confirmed the structural universality of self-esteem as a construct across various cultures, there is a reason to argue that regardless of cultural orientation, individuals would express willingness to experience a positive view of self. If SWB or happiness pertains to an appraisal of how pleasant and satisfying one’s life is, then it is more likely that it may have the capacity to build positive psychological resources such as positive evaluation of self which may serve as a protective structure when future negative circumstances or events are encountered. Yet, these would remain to be speculative contentions regarding the link between SWB and self-esteem without further empirical inquiry, especially in the Philippine context.

As low SWB may lead to severe depressive symptoms such as suicide (Diener, 2012), it may be equally important to assess how happiness can predict self-esteem as a significant reduction in self-worth was strongly linked to depression (Cheng & Furnham, 2003; Quevedo & Abella,
2011). Moreover, Lyubomirsky, Sheldon and Schkade (2005) found that happiness is a strong predictor of positive self-perceptions. These findings contend that without investigating the impact of SWB on perceived self-worth, it is relatively challenging to examine how positive emotions can optimize positive and durable psychological resources like self-esteem. Consequently, psychologists may consistently offer interventions that aim to reduce depression rather than interventions that further enhance positive psychological strength like happiness.

Though people across distinct developmental phases would equally benefit from research that establishes the contribution of SWB to self-esteem, adolescence is emphasized in the present study. As adolescents are developmentally expected to establish a sense of identity (Erikson, 1982; Klimstra, Hale, Raajmakers, Branje & Meeus, 2010; Twenge, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2002), examining the psychological determinants of their perceived self-worth would be an important line of inquiry to look at as it would help them achieve their core developmental task leading to optimum psychological health (Cheng & Furnham, 2002). Given that Reyes (2004) found that self-esteem was associated with the happiness of Filipino adolescents, then it may be interesting to look at how happiness would significantly predict perception of self-importance. To the extent that adolescents experience happiness, they may positively assess themselves, which can then assist in the development of identity or self. In effect, they would learn to appreciate the importance of engaging in happiness-increasing strategies.

Recognizing the role of happiness on self-esteem can essentially lead to the development of positive psychological interventions that maintain and enhance self-esteem, and preventive mental health programs that may significantly reduce depression, which presents low-self-esteem as one of its major symptoms. Therefore, the empirical and theoretical bases of the current empirical inquiry point to the contention that subjective well-being dimensions predict the global self-esteem of Filipino adolescents. Consistent with the theoretical premises of the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), the study hypothesized that positive affect along with life satisfaction would positively predict self-esteem while negative affect would negatively predict perceived self-worth.

**Method**

**Participants**

The present research recruited 470 Filipino college students (230 male and 240 female) of a private and sectarian collegiate institution in Metro Manila which provides quality educational programs to students who came from middle to high socioeconomic status. Their ages ranged from 15 to 18 (\(M = 17.45, SD = .62\)). Prior to the data-collection procedure, teachers of the participants were contacted and the respondents were given informed consent forms to ensure that they were familiar with the nature of the current study. On average, it took 35 minutes for them to complete the surveys. The respondents were given academic course incentives in return for their participation in the research. The number of the participants who completed the surveys comprised 79.66% of 590 students who were initially identified as target pool of respondents.

**Instruments**

The study utilized three questionnaires to gauge the respondents’ levels of cognitive and affective well-being, and self-esteem. These include the following:

**Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.** The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) was used to measure the extent to which individuals realize their self-worth. It is composed of 10 items that are rated on a 4-point scale (0=strongly disagree to 3=strongly agree). The current reliability of the RSES is \(\alpha=.84\).

**Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS-X; Watson & Clark, 1994)** is a 60-item measure of affective well-being with a 5-point scale (1 = very slightly or not at all to 5 = extremely). There are two major dimensions of the scale: positive affect (degree to which
positive emotions are experienced) and negative affect (degree to which negative emotions are experienced). PANAS-X was found to be a culturally-sensitive measure of affective well-being (Reyes, 2004). The current reliability coefficient of the GQ6 is $\alpha = .86$.

**Satisfaction with Life Scale.** The *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) is a unidimensional, five-item measure with a 7-point scale that gauges cognitive well-being of individuals. Past research in the Philippine context found that SWLS is a reliable measure of cognitive well-being (Edillo, Turiano, Reyes & Villanueva, 2012; Ganesan & Reyes, 2011). The present reliability of SWLS is $\alpha = .88$.

**Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences 17th edition (SPSS). First, the descriptive statistical measures and correlation analyses coefficients were computed. Second, when the assumptions for regression (i.e., normality of residuals, linearity, principle of homoscedasticity, independence of errors) were met, demographic characteristics were entered in the first step while well-being domains (i.e., positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction) were entered in the second step of the regression model, both predicting for global self-esteem. Ten participants whose responses were categorized as outliers (e.g., three standard deviation units away from the mean) were removed in the regression and correlational analyses.

**Results**

Descriptive statistical measures like means and standard deviations were shown in Table 1. It illustrates the correlation coefficients of all the variables in the current study. The mean values show that the respondents scored higher on life satisfaction and positive affect while they received low scores on negative affect. Consistent with the findings of Schmitt and Allik (2005), the mean value of the respondents’ scores on RSES fell near the theoretical midpoint ($M = 1.91, SD = .52$).

Correlational analyses confirmed hypotheses of the present empirical inquiry. Positive affect was significantly linked to self-esteem, $r (470) = .43, p < .001$. This implies that as the respondents experience positive emotions, they realize the significance of their lives. Life satisfaction was also significantly associated with self-esteem, $r (470) = .50, p < .001$. This means that contentment with life of the respondents is highly connected to increases in their perceived self-worth. As expected, negative affect was negatively linked to self-esteem, $r (470) = -.49, p < .001$. This implies that as the respondents experience negative emotions, their perceived self-value decreases.

To determine the differential impact of demographic characteristics and SWB dimensions on the global self-esteem of the Filipino adolescents, hierarchical regression analysis was performed. When age, gender, year level and cumulative grade point average were entered as predictor variables in the first step of the model, it explained 2% of the variance in global self-esteem [$F (4, 466) = 2.22, \Delta R^2 = .02, p = .66$] where gender ($\beta = .13, t = 2.23, p < .05$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Positive Affect</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Negative Affect</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Life Satisfaction</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.89</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Self-esteem</td>
<td>.43**</td>
<td>-.49**</td>
<td>.50**</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**p < .001. *p < .05.**
served as its significant predictor.

In the second step of the model, addition of life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect controlling for the effects of age, gender, year level and cumulative grade point average accounted for 46% of the variance in global self-esteem [F (7, 463) = 44.97, ΔR² = .46, p < .001] where gender (β = .15, t = 3.46, p < .001), positive affect (β = .23, t = 6.15, p < .001), negative affect (β = -.29, t = -9.14, p < .001), and life satisfaction (β = .14, t = 6.86, p < .001) served as its significant determinants.

### Discussion

The purpose of the present study is to examine the impact of subjective well-being or happiness on the global self-esteem of the Filipino adolescents. Premised within the assertions of the broaden-and-build theory of Fredrickson (2001), the beneficial contributions of positive affect and life satisfaction, and the debilitating influence of negative affect on the positive appraisal of self were investigated.

The findings of the study confirmed the hypothesized connection of happiness dimensions to perceived self-worth which supported findings from past empirical inquiries (Cheng & Furnham, 2002; Ganesan & Reyes, 2011; Kwan, Singelis, & Bond, 1997; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). In particular, correlational analyses revealed that positive affect and life satisfaction were positively linked to self-esteem while negative affect was negatively linked to the outcome variable.

Moreover, two domains of happiness or SWB (i.e., positive affect and life satisfaction) significantly predicted the inclinations of the participants to favorably evaluate themselves even after controlling for the influence of demographic characteristics such as age, gender, grade level, and cumulative grade point average. This signifies that subjective well-being of Filipino adolescents is an important factor that can be substantially associated with an increase in perceived self-worth which reflects results from past studies (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). To the extent that Filipino adolescents feel happy and satisfied with their lives, they broaden cognitive and behavioral repertoires that may eventually build enduring psychological outcomes like self-esteem. The study supports that when adolescents experience happiness, it is more likely that they will engage in activities or tasks that may increase the degree to which they positively evaluate themselves (Lyubomirsky, King &
individuals in establishing a sense of identity.

Conversely, negative affect had an adverse impact on the self-esteem of the Filipino adolescents. This finding asserts that negative emotions could exert a debilitating influence on the inclinations of individuals to positively appraise themselves, a contention that seems to go well with previous empirical investigations that have emphasized the negative association of negative affect (i.e., depression) and self-esteem (Cheng & Furnham, 2003; Quevedo & Abella, 2011; Tennen & Affleck, 1993; Reyes, 2004).

Based on such findings, the theoretical premises of the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) were validated which contend that positive emotions (i.e., happiness, love, and gratitude) have the capability to build psychological resources (i.e., self-esteem, meaning in life, etc.) that would allow individuals to combat the negative effects of undesirable future circumstances or events. On the other hand, negative emotions like negative affect would narrow the range of thought-action repertoire that would allow adolescents to cope with detrimental situations in the future. Put simply, the cultural applicability of the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) in the Philippine context was confirmed as the facilitating role of positive affect and the weakening function of negative affect on perceived self-worth were substantiated.

Most importantly, results of the study present important implications to mental health professionals who are dealing with adolescent individuals. Since SWB significantly predicted the self-esteem of the respondents, counselors and psychologists are encouraged to develop and use happiness-increasing interventions to maintain and enhance the perceived self-worth of adolescents. Instead of using traditional psychological treatments that aim to reduce the intensity of psychological symptoms, utilizing empirically-grounded positive psychological interventions that are found to be predictive of happiness such as promoting acts of kindness, grateful contemplation tasks, and expressing gratitude and appreciation is highly recommended to enhance the extent to which Filipino adolescents positively construe themselves. This would consequently lead to the building of psychological resources that would help these individuals in establishing a sense of identity-a developmental task that are putatively expected to meet. However, the current study has several limitations. First, the predictive and cross-sectional nature of the present investigation prevents the researcher from establishing a causal inference of the results. Second, the use of self-reporting may also pose an important methodological limitation. In light of these limitations, future studies are recommended to look at the mechanisms that elaborate the connection of SWB to self-esteem (e.g., through the addition of mediating variables) and to devise experimental studies that look at the effect of SWB on perceived self-worth which would further crystallize the contention that subjective well-being can lead to positive psychological outcomes. It is also desirable to examine other outcomes that can profit from SWB.

References


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