

Barriers and directions in the pursuit of happiness

By Dr. Cody Christopherson

The pursuit of happiness in psychological theory has rarely been studied, though it is central to our modern, Western experience. It was enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. It is often cited as grounds for civil rights. Why has this been scarcely studied?

One possible reason for the lack of attention is the widespread assumption in psychology known as egoism (sometimes also called hedonism). This is the assumption that it is only possible to act for the sake of the self. The egoist would claim that altruism, love, and self-sacrifice are illusions. Two prominent personality theorists in the history of psychology illustrate this principle: Sigmund Freud and B.F. Skinner.¹

Sigmund Freud was a fine example of an egoist—his theoretical world is a closed system in terms of the self. All human action is an attempt at self-gratification. Freud postulated that human action is dynamic, focused on the interaction between three forces within each person: the id, ego, and superego. The ego and the superego grow from the id, not in opposition, but as a way of better meeting the id's needs within the constraints of reality including social structures. Because self-gratification is the only motive, worship of any kind is ultimately worship only of the self. One of the most prominent modern critiques of Freudian theory is that it was unfalsifiable —any incorrect prediction can be sufficiently explained with an ancillary theory. That critique is certainly true for Freud's egoist assumption. There is no coherent Freudian alternative to egoism.

Though dramatically different in many ways, B.F. Skinner shared Freud's egoist assumption. All living things, including humans, are responding to reinforcement and punishment. In turn, according to principles of operant conditioning, we shape our environment. These stimulus/response chains can become very complex and take on the appearance of willful behavior, including altruistic-appearing behavior. Like Freud, Skinner would deny that a relationship could exist without the promise of self-gratification (though again, the similarities between the theories do not go much further). Modern cognitive psychologists have built on Skinner's foundation and there are periodically new studies, built on these assumptions, that "demonstrate" that altruism is an illusion.² www.thehumanprospect.com 29

If we are always seeking our own gratification, and have no choice but to do so, it is nonsensical to ask whether the pursuit of happiness is self-defeating. Literally every human experience is necessarily aimed at gratification of some self. Therefore, the pursuit of happiness is the motive for everything we do, with no breaks.

Because this assumption is absolute, the alternative to egoism is not that we act altruistically all the time. The alternative is that altruism is possible, even if it is very rare. If the possibility for non-selfish love or self-sacrifice exist in a personality theory, then it does not carry the assumption of egoism.³

The pursuit is eventually pursued

The pursuit of happiness has occasionally been studied now, not as the result of a philosophical shift in psychology, but through a backdoor; positive psychology has caught on as a subfield of psychology, and, with it, studies of happiness from many angles including the pursuit thereof. Positive psychology was launched in earnest at the turn of the millennium by Martin Seligman. Positive psychology is meant to be "a science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions [which] promises to improve quality of life and prevent the pathologies that arise when life is barren and meaningless."⁴ Although leading happiness researcher Ed Diener began studying happiness in 1981, decades before the term "positive psychology" was in use, the study of subjective well-being is now considered to be an important part of the positive psychology movement.

Part of this positive psychology movement has been to study happiness interventions—specific activities thought to increase happiness such as writing down positive thoughts about your day, doing "random acts of kindness," expressing gratitude, and so forth. These interventions have found mixed results, but in general appear to be somewhat effective.

On the other hand, there are many known barriers to increasing happiness, including the high genetic contribution to happiness and the correlation of happiness and slowly changing life events such as level of income and marriage. In addition to these factors, there is a long-standing folk belief that happiness may be self-defeating. Eric Hoffer once said that the search for happiness is one of the chief sources of unhappiness. This sentiment is shared by such thinkers as John Stuart Mill and (possibly) Aristotle.

There are already certain psychological processes thought to be self-defeating. Most famously, to force someone to imagine a white bear, simply instruct them to not think of a white bear. The greater the effort put forth in this type of thought suppression, the more present the thought becomes. Psychologist Daniel Wegner has explored this type of experience in depth and has dubbed it

the ironic process of mental control. Other types of effort that generate ironic responses include effort to concentrate, fall asleep, and reduce physical pain. Some have hypothesized that the pursuit of happiness may be an ironic process both from moment to moment and over the long term.

Others have shown that some interventions appear to increase happiness. These interventions generally do not involve deception, and happiness intervention researchers widely acknowledge that we are necessarily aware of our own experience of happiness, thus the "subjective" in subjective well-being. For these reasons, participants do put forth conscious effort in increasing their own happiness as part of the experiment.

Is conscious effort a necessary part of happiness, or is it a hopeless or self-defeating pursuit? In an attempt to settle this question, I isolated the pursuit of happiness as one independent variable in a long-term in-vivo experiment. The experiment lasted five weeks including a one-week and one-month follow-up after the initial one-week intervention period. It was conducted completely online and participants were asked to use the interventions in their daily lives, not in a lab setting. I wanted to compare conscious effort to existing happiness interventions, so I used an established

intervention, counting blessings, as another independent variable. Participants were randomly assigned to one of five groups, in a crossed factorial design: 1. Put forth effort with placebo intervention instructions, 2. Put forth effort with legitimate intervention instructions, 3. No instructions about effort with legitimate intervention, 4. No instructions about effort, with placebo intervention, and 5. Put forth effort with no further instructions. The results mostly supported the happiness set-point hypothesis. That is, we move up and down in happiness with life events, but generally return to a stubborn degree of happiness that is mostly consistent across years. Of the three components of subjective well-being (positive emotions, negative emotions, and life satisfaction) two of them would not budge, on average, for participants in my studies. For the variable that did move, positive emotions, trying to be happier was a successful strategy. That is, those who tried to be happier were modestly happier by the end of the study, on average. Participants assigned to the legitimate happiness intervention group also experienced a modest improvement in positive emotions, on average. Combining effort and happiness did not offer an additional benefit. Ultimately, the data are sufficient to conclude that, in this study, the pursuit of happiness is not self-defeating and does offer a modest benefit.

1 Extended discussions of the philosophical assumptions in prominent personality theories can be found in Humanist Joseph Rychlak's "Introduction to www.thehumanprospect.com 31

Personality and Psychotherapy: A theory-building approach."

2 Humanist and existential approaches to personality theory are not similarly closed systems and may allow for altruism. Even so, some strains of Humanism do offer the self as the ultimate goal of development ("self-actualization" via Maslow, for example, though it is not clear to me that the self can be actualized without meaningful sacrifice for others according to his hierarchy).

3 In general, continental philosophers have provided the foundation for non-egoist philosophical assumptions, including Buber and Kierkegaard. These ideas have been brought to psychology by Humanist theorists such as Rollo May and Victor Frankl.

4 Seligman, M.E.P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55, 5-14.

Cody Christopherson, Ph.D. (Clinical Psychology, University of Notre Dame, 2011) is an assistant professor of psychology at Southern Oregon University. His interest in the pursuit of happiness as a research topic began with his dissertation, "Can happiness be successfully pursued?," a randomized, controlled trial of the pursuit and assessment of happiness, the results of which are partially summarized in this article.