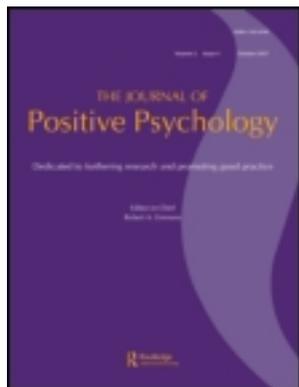


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Jaime L. Kurtz^a

^a Department of Psychology, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA 22807, USA

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Happiness and self-knowledge: A positive psychology and judgment and decision-making hybrid course

Jaime L. Kurtz*

Department of Psychology, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA 22807, USA

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This chapter describes an undergraduate positive psychology course that specifically focuses on the construct of happiness, or subjective well-being. Judgment and decision-making research is used to understand the processes involved in making decisions with the goal of promoting happiness. The course heavily focuses on methodology and recent empirical research. However, students are also given hands-on activities and are encouraged to consider the relationship between happiness, self-knowledge, and decision-making processes in their own lives.

Keywords: teaching; decision making; happiness; subjective well-being

As aptly noted by the economist March (1978), ‘All decisions are based on a prediction of future tastes and feelings’. Implicit in this is the notion that decision making is inherently affective and relies on questions like, ‘Will this make me happy?’ and ‘Will I like this better than the alternatives?’. Therefore, to be both applicable and comprehensive, a positive psychology course must at least give a nod to the question of how people make decisions. A course that goes beyond this, incorporating the literature on judgment and decision-making topics such as hedonic adaptation, affective forecasting, memory biases, and temporal construal, can lead to stimulating discussions about the nature of happiness, the feasibility of lasting happiness, and strategies one should adopt to live a happier life.

My upper-level undergraduate course, Happiness and Self-Knowledge, considers these questions by examining empirical research in social, cognitive, and positive psychology. At this time in their lives, students are on the verge of major life decisions: whether to go to graduate school or to enter the workforce; whether to seek novelty and excitement or comfort and familiarity; or whether to stay with a current romantic partner or open oneself up to future possibilities. Students may initially feel alone in these struggles and are surprised to see their existential questions recast in the form of empirical research on happiness and decision making. Below are two examples of the sort of accessible and applicable research discussed in this course.

The study of Schwartz (2004) on ‘the paradox of choice’ finds that, contrary to popular belief, having

more choice options is often detrimental to good decision making. For example, most people would prefer to shop in a grocery store that has 20 different types of cereal rather than just five. However, choosing one cereal from an array of 20 is more difficult, and people tend to be less happy with the choice they eventually make. This is especially true for maximizers, who tend to seek out ‘the best’ and therefore find it difficult to manage a large array of choice options. This topic is consistently appealing to students. Most of them can readily call to mind examples of times when they maximized, be it in the college search process, while shopping for a new gadget, or in their dating lives. Some staunchly adhere to the belief that maximizing is a superior decision-making strategy, despite the research findings we discuss. This leads to fun and stimulating in-class discussions and hits on the disconnect between self-knowledge and effective decision making.

A second example comes from the hedonic adaptation literature (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978; Diener, Lucas, & Napa Scollon, 2006), which states that, over time and through repeated exposure, people, places, and experiences that initially brought pleasure or pain gradually and naturally cease to do so. Once again, students can quickly get their minds around the concept of adaptation by reflecting on their arrival at college: the campus was so imposing, the array of extracurricular activities limitless, and their new freedom a source of constant excitement. However, those positive attributes quickly became a part of their everyday lives and ceased to

*Email: kurtzjl@jmu.edu

bring them the constant pleasure they initially experienced.

While applying material to their own lives and learning to make better decisions are certainly favorable outcomes of this course, my primary objectives are to expose students to a wide variety of empirical research, teach them to critically read, to consider issues of measurement, to gain a deeper understanding of good methodology, and to improve their written and oral communication. The subject matter makes these goals more feasible, because the broad concepts we discuss are highly relatable and students tend to be intrinsically motivated by a desire to understand the nature of happiness.

Specific course structure

Judging by the list of publicly available syllabi available on the University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center website, most positive psychology courses take a different approach than mine, examining the emerging field more broadly and including topics such as strengths and virtues, optimism, creativity, spirituality, and resilience. My course is different from most positive psychology courses in that, rather than being an overview of positive psychology, I focus solely on the causes and correlates of *happiness*. This is partially for pragmatic reasons. Currently, there is little research at the intersection of decision making and other variables of interest within positive psychology (cf. Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006). However, I also focus primarily on happiness because there is sufficient research on the construct to allow for a semester-long, in-depth analysis.

Happiness and Self-Knowledge is divided into three broad units. The first, Conceptual and Methodological Background, begins with a presentation on the field of positive psychology with a particular emphasis on the nature of happiness, or subjective well-being (SWB). We consider whether happiness is a desirable goal and read the influential work of Fredrickson (2001) on the broaden-and-build model of positive emotions. We also devote a class to issues of measurement. Students take a variety of global, retrospective measures of SWB measures on their own, and then we discuss and contrast them with 'online' or momentary measures such as experience sampling (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and the Day Reconstruction Method (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004). We also discuss the specific biases inherent in self-reported global measures of SWB (Schwarz & Strack, 1999). This naturally leads to discussions of the nature of happiness, and how operationally defining and measuring it a certain way might lead to very different conclusions. This section lays a necessary groundwork

for the rest of the course, and the readings discussed here come up again and again in future weeks.

The second unit of the course, Challenges to Happiness, delves into topics related to decision making. We read and discuss the classic study of lottery winners and paraplegics (Brickman et al., 1978) and consider recent revisions to the hedonic treadmill argument (e.g. people do not always adapt to major life events such as divorce or unemployment; Diener et al., 2006). We transition into a discussion of affective forecasting (Wilson & Gilbert, 2005) and the reasons why we are often inaccurate at predicting our future feelings – one being that we fail to accurately anticipate adaptation. In this unit, we also discuss anticipated, experienced, and recalled emotional experience, and why the three do not always align. For example, we tend to recall certain types of experiences as more positive than they really were in the moment, which can certainly lead to suboptimal decision making when considering whether to do something similar in the future (Loewenstein, 1996; Mitchell, Thompson, Peterson, & Cronk, 1997; Wirtz, Kruger, Napa Scollon, & Diener, 2003). This topic nicely draws on the previous discussion of online *versus* global, retrospective measures of SWB. Another relevant topic, one that is a perennial favorite of students, is choice and maximizing tendencies, as described above (Schwartz, 2004). This unit also leads to interesting discussions on how to spend money and structure one's life to make it more likely to provide happiness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008). In fact, we end this unit with a discussion of this nature, before segueing into the final unit, Enhancing Happiness.

By this point in the course, there may be a feeling of pessimism about the likelihood of making any lasting changes to one's happiness. After all, if we do adapt to our life circumstances, inaccurately recall past affective experiences, and are so poor at anticipating our future emotional states, how can we hope to make choices that promote our future well-being? I counter these questions by beginning this third unit with the finding that it actually *is* possible to make sustainable increases in happiness, despite hedonic adaptation, memory biases, and other imperfections in the decision-making process (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). In the classes to follow, we discuss what has been shown to work. We consider social support and interpersonal relationships as key predictors of happiness (Myers, 1999; Putnam, 2000). We discuss the importance of life experiences rather than material possessions (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003); and of mindsets such as flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003), and appreciation (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Having already discussed topics such as hedonic adaptation and memory biases, we can engage in engaging and informed discussions of why

things like interpersonal relationships and exciting life experiences may be resistant to adaptation and more likely to promote lasting happiness. With a background in research on self-knowledge, discussions of these topics inevitably gravitate to questions like, 'Do people *know* that quality relationships are so central to happiness?', 'In the evenings, why do we often choose to passively watch TV rather than pursue an engrossing hobby, join a community organization or socialize with friends?' and 'Why do we choose to spend our money on material possessions rather than on rich life experiences?'

The course wraps up broadly, with a discussion of application and implications for public policy. For instance, if we are less than perfect at making decisions to promote happiness, and given that psychologists and economists have a wealth of knowledge about what actually *does* make people happy, is there a responsibility associated with this? Should happiness be a concern of policymakers, and exactly what measures should be taken to promote enhanced well-being? Thaler and Sunstein (2008) have recently stated that this body of research should be used by policymakers to 'nudge' people to make decisions that maximize health and happiness, an argument that we discuss and debate. We also consider the argument of Diener and Seligman (2004) for directly measuring national indicators of well-being, rather than using *per capita* income as a proxy. This study can lead to broad discussions not only about the disconnect between happiness and income, and the idea of using happiness to inform public policy, but also about the responsibility of researchers and the relationship between academia and the world outside of it.

Journal assignments

In addition to more traditional assignments (e.g. a literature review and research proposal on an area of interest), before most classes, students are asked to complete a hands-on activity and corresponding journal assignment. These assignments are designed to help students apply the readings to their own lives. As mentioned above, early in the course, students are instructed to complete the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larson, & Griffin, 1985) and comment on their results. They are also asked to reflect on how each measure operationally defines happiness, report which scale they think is the 'best', and suggest other ways in which psychologists could better measure happiness. This activity allows students to think about methodological and measurement issues while also learning about frequently used measures of

happiness, which we continue to discuss throughout the course.

As another example, for the class on affective forecasting, students are given the following prompt: 'Describe a time when you made an inaccurate affective forecast. Why do you think you were so inaccurate? Did you learn from the experience and avoid making a similar inaccurate forecast in the future? If yes, why? If no, why not?'

Early in the course, students design and attempt to live a perfect day (although they are somewhat limited by their schedules and circumstances). They write a reflection on this day. For the final journal assignment, they reflect on this perfect day and describe what they would change, given what they have learned in the course. This activity is certainly enjoyable. After all, students are granted the opportunity to create an optimally enjoyable experience, for a class assignment. However, it also reinforces what they have learned throughout the semester, and highlights particular lapses in self-knowledge. It also raises interesting points, such as the fact that constantly assessing happiness levels is actually detrimental to happiness, and its often better to just relax and 'go with the flow' (Schooler, Ariely, & Loewenstein, 2003).

Students are not required to share specifics of these assignments in class, but they are welcome to do so, and these real-life examples often provide a useful starting point for class discussions. Sometimes, they even lead to empirical questions that are extensions of the research read for the day's class.

Adapting the course

I have taught this class at both a large research university and a small liberal arts college. In both settings, students were primarily junior and senior undergraduates (ranging between 12 and 20 students) and the class size was small, which is important for creating a sense of interpersonal comfort and giving everyone a chance to participate. The course is generally thought of as a 'capstone', one of the final classes students take in the psychology major.

Ideally, the course will be taught using empirical journal articles as the primary reading material. However, for these articles to be read critically and understood in a way that allows for fruitful discussion, students should be fairly advanced in psychology major, having had courses in statistics and research methods. This is not essential, however, and the class could be adapted for less-advanced psychology majors and non-majors. This approach could rely primarily on popular books (e.g. Gilbert, 2007; Schwartz, 2004; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008) and the occasional brief research report. Also, although I did not give exams, they could easily be constructed.

Course evaluations and conclusions

Although I did not collect objective indicators of student learning, end-of-semester course evaluations indicate that students both greatly enjoyed and learned a good deal in this course. Averaging across multiple semesters, at a large research university, mean ratings on the item 'This course taught me a lot' were 4.54 ($SD=0.55$), where 1=poor and 5=excellent. At a small liberal arts college, ratings were similar ($M=4.67$, $SD=0.55$). Representative, anonymous comments included, 'The course really challenged me to think carefully about social psychology concepts and applying them to the real world.' 'I learned a lot from this course that I can apply both to the study of psychology and to my everyday life. That, to me, is the mark of a great class.' 'I have never enjoyed a class more than this one, and this class has definitely helped me realize that I made a right decision in becoming a psychology major. I learned many things that I can apply to improve my life and other people's lives.' The class is extremely popular and has been enrolled to capacity every time it has been offered.

While it may lack the breadth of other positive psychology courses, this approach to studying happiness in the context of decision making has proven effective and interesting to students. The subject matter touches on or applies to various subfields of psychology, appealing to students who have a wide variety of interests within psychology (e.g. social, cognitive, clinical, and industrial-organizational). The course is also useful to students going on to research-oriented graduate programs, careers in counseling, or into business or industry. As an upper-level psychology course, it reinforces methodology and focuses on empirical research on a topic that is of particular interest to students. Finally, it exposes them to empirically validated techniques for enhancing decision making at a critical juncture in their lives.

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