FYS103 SHOWING UP FOR LIFE

OLDER AND YOUNGER ADULTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF HAPPINESS: A VIEW FROM THE LASELL INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNITY
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Introduction

- This research was designed to explore what factors people believe contribute to happiness. The different factors we examined were: family, friends, health, feeling happy, having fun, hobbies, work, school, money, service and religion.

- We compared the perceptions of happiness between older and younger adults in our intergenerational community. Lasell College is a small liberal arts school in Newton. Lasell Village is a retirement community on Lasell campus where residents take courses at the College and participate in other activities.
Background Theory and Research

- Martin Seligman, a pioneer in the field of Positive Psychology, suggests that there are three components to a good life:
  - A Pleasant Life – experiencing positive emotions in life activities
  - An Engaged Life – using your signature strengths in the pursuit of enjoyment
  - A Meaningful Life – using your signature strengths in the service of something larger than yourself

- Other researchers have found that the following factors contribute in positive ways to a good life: family relations, friends, religion, education, health, and positive emotions. Wealth, however, has a different relation. While it is important to have money to buy what you need to survive, excessive money is not associated with greater happiness.

- Barbara Frederickson has also been examining positivity. Her research on positive emotions has identified a positivity ratio which suggests the optimal balance of positive and negative daily emotional experiences for true happiness. The ratio is 3:1 with the three being positive emotional experiences and the one being negative experiences.

- Other researchers have found that positive emotions have a wide range of effects from enabling creativity and innovation to enhancing greater health and longevity.
Why study age differences?

- Comparing older and younger adults’ perceptions of happiness and their positivity ratios is of interest because:

  - It may tell us about how different generations look at their happiness, which may tell us something about the effects of culture, history and other generational factors. We may be able to see what was more important to other generations compared to the generation now and explore the reasons for these differences.

  - Examining differences between older and younger adults’ ideas of happiness may also tell us something about how aging or growing older influences how we experience and think about happiness. This may tell us something about how we might feel when we grow old – will we feel the same or feel differently about what is or was important in our lives?
Methods

Our Survey

To design the survey, our class discussed the common factors that people associate with happiness based on information from our class lectures, readings, and surveys we had taken and discussed as assignments related to aspects of Positive Psychology.

The Questions We Used

**Background Questions**
Respondents were asked to indicate their age, gender, education level and relationship status

**Happiness Questions**
Using a scale with 5 options, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much), respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which 11 factors contributed to “true happiness”. The factors were: fun, feeling happy, money, family, friends, work, school, hobbies, health, religion, and service.
Methods

Positivity Ratio

Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they experienced 20 different emotions in the past day on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much so). 50% of the emotions were positive and 50% were negative. For example, how often have you had feelings such as silliness, anger, amazement, disgust, guilt, love, sadness, fear, stress, etc. in the past day?

The positivity ratio was computed by adding up all of the scores for positive emotions and all of the scores for negative emotions. Then a ratio was made of the two scores:

\[
\frac{\text{Positive Emotions}}{\text{Negative Emotions}}
\]
**Respondents**

- As a class, each student was responsible for distributing three surveys to young adults. Students brought the surveys back to roommates and friends to complete.

- Older adult respondents were obtained from Lasell Village. A group of surveys were placed in a box in a lobby in Town Hall with a description of the project. Those who chose to participate answered the survey and left it in the box.

- All responses were anonymous.
Background Characteristics of Respondents

Younger Adults
- 27 responded
- Between 18 - 22 years of age
- 14 Men, 13 Women
- All in college/BA degree

Older Adults
- 13 responded
- Between 73 – 93 years of age
- 2 Men, 11 Women
- 75% graduate degrees (MA/PhD)
- 25% BA or professional degrees

Relationship status

Younger Adults: Single (70%): Dating (30%)
Older Adults: Single (20%), Married (50%), Widowed (20%), Divorced (10%)
## Results

### Positivity Ratios and Happiness Importance Ratings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Older Adults</th>
<th>Younger Adults</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positivity Ratio</td>
<td>3.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>4.69</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>4.31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>4.31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fun</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>4.15</td>
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<td>Hobbies</td>
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<td>Money</td>
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<tr>
<td>Service</td>
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<td>Positivity Ratio</td>
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</table>
Results

How does the positivity ratio of younger adults compare to that of older adults?

- Older adults positivity ratio was higher than younger adults’ ratio, indicating that they experience more positive than negative emotions in their daily lives.

- These data suggest that older adults usually have a more optimistic outlook on life and events, resulting in an increase in their positivity ratio. One explanation is that the more life experiences you have, the more you learn to appreciate and enjoy life.
Which factors do older and younger adults believe contribute the most to true happiness?

- Both older and younger adults believed that feeling happy, family, friends, fun, and health contributed the most to true happiness.

- However, older adults thought friends and health were the most important things that contributed to happiness, whereas younger adults thought that family and feeling happy were the most important.

- Older adults may have stronger ties to friends because they do not live near their families and because of the loss of their partners. Younger adults may still be living with their families and are more dependent on and connected to them. It may also be that younger adults notice their family more because they are away from them for the first time at college. Older adults may be more aware of friends because of their unique living situation.
Which factors do older and younger adults believe contribute the least to true happiness?

- Younger and older adults believed that religion and service had the least impact on happiness, although younger adults thought that service was less important than did older adults.

- The respondents may have thought of religion as a serious personal matter, or were thinking about negative associations with certain religions. Thus, maybe the results would be different if respondents were asked about spirituality or religion in another way.

- Both groups did not see hobbies, work, school or money as very important. However, older adults thought money was less important than younger adults, and younger adults thought school was less important.

- Younger adults may not have thought of school as important to happiness because it is a more common experience for their generation. Older adults may think money is less important because they have already had jobs and are more financially secure than younger adults.
General Observations

- Differences in the positivity of older adults is consistent with other research comparing how older and younger adults experience emotions and older adults’ generally more positive outlook on life.

- The age differences in the importance of family and friends to happiness were reminiscent of relationships we saw in other personal narratives. For instance, in the book *The Glass Castle*, Jeannette Walls was very family-oriented as a child and focused on how her family contributed to her happiness. In the movie *Cinderella Man*, James Braddock focused more on his health, his friends, and his happiness in order to succeed in boxing, which in turn brought money to the table in order to support his family and make them happy.

- However, it was interesting to see the differences in how Lasell College students versus Village residents viewed the importance of families versus friends. The results may reflect the special characteristics of this sample, and it would be interesting to see if the differences were the same in different groups from different communities. This may also tell us something about how where we live influences the perception of happiness in our lives.