

Subjective Happiness Optimizes Educational Outcomes: Evidence from Filipino High School Students

Jesus Alfonso D. Datu¹, Jana Patricia Valdez¹, Ian Kenneth Cabrera² and Maria Guadalupe Salanga³

¹ *The University of Hong Kong (Hong Kong)*

² *Centro Escolar University (Philippines)*

³ *De la Salle University (Philippines)*

Abstract. Subjective happiness has been found to be associated with key psychological outcomes. However, there is paucity of research that assessed how subjective happiness is related to a number of positive student outcomes in the educational setting. The objective of the study was to assess the associations of subjective happiness with academic engagement, flourishing, and school resilience among 606 Filipino high school students ($m_{age} = 13.87$; $n_{boys} = 300$, $n_{girls} = 305$, $n_{missing} = 1$) in the Philippine context. Results of path analysis demonstrated that subjective happiness positively predicted behavioral engagement ($\beta = .08$, $p < .01$), emotional engagement ($\beta = .08$, $p < .01$), flourishing ($\beta = .17$, $p < .01$), and school resilience ($\beta = .18$, $p < .01$) even after controlling for gender. The theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

Received 16 July 2016; Revised 3 October 2017; Accepted 5 October 2017

Keywords: academic engagement, flourishing, subjective happiness, school resilience.

“Success is not the key to happiness. Happiness is the key to success.” (Herman Cain)

The abovementioned statement points to the advantageous side of achieving happiness. Whereas some believe that success is a precursor of happiness, this quote suggests that happiness can precede optimal human development. Studies have shown that happiness is associated with positive outcomes like academic success (Nickerson, Diener, & Schwarz, 2011), good interpersonal relationships (Diener & Seligman, 2002), longevity (Diener & Chan, 2011), and work efficiency (Oishi, 2012).

Earlier theories of well-being argue that relatively complex and comprehensive models of happiness is necessary to accurately capture the extent to which individuals sense that they live a joyful and satisfying life. For instance, the subjective well-being (SWB) model (Diener, 1984) refers to positive evaluation of one’s life and greater extent of positive emotions. This framework points out that happiness has two distinct dimensions namely; cognitive (life satisfaction) and affective (positive and negative affect) well-being.

Another framework that offers notable insights in understanding the science of happiness is the psychological well-being model (PWB; Ryff & Singer, 1989).

PWB refers to the extent to which individuals are effectively functioning in their lives. PWB is composed of the following facets: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. PWB differs significantly from the SWB framework as the former conceptualizes well-being as optimal psychological functioning than the latter which posits that well-being is a momentary evaluation of life satisfaction and expression of emotional states (i.e., positive and negative emotions).

Although these models have significantly contributed to development in the theorizing and measurement of well-being, Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999) have pointed out that previous research did not place much emphasis on constructing an overall measure of happiness. To address this gap, the authors have conceptualized the subjective happiness construct which refers to the degree to which people believe that they are happy or unhappy with their lives. They have noted that this approach is more efficient in detecting global subjective happiness through examining how individuals’ lives resemble characteristics of a happy and an unhappy person. They have found that subjective happiness was positively correlated

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jesus Alfonso D. Datu. Division of Learning, Development, and Diversity – Faculty of Education. The University of Hong Kong (Hong Kong).
 E-mail: jaddatu@gmail.com

How to cite this article:

Datu, J. A. D., Valdez, J. P., Cabrera, I. K., & Salanga, M. G. (2017). Subjective happiness optimizes educational outcomes: Evidence from Filipino high school students. *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*, 20, e60. Doi:10.1017/sjp.2017.55

with desirable psychological outcomes like positive affect, self-esteem, and optimism.

Previous studies have shown that subjective happiness is positively associated with a wide range of optimal psychological outcomes such as job satisfaction (Iani, Lauriola, Layous, & Sirigatti, 2014), life satisfaction (Iani et al., 2014; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999; Swami et al., 2009), mental health (Nan et al., 2014), and optimal family functioning (Nan et al., 2014). Subjective happiness is also negatively related to anxiety (Iani et al., 2014), depression (Iani et al., 2014), and parental rejection (Moghnie & Kazarian, 2012).

However, past investigations have examined happiness as an outcome rather than as a catalyst of optimal psychological functioning. Diener (2012) has suggested that happiness may also operate as antecedent of personal and occupational success across contexts. To support this, previous studies have revealed that happy people are prone to get higher income (Diener, Nickerson, Lucas, & Sandvik, 2002), to have greater work productivity (Oishi, 2012), and to live a longer life (Diener & Chan, 2011). In the academic context, Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, and Linkins (2009) have recently focused on cultivating the “positive education” perspective which emphasizes the importance of nurturing positive psychological traits, states, and contexts to facilitate desirable learning outcomes.

A major framework that can potentially elucidate why subjective happiness may optimize a wide range of academic and positive psychological outcomes is the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001). The model postulates that well-being states are adaptive in that these positive psychological states broaden or widen the range of thought-action repertoires. The thought-action repertoires accrued from happiness enable people to build durable physiological, psychological, and social resources. Previous studies have demonstrated that positive emotions predict functional psychological resources such as academic engagement (e.g., Lewis, Huebner, Reschly, & Valois, 2009), adaptive coping (Lewis et al., 2009), meaning life (Datu, 2016), and academic motivation (Datu, 2017; Isen & Reeve, 2005).

Despite the seeming advantages of investigating the role of subjective happiness in the academic context, previous studies have not paid much attention on this research area. In particular, we do not know of any research which explored the associations of subjective happiness with relevant educational outcomes like engagement and resilience. Examining the link of subjective happiness to academic and psychological functioning is an important research direction to demonstrate how positive psychological states can promote different indicators of students’ success.

Therefore, the present study addressed previous research gaps through examining the association of

subjective happiness with optimal educational outcomes (i.e., behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, flourishing, and school resilience) among Filipino high school students. Behavioral engagement pertains to the degree to which students actively partake in relevant classroom activities while emotional engagement refers to the extent to which students espouse positive feelings when accomplishing academic endeavors (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009). School resilience refers to the extent to which students can effectively cope with academic and social problems in the academic context (King, Caleon, & Datu, 2015). Flourishing pertains to ‘social-psychological prosperity’ which is characterized by greater optimism, meaning in life, durable interpersonal relations, and perceived competence (Diener et al., 2010). Furthermore, we controlled for the potential effects of gender on the link between subjective happiness and the abovementioned outcomes as previous studies have demonstrated gender differences in academic engagement (Kenney-Benson, Pomerantz, Ryan, & Patrick, 2006; Ryan, Shim, Lampkins-Uthando, Kiefer, & Thompson, 2009), well-being (Meisenberg & Woodley, 2015), and resilience (Newsome, Vaske, Gehring, & Boisvert, 2016). In particular, these investigations have shown that female scored higher than male in such outcomes.

The study proposed the following hypotheses (H):

H1: Subjective happiness would positively predict behavioral and emotional engagement even after controlling for gender.

H2: Subjective happiness would positively predict flourishing and school resilience even after controlling for gender.

Method

Participants

A total sample of 606 Filipino high school students in a private high school participated in the study. There were 300 boys and 305 girls. Yet, one participant failed to report gender. The mean age of the participants was 13.87. High school students in the Philippines are normally required to undergo six years of secondary education. Passive consent forms and active consent forms were given to parents and participants of the study before administering the survey.

Measures

Flourishing

The Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010) is an 8-item questionnaire that measured the degree to which the participants experience holistic well-being. Sample items in the current scale involve “I am optimistic about my future” and “I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others”. All the items were rated on a

7-point likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 7 = *Strongly agree*). The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of the instrument in the current study was $\alpha = .85$.

School resilience

The School Resilience Scale (King et al., 2015) is a 22-item instrument that gauged the extent to which students effectively adjust with various academic challenges. Sample items in the scale include "I am good at dealing with setbacks at school" and "I can manage stress in school work effectively". The items were marked on a 7-point likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 7 = *Strongly agree*). The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of the scale in the present research was $\alpha = .90$.

Student's engagement

The Student's Engagement Scale (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009) is a 20-item questionnaire that measured behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, behavioral disaffection, and emotional disaffection. In the present research, only the behavioral engagement and emotional engagement were gauged. The items are gauged on a 4-point likert scale (1 = *Not at all true*; 4 = *Very true*). The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients were; behavioral engagement = .71; emotional engagement = .70.

Data analysis

First, descriptive statistics (e.g., mean, standard deviation, and Cronbach's α reliability coefficients) of the variables in the current research were calculated. Second, Pearson r -correlational analysis was carried out to assess the associations of subjective happiness with the outcomes of interest in the study. Third, path analysis was performed to assess the degree to which subjective happiness may predict behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, flourishing, and school resilience. Yet we controlled for the potential effects of gender on academic engagement and school resilience. In assessing the validity of the hypothesized model, we adopted the criteria in detecting a model with excellent or acceptable fit based on the guidelines of Marsh et al. (2010) who proposed the following cut-off values: a) non-significant χ^2 test statistics; b) goodness of fit (GFI), comparative fit index (CFI), incremental fit index (IFI), and normed fit index (NFI) should be greater than .95; and c) root mean square error of approximation should be less than .95.

Results

The results of descriptive statistics and correlational analyses were presented in Table 1. Subjective happiness

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlational coefficients among the variables

Variable	M	SD	r				
			1	2	3	4	5
1. Subjective happiness	4.48	.78	–	.12*	.13*	.15*	.34*
2. Behavioral engagement	3.15	.52		–	.47*	.40*	.31*
3. Emotional engagement	3.17	.54			–	.43*	.34*
4. Flourishing	5.49	.89				–	.57*
5. School resilience	4.86	.80					–

Note: * $p < .01$.

was positively correlated with behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, flourishing, and school resilience. After satisfying the assumptions in performing structural equation modeling (e.g., normality and absence of multivariate outlier), we tested a path model wherein subjective happiness was entered as the antecedent of academic engagement, school resilience, and flourishing.

The hypothesized path model significantly fit the present Filipino high school sample: $\chi^2 = 11.26$, $df = 3$, $p = .004$, $\chi^2/df = 3.75$, CFI = .99, GFI = .99, IFI = .99, NFI = .98, and RMSEA = .07 (See Figure 1). Consistent with H1, path analysis showed that subjective happiness positively predicted behavioral ($\beta = .08$, $p < .01$) and emotional engagement ($\beta = .08$, $p < .01$) even after controlling for gender. Subjective happiness positively predicted flourishing ($\beta = .17$, $p < .01$) and school resilience ($\beta = .18$, $p < .01$) which supported H2. These results proposed that subjective happiness may be associated with high levels academic engagement, flourishing, and school resilience.

Discussion

The principal aim of the current research was to assess the associations of subjective happiness with positive

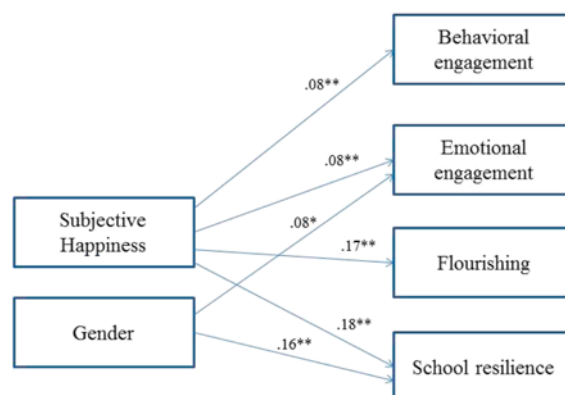


Figure 1. Final path model on the influence of subjective happiness on positive student outcomes

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

student outcomes. Results indicated that subjective happiness was associated with high levels of engagement, flourishing, and resilience among Filipino high school students.

H1 was confirmed as the study showed that subjective happiness was associated with greater behavioral and emotional engagement. These results suggest that the extent to which students perceive that they are living a happy life may be associated with more active participation (academic engagement) and endorsement of positive emotions (e.g., excitement and pride) when participating in classroom activities. These findings corroborated the extant literature on the link of well-being to academic and psychological outcomes such as academic engagement (Lewis et al., 2009), academic motivation (Datu, 2017; Isen & Reeve, 2005), adaptive coping (Lewis et al., 2009), general self-esteem (Datu, 2013), meaning in life (Datu, 2016), and physical health (Diener & Chan, 2011). Our study contributed to the well-being literature through showing that the subjective happiness construct may be associated with engagement in the educational context.

Subjective happiness also predicted flourishing, and school resilience which supported H2. These results implied that students who are subjectively happy tend to experience high levels of social-psychological prosperity, and effective coping with academic challenges. Findings provided support on the existing literature which demonstrated a positive linkage between happiness and positive psychological outcomes like flourishing (Diener et al., 2010).

The results on the positive associations of subjective happiness with engagement and other student outcomes were in line with the important tenets of the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001). Indeed, well-being states are beneficial as these emotional responses provide greater opportunities to enhance thought-action repertoires which build functional physical, psychological, and social resources. Existing empirical investigations have emphasized the advantageous effects of well-being indices like positive affect and life satisfaction in the academic context (e.g., Datu, 2013, 2016, 2017; Isen & Reeve, 2015; Lewis et al., 2009).

Taken together, our study indicates that students who have greater subjective happiness are likely to stay happy and succeed in academic related endeavors as they might show higher tendencies to participate in classroom tasks, to feel satisfied when joining academic tasks, to experience greater psychological well-being, and to efficiently deal with pertinent academic struggles. Our investigation was in line with the literature on positive education (Seligman et al., 2009) which places importance on the role of well-being indices in facilitating important student outcomes in the academic context.

The study has a number of limitations. First, since our study was cross-sectional in nature, caution should be observed when drawing causal inferences between subjective happiness and positive student outcomes. Future researches are recommended to carry out experimental approaches, longitudinal research designs, and experience sampling approaches to offer stronger evidence on the link between subjective happiness and academic functioning. Second, as the study focused on examining the direct effects of subjective happiness to different student outcomes, limited insights could be drawn on the specific theoretical mechanisms that explain why subjective happiness may enhance engagement, flourishing, and resilience. Future research can address this limitation through exploring potential mediating variables on the link between subjective happiness and positive student outcomes. Third, the research selected Filipino high school samples. Future studies are encouraged to recruit student samples from other collectivist settings (e.g., Japan, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Hong Kong) to strengthen the generalizability of our results in other cultural contexts. Fourth, self-report rating scales were utilized in the present study which are prone to common method variance. That said, future studies are recommended to employ other forms of data collection strategies to assess subjective happiness and relevant student outcomes (e.g., peer-report and teacher-report ratings).

Yet, the study offers key theoretical and practical implications. Concerning theory, our findings demonstrated that subjective happiness may serve as an important predictor of adaptive educational outcomes. To our knowledge, this was the first investigation which explored the theoretical linkage among subjective happiness and academic engagement, school resilience, and flourishing. Hence, the results of the study may provide valuable evidence regarding the nomological network of the subjective happiness construct in the academic contexts. In terms of practice, counselors, school psychologists, and other school-based mental health professionals are recommended to assess students' overall evaluations of happiness which may offer potential insights on what psychological interventions can be developed to cultivate academic success and psychological flourishing among secondary school students. To provide greater prospects for enhancing students' engagement and resilience, academic institutions are also encouraged to invest on school-wide psychological programs that aim to boost students' subjective happiness.

References

- Datu J. A. D. (2013). Can happiness boost self-worth?: Exploring the impact of subjective well-being on the global self-esteem. *Journal of Asia Pacific Counseling*, 3, 131–138. <https://doi.org/10.18401/2013.3.2.2>

- Datu J. A. D.** (2016). The synergistic interplay between positive emotions and maximization enhances meaning in life: A study in a collectivist context. *Current Psychology*, 35, 459–466. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-015-9314-1>
- Datu J. A. D.** (2017). Peace of mind, academic motivation, and academic achievement in Filipino high school students. *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*, 20, E22. <https://doi.org/10.1017/sjp.2017.19>
- Diener E.** (1984). Subjective well-being. *Psychological Bulletin*, 95, 542–575. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.95.3.542>
- Diener E.** (2012). New findings and future directions for subjective well-being research. *American Psychologist*, 67, 590–597. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029541>
- Diener E., & Chan M. Y.** (2011). Happy people live longer: Subjective well-being contributes to health and longevity. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, 3, 1–43. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-0854.2010.01045.x>
- Diener E., & Seligman M. E. P.** (2002). Very happy people. *Psychological Science*, 13, 81–84. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9280.00415>
- Diener E., Nickerson C., Lucas R. E., & Sandvik E.** (2002). Dispositional affect and job outcomes. *Social Indicators Research*, 59, 229–259. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1019672513984>
- Diener E., Wirtz D., Tov W., Kim-Prieto C., Choi D. W., Oishi S., & Biswas-Diener R.** (2010). New well-being measures: Short scales to assess flourishing and positive and negative feelings. *Social Indicators Research*, 97, 143–156. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-009-9493-y>
- Fredrickson B. L.** (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist*, 56, 218–226. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.3.218>
- Iani L., Lauriola M., Layous K., & Sirigatti S.** (2014). Happiness in Italy: Translation, factorial structure and norming of the subjective happiness scale in a large community sample. *Social Indicators Research*, 118, 953–967. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-013-0468-7>
- Isen A. M., & Reeve J. M.** (2005). The influence of positive affect on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation: Facilitating enjoyment of play, responsible work behavior, and self-control. *Motivation and Emotion*, 29, 295–323. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-006-9019-8>
- Kenney-Benson G. A., Pomerantz E. M., Ryan A. M., & Patrick H.** (2006). Sex differences in math performance: The role of children's approach to schoolwork. *Developmental Psychology*, 42, 11–26. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.42.1.11>
- King R. B., Caleon I. S., & Datu J. A. D.** (2015, August). Measuring school resilience: A cross-cultural study in Singapore and the Philippines. *Paper presented at the 11th Biennial Conference of the Asian Association of Social Psychology*. Cebu, Philippines.
- Lewis A. D., Huebner E. S., Reschly A. L., & Valois R. F.** (2009). The incremental validity of positive emotions in predicting school functioning. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 27, 397–408. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0734282908330571>
- Lyubomirsky S., & Lepper H. S.** (1999). A measure of subjective happiness: Preliminary reliability and construct validation. *Social Indicators Research*, 46, 137–155.
- Marsh H. W., Lüdtke O., Muthén B., Asparouhov T., Morin A. J. S., Trautwein U., & Nagengast B.** (2010). A new look at the big five factor structure through exploratory structural equation modeling. *Psychological Assessment*, 22, 471–491. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019227>
- Meisenberg G., & Woodley M. A.** (2015). Gender differences in subjective well-being and their relationship with gender equality. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 16, 1539–1555. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-014-9577-5>
- Moghnie L., & Kazarian S. S.** (2012). Subjective happiness of Lebanese college youth in Lebanon: Factorial structure and invariance of the Arabic subjective happiness scale. *Social Indicators Research*, 109, 203–210. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-011-9895-5>
- Nan H., Ni M. Y., Lee P. H., Tam W. W. S., Lam T. H., Leung G. M., & McDowell I.** (2014). Psychometric evaluation of the Chinese Version of the Subjective Happiness Scale: Evidence from the Hong Kong FAMILY cohort. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 21, 646–652. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12529-014-9389-3>
- Newsome J., Vaske J. C., Gehring K. S., & Boisvert D. L.** (2016). Sex differences in sources of resilience and vulnerability for delinquency. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 45, 730–745. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-015-0381-2>
- Nickerson C., Diener E., & Schwarz N.** (2011). Positive affect and college success. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 12, 717–746. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-010-9224-8>
- Oishi S.** (2012). *The psychological wealth of nations: Do happy people make a happy society?* Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Ryan A. M., Shim S., Lampkins-Uthando S. A., Kiefer S. M., & Thompson G. N.** (2009). Do gender differences in help avoidance vary by ethnicity? An examination of African American and European American students during early adolescence. *Developmental Psychology*, 45, 1152–1163. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0013916>
- Ryff C. D., & Singer B. H.** (1998). The contours of positive human health. *Psychological Inquiry*, 9, 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli0901_1
- Seligman M. E. P., Ernst R. M., Gillham J., Reivich K., & Linkins M.** (2009). Positive education: Positive psychology and classroom interventions. *Oxford Review of Education*, 35, 293–311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980902934563>
- Skinner E. A., Kindermann T. A., & Furrer C. J.** (2009). A motivational perspective on engagement and disaffection: Conceptualization and assessment of children's behavioral and emotional participation in academic activities in the classroom. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 69, 493–525. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013164408323233>
- Swami V., Stieger S., Voracek M., Dressler S. G., Eisma L., & Furnham A.** (2009). Psychometric evaluation of the Tagalog and German subjective happiness scale and a cross-cultural comparison. *Social Indicators Research*, 93, 393–406. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-008-9331-7>