
An examination of happiness between race, gender and school classification: an echo boomer analysis

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Abstract: Subjective well-being is often evaluated by happiness within specific domains such as marriage, family life, career, health, material goods and finance. Results of domain based investigations of may not translate to the younger echo boomer generation due to a lack of relevancy to their lifestyles. The purpose of this study was to examine subjective well-being across race, gender, and school classification among college students without domain classification. Volunteer participants received surveys that contained demographic questions and items assessing subjective happiness. Surveys were completed by 1,724 students and analysed statistically. Results showed significant differences in mean subjective happiness scores between race and school classification. No significant differences were found in mean subjective happiness scores between men and women. Findings suggest that the echo boomer generation differs from previous generations in subjective well-being across demographics.

Keywords: happiness; subjective well-being; wellness; life satisfaction; gender; race; demographics; college students; school classification; young adults; millennials; nexters; echo boomer.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Carmichael, K.E. and Czech, D.R. (2019) 'An examination of happiness between race, gender and school classification: an echo boomer analysis', *Int. J. Happiness and Development*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp.25–32.

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This paper is a revised and expanded version of a paper entitled 'An examination of happiness between race, gender, and school classification: an echo boomer analysis' presented at Georgia Southern Honors Research Symposium, Statesboro, Georgia, 22 April 2016.

1 Introduction

Happiness experienced by ordinary people is scientifically termed as subjective well-being (SWB) and refers to how people experience the quality of their lives according to emotional reactions and cognitive judgments (Diener, 1984). Components of SWB include life satisfaction, pleasant (positive) and unpleasant (negative) affect, as well as related components such as self-esteem (Diener et al., 2002). The study of SWB has grown and changed throughout the years. Studies began as demographic and evolved to include more wide-ranging variables and methods (Diener, 2013). Much of today's research chooses to focus on subjective well-being within specific domains, such as career, finance, material goods, family, marriage, health and others. Within these domains, differences in subjective happiness appear to exist across race, gender and age.

Differences in subjective well-being between races are largely documented with the use of domains and are demonstrated across many age groups and populations. In the domains of city of residence, hobbies, family, friends and job satisfaction, blacks reported significantly less satisfaction than whites (Beatty and Tuch, 1997). Of those with spinal cord injuries, Caucasians reported being more satisfied in domains of employment, job satisfaction and finances than minorities (Krause, 1998). Caucasian college students reported greater satisfaction with school and self than non-white minority students (Zullig et al., 2009). These results suggest that Caucasians in the US have higher levels of subjective happiness than African Americans. When looking at life satisfaction through aspirations and attainments, African Americans tend to have less aspirations and less satisfaction in marital life. In the domain of consumer goods, blacks have a greater aspiration, yet greater shortfall than whites, leading to dissatisfaction and a lower subjective well-being than Caucasians overall (Plagnol and Easterlin, 2008). Blanchflower and Oswald (2004) found that while blacks are currently less happy than whites, a significant upward time trend is shown in reported happiness, decreasing the gap between whites and blacks in the US.

Many studies report that men and women do not differ substantially in average subjective well-being (i.e., Diener and Ryan, 2009; Diener et al., 2002). However, while men and women average similar SWB scores, women experience more variance in the intensity of emotional experiences and are more likely to report being at extreme ends of happiness than men (Diener et al., 1999). Contrarily, some studies have found women to report lower life satisfaction than men (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2002; Stevenson and Wolfers, 2009). Additional evidence demonstrates a crossover in satisfaction over time where women report higher levels of satisfaction at earlier life stages than men and men report greater happiness than women in later years. These varying results can be explained by differences in aspirations and attainment of the genders and is conceptualised by the aspiration-adjustment model (Inglehart, 2002). Women report higher levels of aspiration in domains of material goods and family life goals. These aspirations are generally fulfilled earlier in life, as opposed to men's aspirations of

finance and career success (Plagnol and Easterlin, 2008). With shifting societal roles and opportunities for women, we find a decrease in happiness in women both absolutely and relative to men. These results may be explained with the increase of burden on women as they now must juggle responsibilities at work as well as the 'second shift' of duties at home (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2009).

While the aforementioned studies contribute to understanding the relationship between happiness and certain demographics, the use of these domains often excludes the echo boomer generation due to a lack of relevancy. The 'echo boomer' term is used to describe the generation born between 1980 and the late 1990s, with the time period varying slightly across definitions (Wolburg and Pokrywcznski, 2001). Other names given to this generation include: millennials, nexters and generation Y. The latter half of the generation are still in their educational years and do not have established careers, finances, spouses and other factors relevant to the common domains being studied. Additionally, millennials have expressed different values and characteristics than previous generations which may contribute to differences in happiness (Debard, 2004; Wolburg and Pokrywcznski, 2001).

The purpose of this study is to examine subjective well-being across race, gender and school classification among college students without use of specific domains. Results of this study were expected to support previous research in that Caucasians would report higher levels of subjective well-being than African Americans. At this point in the students' lives, women were less likely to have the burden of household responsibilities and men were further from attaining traditional goals of success in career and finances. Therefore, women were predicted to be happier than men at the college level. School classification was expected to vary in subjective happiness scores, though in no particular direction.

2 Method

2.1 Participants and procedures

College students were recruited from physical activity courses at a midsize south eastern US university. Course instructors verbally encouraged students with a bonus grade incentive for volunteering as participants for the study. Surveys were uploaded to the course's online learning management system and were completed by 1,724 students enrolled with no attempt made to contact non-responders. The survey contained demographic questions along with the subjective happiness scale (SHS) (Lyubomirsky and Lepper, 1999). The demographic variables of interest were race (white, African American, or other), Gender and school classification (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior). All procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

2.2 Measures

SHS adopted from Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999) was used in measuring subjective well-being for this study. The scale consists of four questions on a seven-point Likert scale. The first question asks how the individual generally characterises themselves on a scale ranging from 'not a very happy person' to 'a very happy person'. The second asks if compared to peers, the individual considers themselves as 'less happy' or 'more happy'

within the seven-point range. The last two items give brief descriptions of happy and unhappy people and asks the participant to what extent the characterisation describes them from ‘not at all’ to ‘a great deal’. Scores were computed by summing the scores from each question, with the fourth question scored in reverse code. The SHS has shown high internal consistency across 14 separate samples good to excellent reliability composed of nearly three thousand individuals of various ages, occupations and cultures. Furthermore, the scale demonstrates and construct validation studies confirmed the use of this scale in measuring subjective happiness (Lyubomirsky and Lepper, 1999). In addition to demonstrating good psychometric properties, the SHS was specifically chosen for its assessment of SWB without use of domains and for being less time-intensive.

2.3 Statistical analysis

All data was imported and analysed using SPSS statistical software version 24 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL). Descriptive statistics were performed on participants’ demographic data. Multiple statistical tests were conducted for analysing major differences in subjective happiness across the demographics surveyed, with an alpha level set to 0.05 for all tests. An independent sample T-tests was used in analysing gender and multiple one-way ANOVAs were conducted to compare subjective happiness scores between race and school classification.

3 Results

Descriptive statistics revealed that the sample consisted of 872 (51%) males and 852 (49%) females. Regarding race, 1,178 (68%) responders identified as Caucasian, 374 (22%) as African American and 172 (10%) identified as ‘other’. 273 students belonged in the freshman class, 623 were sophomores, 408 were juniors and 420 were seniors.

All subjects reported a mean subjective happiness score of 17.19 with a standard deviation of 3.799. Table 1 presents the means (\pm SD) for males and females on subjective happiness scores. The independent samples T-test revealed similar mean happiness scores for both genders with no significant differences. Table 2 presents the means (\pm SD) for Caucasians, African Americans and ‘other’ on subjective happiness scores. An analysis of variance showed those identifying as ‘other’ to be significantly different from Caucasian and African Americans in subjective happiness scores, $F(2, 1,721) = 17.062$, $p = .000$. Table 3 presents the subjective happiness scores means (\pm SD) for school classification. The one-way ANOVA found the mean subjective happiness score of the freshman class to be significantly different from sophomores, juniors and seniors, $F(3, 1,720) = 5.843$, $p = .001$.

Table 1 Subjective happiness scores for gender

| <i>Gender</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Standard deviation</i> |
|---------------|----------|-------------|---------------------------|
| Male | 872 | 17.31 | 4.192 |
| Female | 852 | 17.06 | 3.347 |

Table 2 Subjective happiness scores for race

| <i>Race</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Standard deviation</i> |
|------------------|----------|-------------|---------------------------|
| Caucasian | 1,178 | 17.43 | 3.317 |
| African American | 374 | 17.11 | 4.525 |
| Other | 172 | 15.65* | 4.711 |

Note: *The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 3 Subjective happiness scores for school classification

| <i>School classification</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Standard deviation</i> |
|------------------------------|----------|-------------|---------------------------|
| Freshman | 273 | 16.41* | 4.653 |
| Sophomore | 623 | 17.25 | 3.842 |
| Junior | 408 | 17.64 | 3.406 |
| Senior | 420 | 17.15 | 3.393 |

Note: *The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

4 Discussion

The results of this study do not support the hypotheses that differences in subjective happiness would exist between males and females and between Caucasians and African Americans. Females and males had similar sample sizes and scored very similarly on the SHS. These results do not concur with previous studies that showed women reporting greater levels of happiness than males in early years (Plagnol and Easterlin, 2008; Stevenson and Wolfers, 2009). African Americans and Caucasians also did not report any significant differences between their subjective happiness scores. This finding may support the reported decreasing gap in SWB between whites and blacks in the USA (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2004). However, the ‘other’ category reported a lower mean subjective happiness score than both Caucasians and African Americans. The freshman class reported a significantly lower mean subjective happiness score than the other school classes and supports the hypothesis that there would be significant differences in this category.

Because of the descriptive, cross-sectional research design, this study did not attempt to seek answers of causation. However, there are many possible explanations for the outcome of this study that can be explored. One potential interpretation of the results would be that different values of the echo boomer generation (compared to previous generations) would impact differences in happiness across demographics. One of the primary values of the millennial generation is achievement. During the generational lifetime of millennials, women have made massive strides in achieving greater levels of education and career. As children, the echo boomers have witnessed their mothers and other women in their lives succeed and wish to do the same. Of first-year female students surveyed, 81.8% expected to receive a bachelor’s degree in 2002, compared to 68.9% in 1998 (Debard, 2004). Feeling more capable and educated may result in an increase of happiness in women compared to previous generations. In contrast, the freshman class may feel further from fulfilling their value of achievement.

The transition from high school to college can be overwhelming and may compromise the well-being of many freshman students (Beck et al., 2003). Stress and depression are commonly reported as the most common health problems disrupting academic success (Lucas and Berkel, 2005; Wintre and Yaffee, 2000). Feeling disconnected from their value of achievement may contribute to freshman reporting lower subjective happiness scores than other school classes. There are additional values aside from achievement that are strongly credited by this generation, such as confidence and teamwork, that are likely to shape their aspirations and consequently SWB, in a different way than previous generations.

Another potential explanation for the results is that demographic inequality is minimised within the college campus. The millennial generation is vastly more diverse than previous generations. On college campuses today, about 56% of the total students enrolled are women. Asian American students in particular are much more prevalent, alongside the decreasing percentage of white students to total by over 10% (Debard, 2004). The university used in this study also has many multicultural organisations that could provide support for minority racial or ethnic groups. While the US Census Bureau (2016) reports the national percent of African Americans is 13.2%, the university reports that over 26% of the enrolled students are African Americans. However, the university also reports a smaller percentage of races other than Caucasian and African American (12% to 11.4%) (Georgia Southern University, 2016) compared to the national 25% (US Census Bureau, 2016). It is possible that through increasing population and group support, African American students and women are less likely to report lower levels of happiness, while those belonging to the 'other' race category are still more isolated.

4.1 Limitations

This study is limited by the sample and correlation method. Sampling from physical education courses may not be an accurate representation of the entire campus. Nor is the campus necessarily an accurate representation of the nation's millennials. There is always the possibility that participants did not provide truthful and carefully selected answers. Some students may have provided wrong information or answered questions in a socially expected manner. The voluntary nature of this study may have attracted those who have stronger opinions regarding the topic, though a grade incentive was provided in order to minimise this problem. Despite these limitations, the number of respondents and the reported validity and reliability of the scale, support the accuracy of the results within the sample.

5 Conclusions

Our findings suggest that generational differences exist in subjective well-being across race, gender and school classification. Specifically, women and African Americans appear to be less likely to report lower levels of subjective happiness than past generations. Furthermore, the present study corroborates previous findings suggesting that the freshman class is most at risk for reporting lower levels of SWB. Future research should continue to investigate subjective happiness within the echo boomer generation. It may be beneficial to compare aspirations of the current generation with previous ones while measuring levels of SWB. Causal research requires more longitudinal studies to

determine which correlates are results of SWB. Furthermore, a different pooling of participants may be beneficial in addressing the USA as a whole, more accurately. Because people are shown to hold great value in happiness and life satisfaction, understanding SWB is beneficial in improving the quality of society and longevity of life.

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