For millions of people, finding the right partner, achieving professional success, and acquiring wealth are all means to a single end: being happy.

In this special section, THE FUTURIST offers two articles that attempt to shed light on happiness and on what we can do to become more happy in the future.

In "The Science of Happiness," psychologists David Myers and Ed Diener discuss scientific research data that reveal who is happy, who is not, and why. The authors identify the traits of happy people and the impact of relationships, debunking myths along the way.

In the second article, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, widely known for his "flow" theory of happiness, concentrates on the links between creativity and happiness. He analyzes how achieving a creative "flow" experience in work and play can enhance one's satisfaction with life.

The Science of Happiness

By David G. Myers and Ed Diener

Does happiness favor those of a particular age, sex, or income level? Does happiness come with satisfying close relationships? With religious faith? What attitudes, activities, and priorities engender a sense of well-being?

Such questions not only went unanswered during psychology's first century, they went largely unasked. Psychology has focused more on negative emotions than on positive ones. From 1967 through 1995, Psychological Abstracts included 5,119 abstracts mentioning anger, 38,459 mentioning anxiety, and 48,366 mentioning depression—but only 1,710 mentioning happiness, 2,357 mentioning life satisfaction, and 402 mentioning joy. This 21 to 1 ratio of negative to positive emotions studied is changing, and researchers are offering fresh insights on an old puzzle: Who is happy and why?
Although the scientific pursuit of happiness has recently mushroomed, speculations about happiness are ages-old. Ancient philosophers believed that happiness accompanied a life of intelligent reflection. “There is no fool who is happy, and no wise man who is not,” said the Roman philosopher Cicero. In the centuries since, some sages have suggested that happiness comes from living a virtuous life, and others, from indulging pleasures; some that it comes from knowing the truth, and others, from preserving illusions; some, that it comes from restraint, and others, from purging oneself of pent-up rage and misery. The list goes on, but the implication is clear: To discover the truth about happiness, we must ask how these competing ideas relate to reality. In short, we must study happiness scientifically.

Assessing Happiness

To probe people’s “subjective well-being,” researchers have asked them to report their feelings of happiness or unhappiness along with their thoughts about how satisfying their lives are. Like tangerines and oranges, happiness and life satisfaction are subtly different, yet they have much in common. Sometimes researchers probe with simple questions, such as, “Taking all things together, how would you say things are these days? Would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?” and, “How satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? Are you very satisfied? Satisfied? Not very satisfied? Not at all satisfied?”

Other researchers use tests that measure the relative frequencies of people’s positive, happy feelings and their negative, depressed feelings. Surprisingly, the amount of good feeling a person experiences over time does not predict how much bad feeling the person experiences. Some people experience intense good moods but also intense bad moods. High highs alternate with low lows. Others are characteristically happy, or melancholy, or unemotional.

Although swayed by temporary moods, people’s self-reported well-being on such measures is moderately consistent over years of retesting. The stability suggests the influence of enduring traits and circumstances, and the change indicates the influence of recent life events.

Do the measures have validity as well as reliability? Or are “happy” people merely “in denial” of their actual misery? Those who report themselves happy and satisfied seem happy to their close friends, family members, and a psychologist-interviewer. Their daily mood ratings reveal more positive emotions. They smile more. Their ratings are responsive to good and bad events and to therapy. Self-reported happiness also predicts other indicators of well-being. Compared with depressed people, happy people are less self-focused, less hostile and abusive, and less vulnerable to disease. They are also more loving, forgiving, trusting, energetic, decisive, creative, sociable, and helpful.

One person who scored high on a happiness scale explained, “Worry and guilt have little part in my life. I enjoy being with friends and experiencing new things. My average mood is a feeling of inner contentment. I don’t have great mood swings. I have pleasant feelings about my future.” Another, who scored low, explained, “In 1985 I wrote a will and planned my suicide, but a motorcycle accident scared me out of it. My average mood is pretty poor. I’m often irritable and usually don’t care what other people feel or think. It’s a chore to be pleasant.”

Dozens of researchers across the world have now asked more than a million people—a representative sample of the human race—to reflect on their happiness and life satisfaction. By taking their self-reports seriously, we can offer tentative answers to the age-old questions, How happy are most people? And who are the happiest?

“No matter how dull, or how mean, or how wise a man is, he feels that happiness is his indiscutable right.”

—Helen Keller
Are Most People Unhappy?

There is a long tradition of viewing life as tragedy. It extends from Sophocles' writing (in Oedipus at Colonus) that "Not to be born is, past all prizing, best" to Woody Allen's discerning (in Annie Hall) two kinds of lives—the horrible and the merely miserable. Albert Camus, Tennessee Williams, Allen Drury, and other playwrights and novelists echo their unhappy picture of humanity.

So have many social observers. "Our pains greatly exceed our pleasures," it seemed to Rousseau, "so that, all things considered, human life is not at all a valuable gift." We are "not born for happiness," agreed Inside Job (Tabor, 1989), Father John Powell agrees: "One-third of all Americans wake up depressed every day. Professionals estimate that only 10% to 15% of Americans think of themselves as truly happy."

But a much rosier picture emerges from careful surveys of ordinary people, using random-sample methods. In national surveys, three in 10 Americans say they are "very happy." Only one in 10 says "not too happy." The remainder—the majority—describe themselves as "pretty happy."

Asked about their "satisfaction with life," most people are similarly upbeat: In western Europe and economic groups, and all races studied, and hold for all strategies for assessing subjective well-being, including those that sample people's experience by "beeping" them at random times. (The few exceptions include hospitalized alcoholics, newly incarcerated inmates, new therapy clients, South African blacks during apartheid, and students living under conditions of economic and political suppression.) This positivity contradicts many people's negative perceptions: Among psychology students, for example, half erroneously believe the elderly are "mostly unhappy"; a third wrongly guess that African-Americans are "mostly unhappy," and nine in 10 guess that unemployed men are.

But aren't depression rates on the rise? They are. Yet clinical researcher Ian Gotlib estimates that less than 2% of the world's population suffers clinically recognizable depression each year. In a recent multinational census of psychiatric disorders, the lifetime rate of depression was only 9% in the most vulnerable group.

Who Is Happy?

Social scientists have exploded some myths about who's happy and who's not by identifying predictors of happiness and life satisfaction.

Many people believe there are unhappy times of life—typically the stress-filled teen years, the "mid-life crisis" years, or the declining years of old age. But interviews with people of all ages reveal that no time of life is notably happier or unhappier. The emotional terrain does change with age: Satisfaction with social relations and health becomes more important in later life. And teens, unlike adults, typically rebound from either gloom or elation within an hour's time. Yet knowing someone's age gives no clue to the person's enduring sense of well-being. Moreover, rates of depression, suicide, and divorce show no increase during the mythical mid-life crisis years.

Does happiness have a favorite sex? Are men happier because of their greater incomes and social
power? Are women happier because of their reputedly greater capacity for intimacy and social connection? Like age, gender gives no clue to subjective well-being. There are gender gaps in misery: When troubled, men more often become alcoholic, while women more often ruminate and get depressed or anxious. Yet men and women are equally likely to declare themselves “very happy” and “satisfied” with life. This conclusion is grounded in scores of studies around the world.

Wealth and Well-Being

Still in pursuit of an elusive happiness, we might wonder whether wealth predicts well-being. Although few agree that money can literally buy happiness, many agree that a little more money would make them a little happier. Moreover, the American dream since 1970 seems increasingly to have become life, liberty, and the purchase of happiness. In 1995, 74% of America’s entering collegians declared that an “essential” or “very important” life goal was “being very well off financially”—nearly double the 39% who said the same in 1970. This topped a list of 19 rated life objectives, exceeding even “raising a family” and “helping others in difficulty.”

Are wealth and well-being indeed connected? Let’s ask three more-specific questions about happiness and wealth between countries, within countries, and over time.

First, are people in rich countries happier than people in not-so-rich countries? There are striking national differences in well-being: In Portugal, one in 10 people reports being very happy; in the Netherlands, four in 10 people say the same. Economic wealth might account for these variations. The correlation between national wealth and well-being is positive (despite curious reversals, such as the Irish during the 1980s consistently reporting greater life satisfaction than the wealthier West Germans). But national wealth is confounded with other factors, such as civil rights, literacy, and number of continuous years of democracy, which also correlate with average life satisfaction.

Second, within any country, are rich individuals happiest? In poor countries, such as Bangladesh and India, satisfaction with finances is a moderate predictor of well-being. But once an individual is able to afford life’s necessities, increasing fluence matters surprisingly little. In the United States and in Europe, the correlation between income and happiness is, as University of Michigan political scientist Ronald Inglehart has noted, “surprisingly weak (indeed, virtually negligible).” Even very rich people—those surveyed among Forbes’ 100 wealthiest Americans—are only slightly happier than the average American. Those whose income has increased over a 10-year period are not happier than those whose income has not increased. And studies suggest that lottery winners gain but a temporary jolt of joy. Wealth, it seems, is like health: Although its utter absence can breed misery, possessing it is no guarantee of happiness. Happiness seems less a matter of getting what we want than of wanting what we have.

At the other end of life’s circumstances are the victims of tragedies. We have been astonished by the negligible long-term emotional impact of negative as well as positive life circumstances. People with disabilities usually report a near-normal level of well-being. Even the trauma of a paralyzing car accident typically gives way to a return of normal happiness. Within four months of his tragic, paralyzing accident, actor Christopher Reeve reported “genuine joy in being alive.” So great is our adaptive capacity that, within three months, the emotional impact of most good and bad events wanes and emotions again fluctuate with more recent events.

As Benjamin Franklin surmised, happiness “is produc'd not so much by great Pieces of good Fortune that seldom happen, as by little Advantages that occur every day.” Feeling the short-run influence of events and circumstances, people use such to explain their happiness, all the while missing subtler but bigger influences on their long-run well-being. Notic-
ing that an influx of cash feels good, they may therefore mistakenly accept the Hollywood image of who is happy—the rich, famous, and beautiful. (Despite the presumptions underlying the billions of dollars spent on cosmetics, clothes, and diets, even the very attractive are barely happier than the unattractive.)

Third, have people become happier over time as their cultures have become more affluent? In 1957, when economist John Galbraith was about to describe the United States as The Affluent Society, Americans' per person income, expressed in today's dollars, was about $9,000 per year. Dishwashers, CD sound systems, and color TVs.

So are Americans happier now than 38 years ago? From 1957 to 1996, the proportion of those telling the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center that they are "very happy" has declined slightly, from 35% to 30%. Meanwhile, divorce has doubled, teen suicide has tripled, arrests for juvenile violent crime have increased sixfold, and depression rates have soared. The same is true of European countries and Japan: Although people in affluent countries enjoy better nutrition, health care, education, and science—and are somewhat happier

tries provides no apparent boost to human morale.

The Traits of Happy People

If happiness is similarly available to those of any age, sex, or race, and to those of all but the lowest income levels, then who are the very happy people? Through life's ups and downs, some people's capacity for joy persists undiminished. In one National Institute on Aging study of 5,000 adults, the happiest of people in 1973 were still relatively happy a decade later, despite changes in their work, their residence, and their family status.

In study after study, four traits characterize happy people. First, happy people, especially in individualistic Western cultures, like themselves. On self-esteem tests, they agree with statements such as "I'm a lot of fun to be with" and "I have good ideas." As we might expect from the typically better-than-neutral levels of well-being, most people do report positive self-esteem. Indeed, they usually exhibit a self-servings bias: They believe themselves to be more ethical, more intelligent, less prejudiced, better able to get along with others, and healthier than the average person. (Such findings bring to mind Freud's joke about the man who told his wife, "If one of us should die, I think I would go live in Paris.")

Second, happy people typically feel personal control. Feeling empowered rather than helpless, they also do better in school, achieve more at work, and cope better with stress. Deprived of control over one's life—an experience studied in prisoners, nursing-home patients, and people living under totalitarian regimes—people suffer lower morale and worse health. Severe poverty demoralizes when it erodes people's sense of control over their life circumstances.

Third, happy people are usually optimistic. One could reason that pessimists, whose low expectations are so often exceeded, would constantly be surprised by joy. "Blessed is he who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed," coun-

"We all live with the objective of being happy; our lives are all different and yet the same."

— Anne Frank

Today it is more than $18,000, defining a "doubly affluent society"—with double what money buys, including twice as many cars per person. Moreover, we eat out more than twice as often and have vastly more abundant air conditioning.
eled poet Alexander Pope in a 1727 letter. Nevertheless, positive-thinking optimists—those who agree, for example, that “when I undertake something new, I expect to succeed”—tend to be more successful, healthier, and happier.

Fourth, happy people tend to be extroverted. Although we might have expected that introverts would live more happily in the serenity of their less-stressed contemplative lives, extroverts are happier—whether living alone or with others, whether living in rural or metropolitan areas, and whether working in solitary or social occupations.

With each of these trait-happiness correlations, the causal arrows are uncertain. For example, does happiness make people more outgoing? Or are outgoing people temperamentally more high-spirited and less anxious about reaching out to others? Such tendencies may explain their marrying sooner, getting better jobs, and making more friends. If these traits indeed predispose happiness, people might become happier by acting as if they had the desired traits. In experiments, people who feign high self-esteem begin feeling better about themselves, and people manipulated into a smiling expression feel happier.

Yet happiness seems modifiable only within limits imposed by our genetic leash. From their study of 254 identical and fraternal twins, psychologists David Lykken and Auke Tellegen estimate that 50% of the difference among people’s happiness ratings is heritable. Even identical twins raised apart often are similarly happy. Depending on our outlooks and recent experiences, our happiness fluctuates around our happiness set point, which disposes some people to be ever upbeat, and others dour.

The Relationships of Happy People

Close relationships also mark happy lives. One could easily imagine why the stress of close relationships might exacerbate illness and misery. “Hell is other people,” mused Jean-Paul Sartre. Thankfully, however, the benefits of close relationships with friends and family usually outweigh the strains. Compared with people bereft of such relationships, those who can name several intimate friends are healthier, less likely to die prematurely, and happier. Psychologist William Pavot has found that people report happier feelings when with others.

For more than nine in 10 people, the most significant alternative to aloneness is marriage. Although broken marital relationships are a source of much misery, a supportive, intimate, committed relationship is among life’s greatest satisfactions. To paraphrase Henry Ward Beecher, “Well-married a person is winged; ill-matched, shackled.” Fortunately, National Opinion Research Center surveys reveal that three in four married Americans say their spouse is their best friend, and four out of five say they would marry the same person again. Such feelings help explain why, during the 1970s and 1980s, more married adults said they were “very happy” than did never-married (39% vs. 24%).

Is marriage, as is so often supposed, more strongly associated with men’s happiness than women’s? In both European and North American national surveys, the happiness gap between the married and never-married is similar for women and men. A digest of nearly a hundred such studies confirms this: Although a bad marriage may be more depressing to a woman than to a man, the myth that single women report greater happiness than married women can be laid to rest.

The Faith of Happy People

“Joy is the serious business of heaven,” said C.S. Lewis. Freud had the opposite opinion: Religion, he said, is an illusion that erodes happiness or even becomes a sort of sickness—an “obsessional neurosis” accompanied by guilt, repressed sexuality, and suppressed emotions. Accumulating data contradict Freud’s surmise. Actively religious people are much less likely to be-
come delinquent, to abuse drugs and alcohol, to divorce, and to commit suicide. In Europe and North America, religiously active people also report greater happiness. In one Gallup Poll, highly spiritual people were twice as likely as those lowest in spiritual commitment to declare themselves very happy. Other surveys find that happiness and life satisfaction rise with strength of religious affiliation and frequency of worship attendance. One statistical digest of research among the elderly found that one of the best predictors of life satisfaction is religiousness.

Studies have probed the connection between faith and coping with a crisis. Recently widowed women who worship regularly report more joy in their lives than do religiously inactive widows. Deeply religious mothers of disabled children are less vulnerable to depression than are their irreligious counterparts. Those with a strong faith also recover greater happiness after suffering divorce, unemployment, or serious illness.

What explains these positive links between faith and well-being? Possible explanations include the supportive close relationships often enjoyed by those active in faith communities, the sense of meaning and purpose that many people derive from their faith, and the motivation to focus beyond self. The Gallup Organization consistently finds doubled rates of volunteerism and quadrupled rates of charitable giving among weekly church attenders compared with non-attenders. A religious world view may offer people answers to life's deepest questions and an optimistic appraisal of life events. Faith offers hope when people face the terror of death. Such proposed explanations await further exploration.

So, knowing people's age, sex, and income (assuming they have enough to afford life's necessities) hardly clues us to their happiness. William Cowper's 1782 hunch has proven right: "Happiness depends, as Nature shows, Less on external things than most suppose." Better clues come from knowing a person's traits, whether the person enjoys a supportive network of close relationships, and whether the person has a faith that entails social support, purpose, and hope. Additional studies have defined the marks of satisfying work and leisure experiences—those that typically engage an unself-conscious "flow" state in which challenges engage skills. Still more studies examine happy people's exercise patterns, cultural world views, and goal-strivings.

This new research on subjective well-being is a welcome complement both to societal emphases on physical and material well-being and to psychology's historic preoccupation with negative emotions. By asking who is happy, and why, the scientific study of well-being can help people rethink their priorities. And it can help us all better understand how to build a world that enhances human well-being.

"Joy, beautiful spark of the gods! . . . All people become brothers where you abide."
—Friedrich Schiller

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