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Preferences for experienced versus remembered happiness

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ABSTRACT

Consider two types of happiness: one experienced on a moment-to-moment basis, the other a reflective evaluation where people feel happy looking back. Though researchers have measured and argued the merits of each, we inquired into which happiness people say they want. In five studies ($N = 3351$), we asked people to choose between experienced happiness and remembered happiness – for shorter timeframes (e.g. one's next hour) and longer timeframes (e.g. one's lifetime). The results revealed a consistent pattern: most people choose experienced happiness for longer timeframes, but not for shorter timeframes. Since people typically live hour-to-hour, these findings imply that people may end up living a different version of happiness than what they believe is a happy life.

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Happiness; well-being; life satisfaction; experience; retrospective; time

First, imagine your ideal vacation. Then, if you knew that at the end of the vacation, all of your pictures would be destroyed and you would completely lose your memory of it – would you choose the same vacation? Given the possibility of you answering 'no,' Kahneman (2010) posed this thought experiment to highlight the discrepancy between happiness experienced and happiness remembered. Now, instead of a vacation, apply the underlying question to your next hour, a year of your life, or even your life overall: Which form of happiness should you pursue – experienced or remembered?

The pursuit of happiness is fundamental. The American Constitution declares it an inalienable right, and people consistently rate it among their most important pursuits (Diener, Suh, Smith, & Shao, 1995). People clearly want to be happy, but what form of happiness do they want? While one form is experienced on a moment-to-moment basis where people feel happy during that time (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003; Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004; Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010; Mogilner, 2010; Galak, Redden, & Kruger, 2009; Nelson, Meyvis, & Galak, 2009); the other is a reflective evaluation where people feel happy looking back on that time (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Easterlin, 1995; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999; Etkin & Mogilner, 2016; Ratner, Kahn, & Kahneman, 1999; Redden, 2008). Kahneman (2011) describes this distinction as experienced happiness (being happy *in* your life) vs. remembered happiness (being happy *about* your life).

Although not mutually exclusive, these two forms of happiness have distinct inputs and outcomes. For

example, researchers measuring people's feelings both during and looking back on events such as movies, vacations, and medical procedures found that moment-to-moment evaluations during events do not simply sum up to people's retrospective evaluations of those events; rather, peak and end moments overdetermine how events are remembered (Diener, Wirtz, & Oishi, 2001; Fredrickson & Kahneman, 1993; Kahneman, Fredrickson, Schreiber, & Redelmeier, 1993; Redelmeier & Kahneman, 1996; Wirtz, Kruger, Scollon, & Diener, 2003). Similarly, even though more varied consumption episodes may be experienced as less enjoyable throughout, people recall those varied sequences more positively than consistent ones (Ratner, Kahn, & Kahneman, 1999). Arguably, one's moment-to-moment assessment should be considered the more 'objective' and true reflection of one's happiness (Kahneman, 1999), yet how events are remembered proves to be a bigger determinant of whether people choose to repeat those events in the future (Ratner et al., 1999; Wirtz et al., 2003).

While scholars continue to debate the relative merits of each form of happiness (Tu & Hsee, 2016; Krueger, Kahneman, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2009; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Schwarz & Strack, 1999), we have taken a different approach and directly asked thousands of Americans and people across the globe their preference between experienced and remembered happiness.

When asking people to choose between experienced and remembered happiness, we varied the timeframe under consideration. We asked some to choose for longer timeframes (e.g. one's life overall or the next year) and

others to choose for shorter timeframes (e.g. the next hour). We expected that when considering longer timeframes, people's preferences would more closely reflect their endorsed life philosophy (Norton, Anik, Aknin, & Dunn, 2011). We further expected that the prevalent philosophy for a happy life would favor experienced happiness. Following lessons from spiritual leaders (Dalai Lama XIV, 1999; Hanh, 2008), happiness scholars (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999; Mogilner, 2010), pop icons (Shahid et al., 2011), and ancient poets (Horace, 23BC), people are led to recognize that their lives are finite. In realizing that any day could be their last, people are encouraged to seize the day and be mindful and appreciative of the present moment. We predicted that when declaring which form of happiness they would want for their life and the years filling their life, people would want to avoid regret from missing out (Gilovich, Medvec, & Kahneman, 1998; Gilovich & Medvec, 1995) and thus prefer to experience happiness along the way.

Notably, however, an opposing perspective might argue that because moments are fleeting, people should pursue a course that provides something to show for their time and allow them to feel good when reflecting back. Indeed, rooted in the Puritan work ethic (Weber, 1930), many Americans have an aversion to being idle (Hsee, Yang, & Wang, 2010) and an incessant desire to be productive throughout their hours and days (Etkin & Mogilner, 2016). Some individuals, in fact, choose less enjoyable but more memorable experiences (e.g. standing for hours in a freezing-cold and overly-crowded Times Square on New Year's Eve to see the ball drop) in order to collect experiences that will contribute to their 'experiential CV' (Keinan & Kivetz, 2011). It tends to be these more remarkable experiences (which get memorialized in photographs and Facebook postings) that many use to define who they are and compose their personal narratives (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014; Zauberman, Ratner, & Kim, 2009). We thus predicted that for shorter timeframes (e.g. the next hour or day) – when people do not typically abstract up to their life philosophy and are instead more sensitive to circumstantial constraints (Norton et al., 2011; Trope & Liberman, 2003) – these competing motivations may come into play and make people's preferred happiness less clear.

Overview

To examine people's view about the optimal form of happiness, Study 1 asks people to choose between experienced and remembered happiness for a longer timeframe (i.e. their life overall and next year) or a shorter timeframe (i.e. their next day and hour). Studies 2 and 3 then examine whether the pattern of preferences is robust across different operationalizations of remembered happiness,

and rule out impatience as a mechanism. Study 4 confirms duration as the critical variable by manipulating how long a given amount of time (a one-week vacation) is perceived. Study 5 explores the generalizability of the pattern of preferences across cultures, comparing Western countries steeped in the Puritan work ethic and Eastern countries long-rooted in teachings of mindfulness (Mick, 2017).

Study 1: Experienced or remembered happiness?

Method

Participants ($N = 1145$; 49.7% female; ages 18–76, $M_{\text{age}} = 32.7$) were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk U.S. subject pool to complete the study for \$0.50. For this and the subsequent studies, sample size was determined prior to each study with an effort to collect as many participants as possible in the allotted timeframe and budget, and all exclusions are reported.

Participants were asked to choose between experienced happiness and remembered happiness for one of four randomly assigned timeframes (i.e. hour, day, year, or life) with the question:

Forced to choose, which of these two forms of happiness would you prefer for your next hour [today/this year/your life]? (a) One where you experience happiness on a moment-to-moment basis. This is one where you feel happy during the hour [day/year/life]. (b) One where afterwards you will reflect back on it and feel happy. This is one that makes you feel happy when you think back and remember the hour [day/year/life].

The order in which the two options were presented was counterbalanced. Since presentation order did not affect the pattern of results (Wald $\chi^2(1, N = 1145) = 1.73, p = .19$), we do not discuss it further. On the following page, participants explained their reasoning for their choice.

The study concluded by asking participants to report their overall happiness (Cantril, 1966) and chronic impulsivity (Barratt, 1965), along with other exploratory measures and demographics.

Results and discussion

Timeframe influenced people's choices between experienced and remembered happiness, Wald $\chi^2(1, N = 1145) = 69.61, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.38, .60]$. The majority of participants chose experienced happiness over remembered happiness when choosing for their life (79% $\text{chose exp}^{\prime}$ 225/284, $p < .001$) or their next year (65% $\text{chose exp}^{\prime}$ 196/290, $p < .001$; Figure 1). By contrast, there was a roughly even split of participants who chose experienced happiness and remembered happiness when choosing for their next hour (49% $\text{chose exp}^{\prime}$ 140/285, $p = .81$) or day (48% $\text{chose exp}^{\prime}$ 137/286, $p = .52$).

This pattern was not affected by individuals' overall happiness ($\text{Wald}\chi^2(1, N = 1145) = 1.53, p = .22$), chronic impulsivity ($\text{Wald}\chi^2(1, N = 1145) = .06, p = .81$), age ($\text{Wald}\chi^2(1, N = 1145) = .30, p = .58$), household income ($\text{Wald}\chi^2(1, N = 1145) = .25, p = .62$), marital status ($\text{Wald}\chi^2(1, N = 1145) = .11, p = .74$), or parental status ($\text{Wald}\chi^2(1, N = 1145) = .28, p = .60$). And though the interaction between time and gender was significant ($\text{Wald}\chi^2(1, N = 1145) = 6.93, p = .008$), a closer examination revealed timeframe to influence choice similarly for men ($\text{Wald}\chi^2(1, N = 576) = 17.29, p < .001$) and women ($\text{Wald}\chi^2(1, N = 569) = 56.87, p < .001$).

An examination of the reasons participants generated for their choice revealed six categories (Table 1). Reasons favoring experienced happiness were a belief in a *carpe diem* philosophy that one should live in and enjoy the present moment; not wanting to wait until later to enjoy one's happiness; and an acknowledgment that the future is uncertain and life short. Reasons favoring remembered happiness were a desire for a longer lasting happiness; an embrace of nostalgia wherein memories are treasured;

and the motivation to achieve so as to feel productive and proud. Participants' reasons confirmed they viewed the options as distinct from each other and consistent with their treatment in the literature.

Even though one's hours and days add up to one's years and life overall, these results show that people's preferences between experienced and remembered happiness differ when considering shorter and longer timeframes. People say they would prefer a life experienced as happy, yet in any given hour or day, this preference is attenuated.

Study 2: Varieties of remembered happiness

Do people's preferences depend on how remembered happiness is described? Study 2 asked participants to choose between experienced happiness and remembered happiness for either their next hour or life overall, but the remembered happiness option was described in one of three ways: feeling happy while looking back and remembering (as in Study 1), evaluating the time as happy while remembering (Krueger et al., 2009), or remembering the time as happy (Fredrickson & Kahneman, 1993).

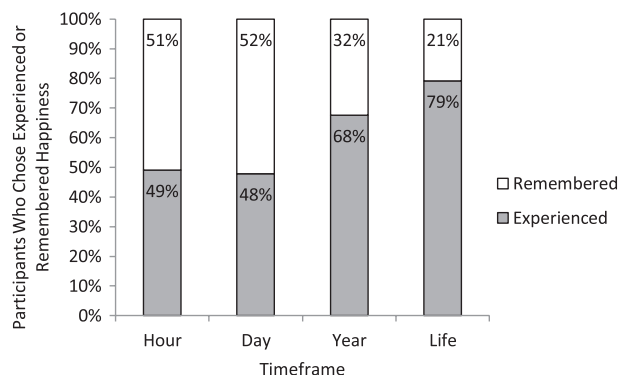


Figure 1. Percentage of participants who chose experienced happiness and remembered happiness for each timeframe (Study 1).

Method

Participants ($N = 960$; 38.5% female; ages 18–81, $M_{\text{age}} = 31.7$) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk U.S. subject pool completed the study for \$0.50.

For their next hour or life, participants were asked to choose between experienced happiness ('where you experience happiness on a moment-to-moment basis') and remembered happiness phrased in one of three ways: 'where afterwards you will reflect back and feel happy,' 'where afterwards you will reflect back and think of it as happy,' or 'where afterwards you will reflect back and remember it as happy.' Participants completed ancillary measures and demographics.

Table 1. Reasons people gave for their choice between experienced happiness and remembered happiness (Study 1).

Reason	Example	Total # who mentioned	% of experienced choosers who mentioned	% of remembered choosers who mentioned	χ^2	Cramér's V	p
<i>Carpe diem</i>	'I want to live in the moment.'	384	54.2%	1.3%	340.98	0.55	.000
Present focused	'I would rather feel happy now than later.'	104	13.8%	1.8%	47.23	0.20	.000
Uncertain future	'There may be no tomorrow.'	30	3.6%	1.1%	6.48	0.08	.010
Lasting	'I want a happiness that lasts longer.'	242	10.3%	38.0%	125.58	0.33	.000
Nostalgia	'Remembering makes me happy.'	192	2.1%	39.6%	273.80	0.49	.000
Achievement	'Working hard makes me feel accomplished, and therefore happy.'	31	0.3%	6.5%	39.78	0.19	.000

Results and discussion

The version of remembered happiness did not influence choices between experienced and remembered happiness, Wald $\chi^2(1, N = 960) = 1.63, p = .20, 95\% CI = [-.27, .05]$. Consistent with the previous study, timeframe did influence choices, Wald $\chi^2(1, N = 960) = 17.11, p < .001, 95\% CI = [.28, .83]$. When choosing for their life, the majority of participants chose experienced happiness over reflecting back and feeling happy (68% chose exp', 147/217, $p < .001$), over reflecting back and thinking of it as happy (73% chose exp', 94/128, $p < .001$), and over remembering it as happy (70% chose exp', 94/135, $p < .001$). However, when choosing for their next hour, approximately half of the participants chose experienced happiness over reflecting back and feeling happy (55% chose exp', 118/215, $p = .17$), over reflecting back and thinking of it as happy (59% chose exp', 74/126, $p = .06$), and over remembering it as happy (58% chose exp', 81/139, $p = .06$). That is, timeframe had a similar influence on people's preferred happiness for all three versions of remembered happiness: feeling happy remembering ($\chi^2(1, N = 432) = 7.53, p = .006$, Cramér's $V = .13, 95\% CI = [.04, .22]$), thinking of it as happy while remembering ($\chi^2(1, N = 254) = 6.13, p = .01$, Cramér's $V = .16, 95\% CI = [.04, .27]$), and remembering it as happy ($\chi^2(1, N = 274) = 3.83, p = .05$, Cramér's $V = .12, 95\% CI = [.01, .23]$).

These results suggest that the pattern observed in Study 1 is robust and not sensitive to how remembered happiness is described.

Study 3: It's not impatience

Because people enjoy remembered happiness only after the specified timeframe, people choosing for their life would have to wait far longer to start enjoying this happiness than people choosing for their next hour. Thus in Studies 1 and 2, it might have been impatience for the onset of happy memories rather than the duration of the timeframe that was responsible for participants' increased tendency to choose remembered happiness for shorter (vs. longer) timeframes. Study 3 examined this possibility by comparing people's preferences when choosing for an hour that will come at the end of their life vs. their life overall – when the onset of remembered happiness would be roughly equivalent.

Method

Participants ($N = 313$; 45.7% female; ages 18–75, $M_{age} = 35.1$) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk U.S. subject pool completed the online study in exchange for \$0.50. We presented these participants with the same choice between experienced and remembered happiness as in

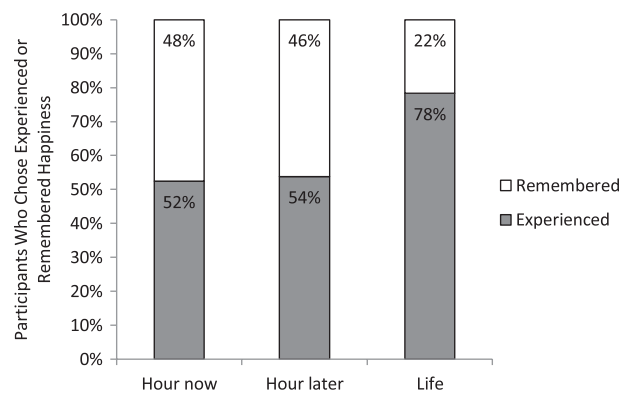


Figure 2. Percentage of participants who chose experienced happiness and remembered happiness for their next hour, for an hour at the end of their lives, or for their lives overall (Study 3).

Study 1 for their life, for their next hour, or for an hour in the last year of their life.

Results and discussion

As in the previous studies, when choosing for their life, the majority of participants chose experienced happiness over remembered happiness (78% chose exp', 83/106, $p < .001$); but when choosing for an hour, only about half of participants chose experienced happiness over remembered happiness – regardless of whether the hour was upcoming (52% chose exp', 54/103, $p = .69$) or at the end of their life (54% chose exp', 56/104, $p = .49$; Figure 2). That is, when considering their lives overall, people were more likely to choose experienced happiness over remembered happiness than when considering an hour that is either imminent ($\chi^2(1, N = 209) = 15.49, p < .001$, Cramér's $V = .27, 95\% CI = [.14, .40]$) or at the end of one's life ($\chi^2(1, N = 210) = 14.03, p < .001$, Cramér's $V = .26, 95\% CI = [.13, .39]$).

Study 3 demonstrates that it is the duration of the timeframe, rather than the amount of time preceding the end of the timeframe (when enjoyment of remembered happiness would begin), that influences people's preferred happiness. This rules out impatience as an explanation for people's increased likelihood to choose remembered happiness for their next hour than their life overall.

Study 4: Manipulating perceived timeframe

Study 4 experimentally varied the perceived duration of time. Leveraging the insight that the same timeframe can be perceived as shorter or longer (Mogilner, Chance, & Norton, 2012; Rudd, Vohs, & Aaker, 2012), we asked American university students to choose between experienced and remembered happiness for their upcoming week-long Spring Break vacation – framed as shorter or longer.

Method

Two weeks before Spring Break, 185 university students (69.2% female; ages 18–37, $M_{\text{age}} = 20.6$) were presented with a calendar in which their upcoming week-long vacation was highlighted in yellow. The calendar was either a year calendar (which made the week look relatively short) or a month calendar (which made the week look relatively long); we also included a ‘no calendar’ control condition. Next, participants were asked to choose between vacations offering experienced or remembered happiness:

Forced to choose, which of these two forms of happiness would you prefer for your upcoming Spring Break? (a) A Spring Break where you experience happiness on a moment-to-moment basis. This break is one where you will feel happy during it; or (b) A Spring Break where afterwards you will reflect back on it and feel happy. This break is one that will later make you feel happy when you think back and remember it.

Participants were also asked what they planned to do during their Spring Break.

Results and discussion

In the control condition, the majority of students chose a vacation experienced as happy over a vacation remembered as happy (74% $_{\text{chose exp}}$, 46/62, $p < .001$). Similarly, students led to perceive their vacation as relatively long were more likely to choose a vacation experienced as happy over one remembered as happy (77% $_{\text{chose exp}}$, 47/61, $p < .001$). In contrast, students led to perceive their vacation as relatively short were not significantly more likely to choose a vacation experienced as happy than one remembered as happy (60% $_{\text{chose exp}}$, 37/62, $p = .16$). Perceiving a week-long vacation as shorter or longer influenced the form of happiness students preferred, $\chi^2(1, N = 123) = 4.29, p = .04$, Cramér’s $V = .19$, 95% CI = [.02, .36], (Figure 3).

An examination of students’ self-described vacation plans revealed that experienced happiness choosers were more likely to be planning a beach vacation (24%, 31/130) than remembered happiness choosers (11%, 6/55; $\chi^2(1, N = 185) = 4.04, p = .04$, Cramér’s $V = .15$, 95% CI = [.02, .26]); whereas remembered happiness choosers were more likely to be planning to do volunteer work (6%, 3/55) than experienced happiness choosers (1%, 1/130; $\chi^2(1, N = 185) = 4.01, p = .05$, Cramér’s $V = .15$, 95% CI = [.02, .27]).

By manipulating the perceived duration of a given timeframe, this study further established the effect of timeframe on happiness preferences. People preferred experienced happiness over remembered happiness for a long week, but this preference was tempered for a seemingly short week. The fact that the majority of participants in the control condition chose experienced

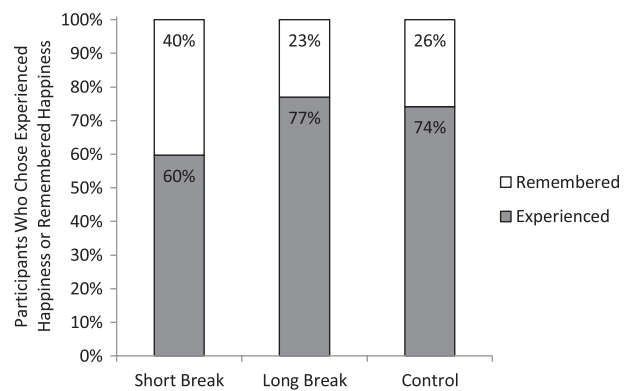


Figure 3. Percentage of participants who chose experienced happiness or remembered happiness for a one-week vacation framed as relatively short or long (Study 4).

happiness for their week-long vacation suggests that a one-week timeframe is sufficiently long to align people’s happiness preferences with their preferences for their life more broadly.

Study 5: Across cultures

To test whether the pattern observed in Studies 1–4’s American samples generalizes to other cultures, we presented the same choice between experienced and remembered happiness for either their next hour or their life to people in other Western countries (England and the Netherlands) and to people in Eastern countries (China and Japan). We expected to see the same gain in preferences for remembered happiness in the next hour amongst people in Western countries similarly steeped in the Puritan work ethic. However, we expected the greater preference for experienced happiness to persist across timeframes amongst people in Eastern countries that have a long religious history in Buddhism with teachings of mindfulness (Mick, 2017).

Method

We used Qualtrics Panels to recruit individuals from two countries representing Western culture (England and the Netherlands) and two countries representing Eastern culture (China and Japan). Participants ($N = 748$; 45.6% female; ages 18–75, $M_{\text{age}} = 41.14$) completed the online study in exchange for the equivalent of \$4.50. We had requested 200 participants from each country, but individuals under the age of 18 who had been surveyed were necessarily removed from our sample.

Participants were presented with the same choice between experienced and remembered happiness as in Study 1, for either their next hour or their life.

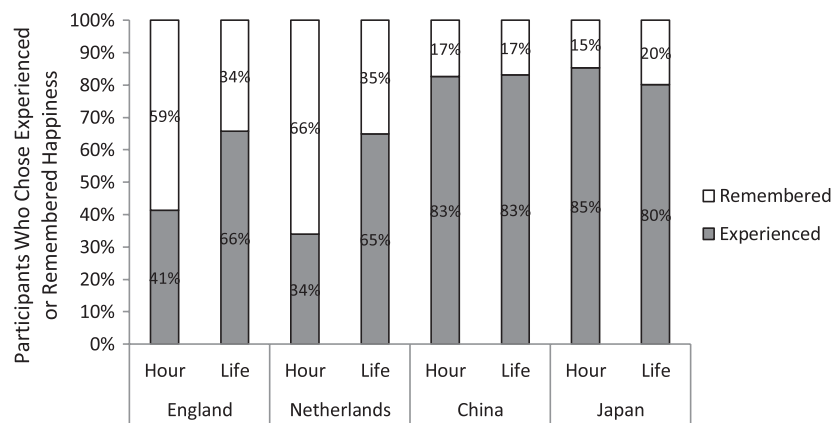


Figure 4. Percentage of participants who chose experienced happiness and remembered happiness in each country (Study 5).

Results and discussion

Timeframe influenced choices between experienced and remembered happiness among Westerners, Wald $\chi^2(1, N = 400) = 29.51, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-1.53, -.75]$, but not among Easterners, Wald $\chi^2(1, N = 348) = .44, p = .51, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-.36, .79]$ (Figure 4). Like Americans, when choosing for their life, the majority of Europeans chose experienced happiness over remembered happiness (65% chose exp, 130/199, $p < .001$); when choosing for their next hour, however, a majority chose remembered happiness over experienced happiness (62% chose rem, 125/201, $p = .001$). In contrast, the majority of Easterners chose experienced happiness over remembered happiness regardless of whether choosing for their life (81% chose exp, 140/172, $p < .001$) or their next hour (84% chose exp, 148/176, $p < .001$). An examination by country showed that timeframe influenced choice similarly among participants from England ($\chi^2(1, N = 203) = 12.04, p = .001, \text{Cramér's } V = .24, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.11, .37]$) and the Netherlands ($\chi^2(1, N = 197) = 18.90, p < .001, \text{Cramér's } V = .31, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.17, .44]$); whereas timeframe did not influence choice among participants from China ($\chi^2(1, N = 152) = .00, p = .95, \text{Cramér's } V = .01, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.00, .19]$) or Japan ($\chi^2(1, N = 196) = .88, p = .35, \text{Cramér's } V = .07, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.00, .20]$).

General discussion

Some factors associated with happiness depend on whether happiness is treated as (a) a moment-to-moment state where happiness is experienced throughout one's daily life or as (b) an evaluation of one's life when reflecting back. For instance, money and age have a weaker influence on experienced happiness than remembered happiness (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010; Stone, Schwartz, Broderick, & Deaton, 2010), and although children can be taxing from a moment-to-moment perspective, having children is highly rewarding when reflecting back (Kahneman

et al., 2004; Nelson, Kushlev, English, Dunn, & Lyubomirsky, 2012; White & Dolan, 2009).

Our research examines which of these two types of happiness people believe they should maximize, revealing that the answer depends on whether they are considering the short pieces of their life or their life overall. While the majority of the Americans and Europeans we surveyed reported they would prefer a life experienced as happiness over one they would remember happily, this was not so for shorter timeframes – perhaps because the answer seems less clear for one's imminent future when there is greater concern about *how* to get things done than *why* to do them (Trope & Liberman, 2003), or because there is a subset of respondents focused on being productive and accumulating memories (Keinan & Kivetz, 2011). Timeframe, however, did not influence preferred happiness amongst Asians. Amongst people from Eastern culture, which has a long religious history in teaching the value of mindfulness and appreciating each present moment, experienced happiness was preferred both for one's life overall and the next hour.

Within the mounting research on happiness, happiness has been measured and conceptualized in different ways. Given that the resulting prescriptions for achieving greater 'happiness' can differ depending on how it is measured, and given that scholarly debate is still unresolved on which form of happiness should be maximized, it is important to understand which form of happiness people believe they should maximize. These findings inform this question, and further show that people's beliefs about this ultimate human pursuit are subject to circumstantial factors, like timeframe.

Additionally, these results highlight that Westerners may be less likely to follow their life philosophy of fully experiencing the moment when considering their next hour or day. Yet, it is for these moments that people often decide how to spend their time. Together, these findings put forth the unfortunate implication that a life planned

hour-to-hour will produce a different version of happiness than one's notion of a happy life.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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