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Eavesdropping on Happiness: Well-Being Is Related to Having Less Small Talk and More Substantive Conversations

Matthias R. Mehl[1], Simine Vazire[2], Shannon E. Holleran[1], and C. Shelby Clark[1]

[1]University of Arizona and [2]Washington University in St. Louis

Is the happy life characterized by shallow, happy-go-lucky moments and trivial small talk, or by reflection and profound social encounters? Both notions—the happy ignoramus and the fulfilled deep thinker—exist, but little is known about which interaction style is actually associated with greater happiness (King & Napa, 1998). In this article, we report findings from a naturalistic observation study that investigated whether happy and unhappy people differ in the amount of small talk and substantive conversations they have.

Although the macrolevel and long-term implications of happiness have been studied extensively (Eid & Larsen, 2008; Howell & Howell, 2008), little is known about the daily social behavior of happy people, primarily because of the difficulty of objectively measuring everyday behavior. Many behavioral measures (e.g., experience sampling, day-reconstruction method) rely on self-reports and thus cannot be used to disentangle true associations between happiness and behavior from biases or idealized self-views. This is especially true for evaluatively loaded behaviors, such as the substance (or lack thereof) of one's conversations. To address this difficulty, we used the Electronically Activated Recorder (EAR; Mehl, Pennebaker, Crow, Dabbs, & Price, 2001), a digital audio recorder that unobtrusively tracks real-world behavior by periodically recording snippets of ambient sounds while participants go about their daily lives.

Method

Seventy-nine undergraduates (32 males, 47 females) wore the EAR for 4 days (Vazire & Mehl, 2008). The EAR recorded 30 s of sounds every 12.5 min, providing 23,689 waking recordings (M = 300 per participant). For each recording, coders identified whether the participant was alone or talking with other people, and whether the conversation consisted of small talk or substantive discussion. Small talk was defined as an uninvolved, banal conversation (i.e., only trivial information was exchanged; e.g., "What do you have there? Popcorn? Yummy!"). A substantive conversation was defined as an involved conversation of a substantive nature (i.e., meaningful information was exchanged; e.g., "She fell in love with your dad? So, did they get divorced soon after?"). See Table 1 for reliabilities of the coding.

We converted the EAR codings into relative frequencies (i.e., percentage of waking recordings in which a category applied). To account for differences in number of conversations, we also computed the percentage of conversations that were small talk or substantive. Across all participants, 17.9% (SD = 15.4%) of conversations were small talk and 35.5% (SD = 24.7%) were substantive. (Some conversations fell into neither category.) Substantive conversations were significantly related to time spent socializing (r = .38), eating (r = .33), and watching TV (r = –.22). Small talk was unrelated to all standard EAR activity categories. For a description of the coding procedures, see Vazire and Mehl (2008).

We assessed well-being with several methods. Participants completed the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; α = .93) and a single-item happiness measure ("I see myself as someone who is happy, satisfied with life") twice, 3 weeks apart. The single-item self-report of happiness was combined with reports from two to three informants per subject on the same measure, α = .80. (For details on the recruitment of these informants, see Vazire & Mehl, 2008). To obtain a multimethod well-being index, we combined (i.e., averaged) the self- and informant-based happiness measure with participants' self-reported life satisfaction.

Subjects rated their own personality twice, 3 weeks apart, on the Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999; αs ≥ .92), and informants rated subjects' personality on the same inventory. To obtain a multimethod measure of personality, we then averaged self-reports and informant reports.

Results and Discussion

Results were consistent with prior research (Diener & Seligman, 2002) in that higher well-being was associated with spending less time alone, r = –.35, and more time talking to others, r = .31. Further, higher well-being was associated with

Corresponding Author:
Matthias R. Mehl, Department of Psychology, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721
E-mail: mehl@email.arizona.edu

Table 1. Daily Interaction Variables: Reliabilities and Correlations With Well-Being

| Interaction variable | Intercoder reliability | Overall correlation with well-being | | | Correlation with well-being on weekdays | Correlation with well-being on weekends[b] | Correlation with well-being after accounting for personality differences |
		Well-being index	Satisfaction with life	Happiness			
Alone[a]	.97	−.35**	−.36**	−.27*	−.29**	−.35**	−.40**
Talking to others[a]	.95	.31**	.31**	.26*	.30**	.30**	.39**
Small talk[a]	.76	−.07	−.03	−.10	−.01	−.09	.08
Small talk as a percentage of all conversations	—[c]	−.33**	−.25*	−.35**	−.30**	−.34**	−.17
Substantive conversations[a]	.84	.31**	.26*	.30**	.27*	.31**	.36**
Substantive conversations as a percentage of all conversations	—[c]	.28**	.20	.31**	.28**	.27*	.22*

Note: $N = 79$. Intercoder reliabilities were computed as intraclass correlations, $ICC(2, k)$, from a training set of 221 Electronically Activated Recorder (EAR) sound files that were independently coded by all coders. Satisfaction with life was assessed using participants' responses on the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985); happiness was assessed using self-reports and informant reports on a single item. The happiness and life-satisfaction measures were combined to create the well-being index. Personality was measured using self-reports and informant reports on the Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999).
[a]These variables were calculated as the proportion of the total number of sampled sound files in which the indicated activity occurred. [b]The weekend was defined as beginning Friday at 6:00 p.m. and ending Sunday at midnight. [c]No reliability is reported because the variable is a quotient of two coded variables.
*$p \leq .05$ (two-tailed). **$p < .01$ (two-tailed).

having less small talk, $r = −.33$, and having more substantive conversations, $r = .28$. For example, compared with the unhappiest participants ($z = −2.0$ SD), the happiest participants ($z = +1.5$ SD) spent about 25% less time alone (58.6% vs. 76.8%) and about 70% more time talking (39.7% vs. 23.2%). They also had roughly one third as much small talk (10.2% vs. 28.3%) and twice as many substantive conversations (45.9% vs. 21.8%; for scatter plots showing the association between participants' well-being and these two categories of daily interactions, see Fig. S1 in the Supplemental Material available on-line). The effects for the well-being index were comparable to those for the life-satisfaction and happiness measures separately and emerged for both weekdays and weekends (Table 1).

To test whether personality differences accounted for these effects, we regressed the well-being scores on the Big Five dimensions (Steel, Schmidt, & Shultz, 2008) and saved the residuals. In analyses using this residualized well-being index, the effects for time spent alone, talking to others, and substantive conversations were essentially unaffected, and the effects for small talk were diminished (Table 1). These analyses indicated that participants who were happier than one would have predicted on the basis of their personality had more—and more substantive—conversations than their less happy counterparts with similar personalities.

Together, the present findings demonstrate that the happy life is social rather than solitary, and conversationally deep rather than superficial. What makes these findings especially compelling is the lack of method overlap between the well-being measures (self- and informant reports) and the interaction measures (direct observation). Also, the replication of

findings across measures of well-being and across weekday and weekend behavior is encouraging.

Naturally, our correlational findings are causally ambiguous. On the one hand, well-being may be causally antecedent to having substantive interactions; happy people may be "social attractors" who facilitate deep social encounters (Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006). On the other hand, deep conversations may actually make people happier. Just as self-disclosure can instill a sense of intimacy in a relationship, deep conversations may instill a sense of meaning in the interaction partners. Therefore, our results raise the interesting possibility that happiness can be increased by facilitating substantive conversations (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Future research should examine this possibility experimentally.

Remarking on Socrates' dictum that "the unexamined life is not worth living," Dennett (1984) wrote, "The overly examined life is nothing to write home about either" (p. 87). Although we hesitate to enter such delicate philosophical disputes, our findings suggest that people find their lives more worth living when examined—at least when examined together.

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Supplemental Material

Additional supporting information may be found at http://pss.sage pub.com/content/by/supplemental-data

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