

The difference between a happy life and a meaningful one?

For some it's lying on a sun-drenched beach sipping sangria, for others it's wallowing in a cosy cocoon munching on chocolate and playing video games. Many people will admit that these or other immediate indulgences are what makes them happy. And yet, even given the freedom and resources to live a life of hedonism, many of us find it's not enough – we want to have meaning in our lives too.

Unfortunately, what we mean by 'meaning' has largely been neglected by psychologists. But now Roy Baumeister and his colleagues have conducted an in-depth online survey with 397 adults (68 per cent female; average age 36) and a follow-up with 124 students (45 per cent female; average age 21). The researchers tapped the participants' happiness levels, and their feelings of having a meaningful life, three times over a month. They also asked them a raft of other questions with the aim of identifying factors that were related to happiness but not meaningfulness, or vice versa.

Although happiness and meaningfulness tend to go together (they correlated at .63 and .70 where 1 would be a perfect match), Baumeister's team made some thought-provoking discoveries about ways they differ. People who rated their lives as easier, who had good health, enough money to buy what they wanted, were more short-term oriented, felt connected to others, and experienced low stress and worry, also tended to rate themselves as happier. Yet these same factors had either no association with meaningfulness or the opposite association.

In contrast to the findings for happiness, people who described their lives as having more meaning tended to say: that they spent more time thinking about the past and future; that they had experienced more negative events in their lives; expected to do a lot of deep thinking; engaged in activities that were true to themselves; and they reported more stress, anxiety and worry.

Some of the results were particularly telling. Being more of a taker was related to greater happiness but less meaningfulness, whereas being more of a giver was linked with less happiness but more meaningfulness. Related to that, spending time with one's children was linked with more meaningfulness but had no correlation with happiness. Arguing, if it was seen as reflecting oneself, was linked to less happiness but more meaningfulness. In fact, pursuing any activities that reflect the self was linked to more meaningfulness but not happiness. Feeling socially

connected was linked with happiness and meaningfulness, but time spent with loved ones was only relevant to meaningfulness (perhaps, the researchers surmised, because 'loved ones can be difficult at times').

Baumeister's team concluded that the highly meaningful but relatively unhappy life has 'received relatively little attention and even less respect' to date. 'But people who sacrifice their personal pleasures in order to participate constructively in society may make substantial contributions,' they said. 'Cultivating and encouraging such people despite their unhappiness could be a goal worthy of positive psychology.'

The researchers admitted their 'tentative' study has limitations – they were not able to explore the causal roots of happiness and meaningfulness, and by studying so many possible factors there was a significant risk of associations appearing purely by chance. We could also add that the findings are culturally specific to North America, and they are based on the participants' subjective interpretation of what happiness and meaningfulness mean. It also seemed a shame that there was no cross-reference to Daniel Kahneman's distinction between the 'remembering self' and the 'experiencing self'. Nonetheless, this study certainly makes a useful starting point for discussion and future investigation. 'This project was intended to generate ideas,' the researchers said, 'and future work would be desirable to verify and build on them.'



In the *Journal of Positive Psychology*



Childhood amnesia starts around age seven

In Memory

You could travel the world with an infant aged under three and it's almost guaranteed that when they get older they won't remember a single boat trip, plane ride or sunset. This is thanks to a phenomenon, known as childhood or infantile amnesia, that means most of us lose all our earliest autobiographical memories. It's a psychological conundrum because when they are three or younger, kids are able to discuss autobiographical events from their past. So it's not that memories from before age three never existed, it's that they are subsequently forgotten.

Most of the research in this area has involved adults and children reminiscing about their earliest memories. For a new study, Patricia Bauer and Marina Larkina have taken a different approach. They recorded mothers talking to their three-year-olds about six past events, such as zoo visits or first day at pre-school. The researchers then re-established contact with the same families at different points in the future. Some of the children were quizzed again by a researcher when aged five, others at age six or seven, eight or nine. This way the researchers were able to chart differences in amounts of forgetting through childhood.

Bauer and Larkina uncovered a paradox – at ages five to seven, the children remembered over 60 per cent of the events they'd chatted about at age three. However, their recall for these events was



Activists have an image problem

In the *European Journal of Social Psychology*

immature in the sense of containing few evaluative comments and few mentions of time and place. In contrast, children aged eight and nine recalled less than 40 per cent of the events they'd discussed at age three, but those memories they did recall were more adult-like in their content. Bauer and Larkina said this suggests that adult-like remembering and forgetting develops at around age seven or soon after. They also speculated that the immature form of recall seen at ages five to seven could actually contribute to the forgetting of autobiographical memories – a process known as 'retrieval-induced forgetting'.

Another important finding was that the style mothers used when chatting with their three-year-olds was associated with the level of remembering by those children later on. Specifically, mothers who used more 'deflections', such as 'Tell me more' and 'What happened?' tended to have children who subsequently recalled more details of their earlier memories.

The researchers said their work 'provides compelling evidence that accounts of childhood amnesia that focus only on changes in remembering cannot explain the phenomenon. The complementary processes involved in forgetting are also part of the explanation.'

For more on childhood memories, see the Psychologist archive piece by Wade and Laney at tinyurl.com/nrj2ale

When you picture a feminist or an environmental campaigner, what kind of a person do you think of? If you're like the US and Canadian participants in this new paper, then you'll have in mind an eccentric, militant, unhygienic person. Nadia Bashir and her colleagues say this commonly held stereotype of an activist is partly responsible for the sluggishness of social change. Large sections of the public agree with activists' messages, but are put off by not wanting to affiliate themselves with the kind of person they think makes an activist.

Bashir's team conducted five proper studies in all, and three pilot investigations. The pilot work involved Canadian students, and US participants recruited online, and was used to establish the characteristics – militant, eccentric, etc. – that people tend to associate with a 'typical' feminist or environmentalist.

For one of the main studies, undergrads read about either a 'typical' feminist, who took part in rallies, or an 'atypical' feminist, who used less abrasive techniques, such as holding social events to raise money for feminist causes. Next, all the students read the same article, ostensibly written by the aforementioned feminists, about the unfair obstacles that women continue to face. Finally, the students declared their intentions to adopt pro-feminist behaviours, such as getting involved in pro-women's rights initiatives.

The students who read about a 'typical' feminist tended

to assume she had more negative stereotypical traits, such as being militant and eccentric.

What's more, after reading her article, these same students tended to report fewer intentions to engage in pro-feminist behaviours themselves, as compared with students who'd encountered the 'atypical' feminist and her article. These two things were linked – mediation analysis suggested students who encountered the 'typical' feminist and her article had lower pro-feminist intentions because they saw the feminist as having stereotypical activist traits.

The gist of these findings was replicated in another study with a sample of 140 US participants recruited online, and with the focus on an environmentalist rather than a feminist. This study also showed that participants were less inspired by the arguments

of a more typical militant environmentalist, not just because of seeing him as having more negative stereotypical traits, but also because of not wanting to affiliate with him.

Past research on people's advocacy for social change has tended to focus on their beliefs about the issue at hand, or on the personality characteristics of people who tend to favour social change or oppose it.

This study is novel in that it focuses instead on people's perceptions of those who campaign for social change. The findings have obvious real-life implications for activists. 'Seemingly zealous dedication to a social cause may backfire and elicit unfavourable reactions from others,' the researchers said. '[T]he very individuals who are most actively engaged in promoting social change may inadvertently alienate members of the public and reduce pro-change motivation.'



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