



Fear of Happiness Influences Responses to Subjective Happiness Scale

Joshanloo, M.

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Abstract: Fear of happiness (the belief that happiness may lead to negative consequences) is associated with lower mental well-being. However, little is known about the impact of individuals' fear of happiness on their responses to measures of wellbeing. The purpose of this study was to examine how fear of happiness affects the way Iranian university students (N = 207) respond to items of the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS), using the multiple-indicator multiple-cause (MIMIC) model. Results indicated that fear of happiness positively predicted the fourth item of the SHS (an item measuring the inclination to never appear as happy as one could be). This means that individuals who have equivalent levels of subjective happiness but higher levels of fear of happiness are more likely to rate Item 4 higher. The present findings underscore the importance of considering fear of happiness when interpreting responses to affect and wellbeing measures.

الخوف من السعادة (الاعتقاد بأن السعادة قد تؤدي إلى عواقب سلبية) مرتبط بتدهور الرفاهية العقلية. ومع ذلك، يوجد القليل من المعلومات عن تأثير خوف الأفراد من السعادة على استجاباتهم لقياسات الرفاهية. الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو فحص كيف يؤثر الخوف ، باستخدام نموذج (SHS) من السعادة على طريقة استجابة الطلاب الجامعيين الإيرانيين (عددهم 207) لبنود مقياس السعادة الشخصية (البند الذي) SHS أظهرت النتائج أن الخوف من السعادة تنبأ بشكل إيجابي بالبند الرابع من (MIMIC) المؤشر المتعدد والسبب المتعدد وهذا يعني أن الأفراد الذين لديهم مستويات مماثلة من السعادة. (يقيس الميل إلى عدم الظهور أبدًا بمستوى السعادة الذي يمكن أن يكون الشخصية ولكن مستويات أعلى من الخوف من السعادة أكثر عرضة لتقييم البند الرابع بشكل أعلى. تؤكد النتائج الحالية أهمية النظر في الخوف من السعادة عند تفسير الاستجابات لقياسات العاطفة والرفاهية

Keywords: Fear of happiness; subjective happiness; item bias; measurement invariance

About the Author: Dr. Mohsen Joshanloo is Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at Keimyung University, Daegu, South Korea. For more publications and research, see Dr. Mohsen's website here: <https://mohsenjoshanloo.weebly.com/>. For any inquiries, he can be reached by email at mjoshanloo@gmail.com.

Fear of happiness involves the avoidance of experiencing or expressing happiness due to the belief that happiness may lead to negative outcomes (Joshanloo & Weijers, 2013). The Fear of Happiness Scale (Joshanloo et al., 2014) has been widely used to measure this concept. Although fear of happiness is not formally recognized as a mental disorder, extensive research across cultures has shown that aversive beliefs about happiness are linked to various indicators of mental illness. For instance, studies have demonstrated that individuals who experience fear of happiness tend to exhibit elevated levels of negative affect, reduced levels of positive affect and life satisfaction, and more symptoms of depression and anxiety (Belen et al., 2020; Bryant et al., 2023; Joshanloo et al., 2014; Lambert et al., 2021). Blasco-Belled et al. (2021) found that fear of happiness correlates negatively with subjective happiness as measured by the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky &



Lepper, 1999). Unlike measures of wellbeing that focus on life satisfaction or affect balance, the SHS was developed to assess subjective happiness, that is, a person's own assessment of whether he or she feels happy or unhappy (Chinni, 2014). Similar to life satisfaction, this concept is consistent with a subjectivist perspective, which emphasizes that individuals can assess their own level of happiness according to their self-defined criteria.

Individuals who experience a fear of happiness are prone to engaging in a process of conscious or unconscious down-regulation of their positive emotions or avoidance of the expression of such emotions (Joshani et al., 2014). This tendency may stem from a multitude of sources, such as the notion that experiencing happiness may result in unfavorable consequences, the belief that displaying happiness may give rise to negative impressions by others or have detrimental effects on others, or the belief that actively pursuing happiness may lead to moral decline (Joshani & Weijers, 2013). Individuals who score high on the fear of happiness may also display a degree of reluctance in responding to items pertaining to happiness on assessment measures, which may ultimately result in lower-than-expected scores on such measures. For example, in an Iranian sample, Joshani (2013) found that individuals that scored higher on fear of happiness tended to score lower on one of the items of the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985) after controlling for overall life satisfaction levels.

Although fear of happiness is expected to be negatively associated with subjective happiness, research has yet to explore the potential impact of fear of happiness as a factor that affects the way people answer the SHS items. Studies (e.g., Bieda et al., 2017; Zager Kocjan et al., 2022) have examined the extent to which the SHS exhibits measurement invariance across different groups, with particular emphasis on the effects of national and demographic group membership (e.g., gender, age). However, it is important to recognize that item bias does not arise solely from membership in different demographic groups. As noted by Brown (2015), psychological concepts can also influence responses to scale items. Prior research on measures of wellbeing has largely overlooked this possibility. Some studies, however, have examined the biasing effect of psychological concepts. Joshani's (2013) results showing that fear of happiness is a source of measurement invariance in a life satisfaction scale is a case in point.

The present study sought to examine the influence of fear of happiness on the responses to the items of the SHS among a group of Iranian university students. In this study, the multiple-indicator multiple-cause (MIMIC) model introduced by Joereskog and Goldberger (1975) was used to analyze the data. The MIMIC model is a statistical method that allows researchers to examine measurement invariance, which refers to the degree to which different respondents interpret and respond to the same items in different ways (Woods & Grimm, 2011). It provides a significant advantage when working with continuous covariates (such as fear of happiness) in measurement invariance analyses. Specifically, using the MIMIC model eliminates the need to create artificial groups by imposing categorical cutoffs on fear of happiness scores (Brown, 2015). Further, it allows fear of happiness to be included as a latent variable, which accounts for measurement error in its scores and provides more accurate results than using observed variables.

An Iranian sample was used in this study. Iran is a Muslim-majority country in the Middle East. The level of happiness in Iran is relatively low (Helliwell et al., 2021) and Iranians report high levels of negative affect in their daily lives (Joshani et al., 2019). The level of fear of happiness in



Iran is also relatively low, lower than in other Islamic countries (Joshani et al., 2014). Nevertheless, there are people in Iran with moderate or high levels of fear of happiness.

Methods

Participants

A convenience sample of 207 Iranian students from universities in Tehran (Iran) was used (mean age = 22.03, SD = 3.34, females 57%). The survey was carried out in Persian and paper-and-pencil format. Participants were given the choice to participate voluntarily in the study, and prior to the survey, their informed consent was obtained. The study included other measures not used here.

Measures

The subjective happiness scale (SHS) is a self-report measure consisting of four items that are designed to assess an individual's subjective perception of their happiness level (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). The Fear of Happiness Scale (Joshani et al., 2014) has five items measuring beliefs about the negative consequences of happiness. The alpha reliability coefficients of the SHS and Fear of Happiness Scale were .827 and .919 in the present sample, respectively. The items of both scales (all rated on a 7-point scale) are shown in Table 2. The Persian version of the Fear of Happiness Scale was obtained from Joshani et al. (2014). The SHS was translated into Persian by the author for use in this study and translated versions are available upon request.

Statistical Analysis

First, first-order confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the measurement model, which included correlated factors of fear of happiness and subjective happiness. Next, a MIMIC model was tested using the fear of happiness latent variable to predict both the subjective happiness latent variable and one of its items. The determination of which item to regress on fear of happiness was guided by modification indices as proposed by Muthén (1988). Robust maximum likelihood estimation (MLR) was used in Mplus to estimate both the CFA and MIMIC models. The criteria for a well-fitting model included a comparative fit index (CFI) of at least 0.95, a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of no more than 0.07, and a standard root mean square residual (SRMR) of no more than 0.08 (Kline, 2015). The dataset had no missing values.

Results

Following previous studies conducted in Iran (Joshani, 2013), a covariance was included between the residuals of items 4 and 5 of the fear of happiness scale. As shown in Table 1, the CFA model had an acceptable fit. The factor loadings, as shown in Table 2, were acceptable. Inspection of the modification indices revealed that the inclusion of predictive paths from the fear of happiness latent variable to Item 4 of the SHS would improve model fit. Accordingly, a MIMIC model was tested in which latent fear of happiness predicted both the subjective happiness factor and Item 4. Compared to the CFA model, the MIMIC model had a better fit to the data, as shown in Table 1. The standardized coefficients for the MIMIC model are shown in Figure 1. The results indicated that the regression paths from fear of happiness to latent SHS ($p < .001$) and to Item 4 ($p = .001$)



were significant. The magnitude of these effects can be considered medium-sized (Howitt & Cramer, 2020). This statistically and practically significant effect of fear of happiness on Item 4 suggests that individuals with higher levels of fear of happiness rated this item higher than those with lower levels of fear of happiness, regardless of their overall level of subjective happiness.

Table 1

Fit indices

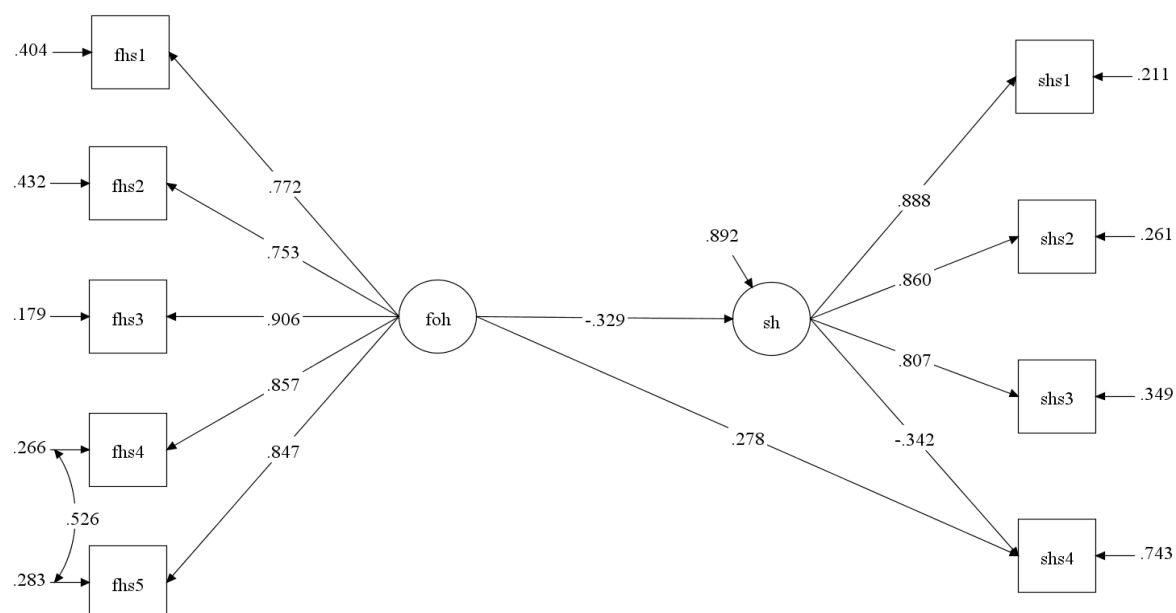
Model	χ^2	<i>df</i>	<i>P</i>	RMSEA [90% CI]	CFI	SRMR
Confirmatory factor analysis	59.265	25	0.0001	0.081 [0.055-0.108]	0.953	0.075
MIMIC	47.019	24	0.0033	0.068 [0.038-0.097]	0.969	0.047

Post Hoc Power Analysis

A Monte Carlo simulation model with 10,000 replications was tested based on the parameter estimates from the MIMIC model to assess the statistical power of all parameter estimates (Muthén & Muthén, 2002). For a sample size of 207, the estimated power for all model parameters was greater than 0.977. This value exceeds the commonly used cutoff of 0.80 (Howitt & Cramer, 2020), suggesting that the model has sufficient power to detect significant effects and that the sample size used in this study is adequate.

Figure 1

Standardized coefficients



Note. foh = fear of happiness. sh = subjective happiness.



Table 2

Factor loadings from the confirmatory factor analysis model

Indicators	Unstandardized	<i>p</i>	95% CI		Standardized	<i>R</i> ²
			Low	Up		
Subjective happiness						
1. In general, I consider myself a very happy person.	1.000	-	-	-	0.885	0.783
2. Compared with most of my peers, I consider myself more happy.	1.070	0.000	0.950	1.191	0.858	0.736
3. Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you?	0.935	0.000	0.799	1.071	0.810	0.655
4. Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you?	-0.550	0.000	-0.765	-0.335	-0.445	0.198
Fear of happiness						
1. I prefer not to be too joyful, because usually joy is followed by sadness.	1.000	-	-	-	0.773	0.597
2. I believe the more cheerful and happy I am, the more I should expect bad things to occur in my life.	1.007	0.000	0.826	1.187	0.754	0.568
3. Disasters often follow good fortune.	1.144	0.000	0.985	1.304	0.905	0.820
4. Having lots of joy and fun causes bad things to happen.	1.015	0.000	0.862	1.168	0.857	0.734
5. Excessive joy has some bad consequences.	1.090	0.000	0.908	1.273	0.847	0.717



Discussion

Fear of happiness both predicted lower scores on subjective happiness and higher scores on Item 4 (“Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you?”). The former effect suggests that fear of happiness contributes to lower levels of subjective happiness. The latter effect suggests that fear of happiness affects the way people respond to Item 4, a measure of the extent to which individuals express their happiness to others. Specifically, the results indicate that individuals with a higher fear of happiness tend to rate Item 4 higher than those with a lower fear of happiness, regardless of their overall level of subjective happiness. That is, between two individuals with equivalent levels of subjective happiness, the one with a higher score on the Fear of Happiness scale is likely to give a higher rating to Item 4. In other words, fear of happiness makes it easier for individuals to agree with Item 4. Considering the content of Item 4, a higher fear of happiness makes it easier for a person to agree that they seem less happy than they could be. This highlights the role of fear of happiness in how individuals express their happiness when answering wellbeing measures and perhaps in real life. It is worth noting that fear of happiness only affected responses to item 4, which measures being unhappy or failing to reach the level of happiness that one could potentially attain, and not the other items that measure experienced happiness.

Fear of happiness is often regarded as a factor that undermines the experience of happiness. However, fear of happiness can also affect the way people answer questions about how happy they are. While the prevailing assumption has been that the negative association between fear of happiness and well-being arises primarily from the influence of fear of happiness on the experience of happiness (e.g., Arslan, 2023), it is also plausible to argue that fear of happiness interferes with an individual's ability to signal or express happiness effectively. Thus, some of the deleterious effects of fear of happiness may be due to the tendency of individuals with high levels of fear of happiness to inhibit or suppress their expressions of happiness when it might be beneficial for them to do so.

Conclusion

Fear of happiness may reduce both the actual levels of experienced happiness and the ability or willingness to express happiness. In contexts where it is advantageous to signal or express happiness (Joshani, 2023), fear of happiness can emerge as a disruptive psychological phenomenon that prevents individuals from fully expressing their happiness. Even when answering happiness questions (which constitute a form of happiness expression), individuals' level of fear of happiness may affect their responses, as shown in this study. The present findings emphasize the significance of considering fear of happiness when interpreting subjective wellbeing scores, especially in certain cultural groups (Joshani et al., 2014) or clinical samples (Bryant et al., 2023), where fear of happiness tends to be more pronounced. These results need to be replicated with larger samples from different cultures.

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