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Some Key Differences between a Happy Life and a Meaningful Life

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Abstract

Being happy and finding life meaningful overlap, but there are important differences. A large survey revealed multiple differing predictors of happiness (controlling for meaning) and meaningfulness (controlling for happiness). Satisfying one's needs and wants increased happiness but was largely irrelevant to meaningfulness. Happiness was largely present-oriented, whereas meaningfulness involves integrating past, present, and future. For example, thinking about future and past was associated with high meaningfulness but low happiness. Happiness was linked to being a taker rather than a giver, whereas meaningfulness went with being a giver rather than a taker. Higher levels of worry, stress, and anxiety were linked to higher meaningfulness but lower happiness. Concerns with personal identity and expressing the self contributed to meaning but not happiness. We offer brief composite sketches of the unhappy but meaningful life and of the happy but meaningless life.

The wishes for happiness and for a meaningful life are two of the most widely held goals by which people measure and motivate themselves. A breathtakingly broad variety of other common goals and strivings — as examples, the desires to be healthy, to be loved, to succeed at work, to raise children, to serve one's religion or country — can be subsumed under either or both of those broad wishes. The present article addresses the relationship between the two. Although undoubtedly happiness and a meaningful life have substantial overlap, our focus is on the differences. More precisely, we shall develop theory and provide data about what factors differentially predict happiness and meaningfulness.

Positive psychology took off in the 1990s as a corrective to psychology's heavy emphasis on illness, suffering, and misfortune. It sought to enrich human life and enhance human functioning. The study of happiness has received a tremendous boost from the advent of positive psychology. Research on what makes life meaningful has increased too, but perhaps not nearly as much. This special issue of the journal may be a useful corrective in that it undertakes to call the attention of positive psychologists (and other interested researchers) to issues of meaning and meaningfulness. The present investigation was intended partly to clarify some key differences between happiness and meaningfulness.

We shall argue that although happiness and meaning are important features of a desirable life and indeed are interrelated, they have different roots and implications (MacGregor & Little, 1998). Happiness may be rooted in having one's needs and desires satisfied, including being largely free from unpleasant events. Meaningfulness may be considerably more complex than happiness, because it requires interpretive construction of circumstances across time according to abstract values and other culturally mediated ideas. We shall report results of an empirical investigation on differential correlates of meaningfulness and happiness.

Definitions

Happiness is generally defined as subjective well-being, which is to say, an experiential state that contains a globally positive affective tone. It may be narrowly or broadly focused: A person may be happy to have found a lost shoe, happy that the war is over, or happy to be having a good life. Researchers have conceptualized and measured happiness in at least two quite different ways. One is *affect balance,* indicating having more pleasant than unpleasant emotional states, and is thus essentially an aggregate of how one feels at different moments. The other, *life satisfaction*, goes beyond momentary feelings to invoke an integrative, evaluative assessment of one's life as a whole. Assessing both provides a powerful and thorough index of subjective well-being (Linley, Maltby, Wood, Osborne, & Hurling, 2009).

Thus, happiness can be understood in multiple ways. Recently, some positive psychologists and others have revived a conceptual distinction dating back to Aristotle between feeling happy and living a good life, also known as Eudaimonia (see Deci & Ryan, 2008; Keyes & Annas, 2009). Meaningfulness is seen as more central to eudaimonia than to simply feeling good.

Meaning can be a purely symbolic or linguistic reality, as in the meaning of a word. The question of life's meaning thus applies symbolic ideas to a biological reality. Meaningfulness is presumably both a cognitive and an emotional assessment of whether one's life has purpose and value. People may feel that life is meaningful if they find it consistently rewarding in some way, even if they cannot articulate just what it all means. Our focus is on meaningfulness and the meaning of life.

Operationally, we let participants in our studies define happiness and a meaningful life in whatever way they chose, rather than imposing specific definitions on them. We also assumed (and

found) that the two overlap substantially. Nonetheless, we assume that there are real differences and that people's responses would reflect these. In particular, it should be possible to have a highly meaningful life that is not necessarily a happy one (e.g., as religious missionary, political activist, or terrorist).

Theory: Happiness is Natural, Meaning is Cultural

We assume the simpler form of happiness (i.e., affect balance rather than life satisfaction), at least, is rooted in nature. All living creatures have biological needs, which consist of things they must obtain from their environment in order to survive and reproduce. Among creatures with brains and central nervous systems, these basic motivations impel them to pursue and enjoy those needed things, and the satisfaction of those needs generally produces positive feeling states. Conversely, negative feelings arise when those needs are thwarted. Hence affect balance depends to some degree on whether basic needs are being satisfied. Possibly life satisfaction too could be swayed by whether, in general, one is getting the things one wants and needs. Human beings are animals, and their global happiness therefore may depend on whether they generally get what they want and need.

If happiness is natural, meaningfulness may depend on culture. All known cultures use language, which enables them to use meanings and communicate them. There is a large set of concepts underlying language, and these concepts are embedded in interconnected networks of meaning. These are built up over many generations, and each new person comes to learn most of these meanings from the group. Appraising the meaningfulness of one's life thus uses culturally transmitted symbols (via language) to evaluate one's life in relation to purposes, values, and other meanings that also are mostly learned from the culture. Meaning is thus more linked to one's cultural identity than is happiness.

Although this special issue is devoted to "personal meaning," meaning itself is not personal but rather cultural. It is like a large map or web, gradually filled in by the cooperative work of countless generations. An individual's meaningfulness may be a personally relevant section of that giant, culturally created and culturally transmitted map.

One crucial advantage of meaning is that it is not limited to the immediately present stimulus environment. Meaningful thought allows people to think about past, future, and spatially distant realities (and indeed even possibilities). Related to that, meaning can integrate events across time. Purpose, one important component of meaningfulness, entails that present events draw meaning from future ones. The examples listed above of meaningful but unhappy lives (e.g., oppressed political activist) all involve working toward some future goal or outcome, such that the future outcome is highly desirable even though the present activities may be unpleasant. Meaningfulness may therefore often involve understanding one's life beyond the here and now, integrating future and past. In contrast, happiness, as a subjective feeling state, exists essentially in the present moment. At most, happiness in the form of life satisfaction may integrate some degree of the past into the present — but even so, it evaluates the past from the point of view of the present. Most people would probably not report high life satisfaction on the basis of having had a good past but while being currently miserable.

Consistent with that view that meaning integrates across time, Vallacher and Wegner (1985, 1987) found that higher levels of meaning were consistently marked by longer time frames. As people shifted toward more concrete and less meaningful ways of thinking about their actions, they became more focused on the here and now. Thus, a wedding can be described both as "making a lifelong commitment to love" and as "saying some words in a church." The former invokes a longer time span and is more meaningful than the latter. Likewise, work by Huta and Ryan (2010) found

that hedonic pursuits (related to happiness) produced short-term benefits, while long-term ones depended more on eudaimonic activities to cultivate fulfillment and the good life, which were mainly linked to meaningfulness.

Indeed, Baumeister (1991) observed that life is in constant change but strives for stability, and meaning is an important tool for imposing stability on the flux of life. For example, the feelings and behaviors that two mates have toward each other will fluctuate from day to day, sometimes even momentarily, but culturally mandated meanings such as marriage define the relationship as something constant and stable. (And marriage does in fact help to stabilize relationships, such as by making it more difficult for the partners to dissolve the relationship.) Such ongoing involvements undoubtedly contribute to the degree of meaningfulness a life has. Put another way, the pursuit of goals and fulfillments through ongoing involvements and activities that are interlinked but spread across time may be central to meaningfulness.

Again, we assume there is substantial overlap between meaningfulness and happiness. Humans are social beings, and participation in social groups is a vital means by which people satisfy their basic needs in order to survive and reproduce. Hence interpersonal involvement, among other things, is surely vital for both meaning and happiness. We do not intend to dwell on such things as interpersonal belongingness, because our focus is on the differences between meaningfulness and happiness, but we acknowledge their importance. Although both happiness and meaningfulness may involve interpersonal connection, they may differ as to how the person relates to others. Insofar as happiness is about having one's needs satisfied, interpersonal involvements that benefit the self should improve happiness. In contrast, meaningfulness may come instead from making positive contributions to other people.

Although needs can be satisfied in a selfish fashion, the expression and development of selfhood tends to invoke symbolic relations and is therefore more a matter of meaning than happiness. MacGregor and Little (1998) found that the meaningfulness of individuals' personal projects depended on how consistent they were with core aspects of self and identity. Many animals have the same basic needs as humans, but the human self is far more elaborate and complex than what other animals exhibit. Part of the reason is that the human self is created and structured on the basis of the cultural system (see Baumeister, 2011). Prior research and theory on living the good and meaningful life have emphasized doing things that express who one is (e.g., Ryff & Singer., 2008; Waterman, Schwartz, & Contie, 2008). On that basis, we predicted that selfhood would have different relationships to happiness and meaningfulness. Happiness would mainly be linked to whether the self's needs are being satisfied. Meaningfulness would be far more broadly related to what activities express and reflect the symbolic self, some of which would involve contributing to the welfare of others (individually or in general) or other culturally valued activities.

We turn now to report on our empirical investigations. These consisted of a series of surveys and a follow-up experiment aimed at differentiating meaningfulness and happiness They were set up partly to test the above hypotheses but also partly as exploratory, hypothesis-generating research. Our work was guided by the theories we have elucidated, but we were also deliberately open to new and unexpected patterns that emerged.

Method

Our main source of data was a series of surveys. A national sample of 397 adults (68% female; ages 18-78; $M = 35.5$ years old; 48.1% were parents) participated in this online study. The study consisted of three surveys, and participants received $10 for completing the first survey and $5 for each subsequent survey completed.

One week later, participants completed the first follow-up survey. Three weeks later (i.e., one month after the initial survey), participants completed the final follow-up survey. All items unless noted were answered on a 1-7 scale, with not at all/very or infrequency/frequently as end points.

At both Time 1 and Time 3, participants responded to several items that were used to create the main indices. Happiness was measured with three items (with 7-point scales): "In general I consider myself happy;" "taking all things together, I feel I am happy;" "compared to most of my peers, I consider myself happy." Meaningfulness was identified by three parallel items: "In general I consider my life to be meaningful;" "compared to most of my peers, my life is meaningful;" and "taking all things together, I feel my life is meaningful." All scale reliabilities were high, alphas > .94.

Results and Discussion

The goal of this research was to differentiate meaning and happiness. Our analysis strategy was therefore as follows. We computed correlations of both meaningfulness and happiness with our other measures, each controlling for the other. Then we identified pairs of opposite findings, such as a variable that correlated significantly positively with happiness but significantly negatively with meaningfulness. Cases in which there was a significant correlation with one variable in one direction but a nonsignificant, even negligible correlation in the opposite direction with the other variable were also sought, because these indicate target variables that are exclusively related to either meaningfulness or happiness but not both. (Again, the correlations with either happiness or meaningfulness control for the other variable.) In general we ignored cases in which both correlations were in the same direction, even if one was significant and the other not, and we only mention them if relevant to elucidating other findings.

The large number of correlations raises the possibility of capitalizing on chance, so our results must be considered tentative and await replication. Still, we used consistent and rigorous criteria for what we found, and we also sought to emphasize patterns of conceptually relevant findings. We did exclude a few correlations that stood out as unrelated to the general patterns and that made little or no sense, as they may well reflect the emergence of some ostensibly significant findings by chance. This project was intended to generate ideas, and future work would be desirable to verify and build on them.

Direct Relationship between Meaningfulness and Happiness

Happiness and meaningfulness were substantially and positively intercorrelated. As Table 1 shows, the correlations in the two surveys were .63 and .70. Thus, in this sample, being happy and regarding one's life as meaningful are similar, related attitudes.

We went looking for variables that correlated positively with happiness but negatively with meaningfulness (also vice versa). Meeting these criteria thus required overcoming substantial conceptual and methodological obstacles, which a priori increases their interest value. In other words, we sought variables that have opposite connections to two things that are themselves highly positively intercorrelated. Again, though, we corrected happiness for meaningfulness, and vice versa, so our results are based on what is different about them — which, to reiterate, was the primary focus of this investigation.

Meaning and happiness thus feed off each other, but they do have some substantially different roots. Some things contribute to both, but others really are quite differentiating and specific. This investigation was a search for the latter.

Satisfaction of Basic Needs and Wants

Almost by definition, basic needs are natural, and so by our theory the satisfaction of these needs should be mainly related to happiness. We assume that all animals, even those who cannot think a simple sentence, have basic needs and feel good when these are satisfied. Among humans, goal satisfaction generally brings positive feelings, and happiness has been linked to how successful people are at their various personal projects (MacGregor & Little, 1998).

We describe the findings in narrative fashion here and present the statistics in tables. Table 1 covers the results for this section.

One first sign of whether one's needs are being satisfied is whether people consider their lives to be easy or difficult. Finding one's life to be relatively easy was linked to more happiness. Finding life difficult (a separate item) was linked to lower happiness. Neither variable correlated significantly with meaning, and in fact the trends were in the opposite direction for meaning as compared with happiness. Considering life a struggle was negatively correlated with happiness but approached a significant positive relationship with meaningfulness (consistent with the view that some people live highly meaningful but not very pleasant lives, perhaps because their meaningful activities require strenuous and unpleasant activities). Thus, finding one's life easy or difficult is a matter of happiness and not of meaning.

Good health is certainly a very basic and rather universal desire. How healthy people considered themselves to be was a positive contributor to happiness, but it was irrelevant to meaningfulness. Healthy and sick people can have equally meaningful lives, but the healthy people are happier than sick ones.

Good and bad feelings often arise from the satisfaction versus thwarting of desires. The more often people felt good, the happier they were. The more often they felt bad, the less happy they were. Neither was related to meaning. These findings also support the understanding of happiness as affect balance: Feeling good rather than bad most of the time was apparently one valuable predictor of overall happiness.

The links to feeling good and bad generally are not simply an artifact of a general pattern that all good feelings are exclusive to happiness, which would be the case if this were simply a matter of definition. By way of contrast, feeling bored is unpleasant but also suggests a lack of meaningful involvement, and feeling bored was negatively related to both happiness and meaningfulness.

Money is a product of culture rather than nature, but people use money to satisfy many of their most basic and natural desires. Being able to buy the things one needs had a significant positive relationship to happiness but was irrelevant to meaning. Another item that asked about being able to buy the things one wants (as opposed to needs) yielded quite similar results. Scarcity of money reduced both meaningfulness and happiness, but the effect was considerably larger on happiness than meaningfulness. In terms of variance accounted for, monetary scarcity was twenty times more detrimental to happiness (5%) than to meaning (0.25%). Overall, then, having sufficient money to purchase objects of desire (both necessities and luxuries) was important for happiness but made little difference as to whether life was meaningful.

We asked whether "economic fluctuations affect my happiness." Agreement with that item predicted significantly lower happiness but had a nonsignificant positive trend on meaningfulness. In principle, recognizing that one's happiness depended on the economy could operate equally in good or bad directions, but in empirical fact people associate that recognition with bad things. This may reflect the general principle that bad things have stronger effects than good ones (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). In any case, recognizing that one is dependent on the economy has more impact on happiness than meaning.

The survey included a list of activities and asked whether they "reflect me," as in whether they express something personal about the respondent. As we shall see below, the majority of these were highly relevant to meaningfulness and not happiness. One exception, however, was that people who agreed that "how I spend money reflects me" were happier than those who disagreed, whereas the effect on meaningfulness, though significant and also positive, was considerably weaker. Thus, again, it appears that spending money in ways relevant to one's own values, goals, and motivations contributes more to happiness than to meaningfulness.

One might wonder whether all money items simply evoked happiness more than meaningfulness. Against that view, the item "balancing finances reflects me" was completely irrelevant to happiness but significantly related to meaningfulness. Balancing finances does not usually entail satisfying basic needs in any way. (Rather, it involves integrating past, present, and future actions and obligations, possibly also planning and strategizing, and therefore it may be much more relevant to meaning than happiness.) It is thus not a simple link that money is tied to happiness. Instead, it appears that spending money to get desired things is what contributes to happiness.

Taken together, these results fit the general view that having one's needs satisfied, being able to obtain what one wants and needs, and (presumably on that basis) feeling good more often than bad are central to happiness. They have relatively little to do with a meaningful life. Insofar as wants and needs arise naturally, these patterns also fit the broader view that happiness is rooted in nature and in the motivational patterns instilled by nature. People are happy when they get what they want. Meaning is to be found elsewhere.

Past, Present, and Future, and Temporal Integration

One central idea behind this investigation is that happiness is about the present whereas meaning is about linking events across time, thus integrating past, present, and future. Meaning links experiences and events across time, whereas happiness is mostly in the moment and therefore largely independent of other moments.

The more time people reported having devoted to thinking about the past and future, the more meaningful their lives were — and the less happy. Table 2 reports the effects. The effects were roughly similar for thinking about the future and the past, and these items individually significantly related to happiness (the more thinking, the less happiness) but had marginal trends toward positive relations to meaning. Another item revealed that the more people reported imagining the future, the more meaningful their lives were, but the less happy. Thus, thinking beyond the present moment, into the past or future, was a sign of the relatively meaningful but unhappy life. Happiness is not generally found in contemplating the past or future.

In contrast, the more time people reported thinking about the present, the happier they were, although this was weak and only marginally significant at $p=.07$. (The results might be weakened because many unpleasant events force an acute awareness of the present, thereby diluting the statistical effect linking happiness to focusing on the present.) Thinking about the present was irrelevant to meaningfulness. Thus, whereas meaning is found in connecting to past and future, happiness may be mainly in the present.

Because of the potential importance of these differences in time span, we conducted a second study. We asked 124 student participants to rate a series of adjectives and phrases as to how strongly they were related to meaningfulness and happiness, respectively. The order of rating meaningfulness and happiness was counterbalanced. Table 2 shows these results as well as the ones from the main survey. Being focused on the future and being long-term oriented were more strongly associated with meaning than with happiness. In contrast, being short-term oriented went with happiness more

than meaning. Happiness was moreover rated as considerably more short-lived and fleeting than meaningfulness. Conversely, meaningfulness was rated as much more lasting and permanent than happiness.

These striking differences in time span do not reflect a simple tendency to associate all time items with meaning rather than happiness. As already noted, the proportions of time spent feeling good and feeling bad were correlated with happiness and not with meaningfulness. These findings underscore the notion that happiness is present-oriented, because the items about frequency of feeling good and bad refer specifically to how one feels in the current moment (even though they aggregate across many moments).

Despite the implication that happiness is fleeting, our data, like many other findings, suggest that happiness is actually rather stable. Both meaning indices and happiness indices were quite stable from Time 1 to Time 3, $r(329) = .76$ for meaning and $r(325) = .82$ for happiness, $ps < .001$. The measures of happiness thus show that people's self-rated happiness was quite consistent across the month from the first to the third time point. (Other data show happiness to be remarkably stable even across many years; Costa, McCrae, & Zonderman, 1987). Our participants' rated impression that happiness is fleeting and unstable is thus incorrect. The reason behind that apparent mistake may be that happiness in fact consists of enjoyment of the present, so it does not inherently link together different moments in life (unlike meaning). Its link to the present may encourage the inference that it is unstable and transient. The actual stability of happiness might therefore reflect stable aspects of personality and temperament, so that people who are dispositionally inclined to enjoy the present and shrug off or avoid problems are consistently happier in the present, moment after moment, than other people.

Taken together, these findings support the hypothesis that happiness is about the present — whereas meaningfulness is about linking past, present, and future together. The fact that the amount of time spent thinking about the present was only weakly related to happiness is not surprising, because when people are experiencing serious problems and difficulties, they may be forced to think about the present, and such all-too-common episodes will statistically dilute the general tendency for happiness to involve focus on the present. In other words, happiness is in the present, but this fact is obscured in the data by the fact that some suffering is also highly present-oriented. In any case, the more time people spent thinking about past and future, the more meaningful their lives were, and the less happy they were. People seem to use meaning to link past, present, and future together, presumably in part so as to guide their present actions. Recognizing links from the present to past and future would seemingly be helpful for success at meaningful enterprises, including education, career, and long-lasting intimate relationships.

Social Engagement

Belongingness. Although our focus is on differences between happiness and meaningfulness, we introduce this section with a brief account of some key similarities, because they provide context for the differences. Many studies have shown that being socially connected to others is positively related to happiness, and indeed being alone in the world or being lonely is generally a strong detriment to happiness (Myers, 1992; Cialdini & Patrick, 2009). Social connections are also important to meaningfulness, and most people's reports on what makes their lives meaningful feature relationships with family and friends (Debats, 1999; Lambert, Stillman, Baumeister, Fincham, Hicks, & Graham, 2010). In that regard, happiness and meaningfulness are quite similar: Both benefit from a strong social network and both suffer when the person is isolated or socially deprived (see also Fave, Brdar, Freire, Vella-Brodrick & Wissing, 2011).

In our data, the positive links between social connection and both happiness and meaningfulness were quite evident (Table 3). Feeling connected to others was linked independently to both, as was thinking that others feel connected to oneself. Recalling hours spent alone, and predicting future hours spent alone, had significant negative correlations with both happiness and meaningfulness. Frequency of spending time with friends was positively related to happiness and fell just short of a positive correlation with meaning. Percent time spent with loved people was significant with meaning, but surprisingly irrelevant to happiness, possibly because loved ones can be difficult at times. People with more meaningful lives also agreed that "relationships are more important than achievements," and that item was unrelated to happiness, though it was in the same positive direction and therefore the item did not meet our criteria for inclusion.

Interpersonal differences. Our findings indicate, however, that happiness and meaning are far from identical as to how the social connections are implemented. Social connectedness may be important for both, but the direction and focus differ. Happiness seems intertwined with the benefits one receives from others. Meaningfulness is instead associated with the benefits that others receive from the self.

Two key items asked people to rate whether they were givers or takers. Being a giver was positively related to meaningfulness, while being a taker was negatively related to it. Meaning is thus about being a giver rather than a taker. With happiness, the correlation trends were in the opposite direction. Although neither correlation with happiness was significant, their difference was, Z=.350, p<.001. Thus, takers may well be happier than givers. In any case, the clear and strong finding is that givers have more meaningful lives than takers.

Another item asked to what extent the participant generally tries to help others in need. More helping was strongly related to meaningfulness, but it had a nonsignificant trend in the opposite direction with happiness (as if helping others detracted from happiness). To be sure, in the simple (uncorrected) analyses, meaningfulness and happiness were both positively correlated with saying that one generally tries to help the needy, meaningfulness: $r(390) = .24$, $p < .001$; happiness: $r(390) = .11$, $p < .05$. But most of that appears to be due to the impact of meaningfulness. That is, helping others increases meaning, and that benefit carries over to increase happiness too — but with the increase in meaning controlled for, helping others has if anything a negative impact on happiness. When we corrected meaningfulness for happiness (Table 3), the effect remained the same, $r\text{p}(387) = .23$, $p < .001$, whereas when we corrected happiness for meaningfulness, the impact of helping others switched from positive to negative, $r\text{p}(387) = -.06$, *ns*. Thus, if anything, pure happiness is linked to ***not*** helping others in need. But in everyday life, helping others makes the helper's life meaningful and thereby increases happiness.

Taking care of children is a highly relevant activity, because people associate parenthood with personal fulfillment but it often requires downplaying the self and devoting oneself to caring for the children. Our sample was evenly divided between parents and nonparents. For non-parents, taking care of children had no relationship to either happiness or meaningfulness, but for parents, the more time they spent taking care of children, the more meaningful their lives were. (Time spent taking care of children had no relation to happiness and if anything trended toward reducing happiness.)

These findings illuminate the so-called "parenthood paradox," which is that most people want to be happy and want to become parents, but those two goals are in conflict insofar as becoming a parent often reduces happiness (e.g., Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003; cf. Nelson et al., in press). Baumeister (1991) proposed that the parenthood paradox can be resolved by proposing that people seek not just happiness but also meaning, and so they become parents because the gains

in meaningfulness offset any losses in happiness. The present findings are consistent with that conclusion, which has broader implications for positive psychology, because they suggest that people will pursue meaningfulness even at the expense of happiness.

Arguing would seemingly test the limits of interpersonal connection, because arguing is regarded by most people as unpleasant. The item that asked people to rate whether arguing is something that reflects and expresses them yielded significant correlations in opposite directions. The more that people regarded arguing as something that reflects them, the more meaningful but the less happy their lives were. Thus, perhaps surprisingly, the effects of arguing were similar to those of helping others. We propose that meaningfulness comes in part from being involved in things one regards as important (see next section), and sometimes one has to argue for these. But the unpleasantness of arguing may contribute to the lower happiness. Happy people may prefer not to argue and may certainly think that arguing is something they do only reluctantly rather than as a frequent expression of their inner self and values.

Thus, to summarize, meaningfulness is associated with doing things for others. Happiness is associated with others doing things for oneself. Engagement with others that sacrifices the self or that builds relationships over time contributes to meaningfulness, but it has a negligible or negative link to happiness.

Meaningful Involvement

A smattering of findings (see Table 4) suggested that serious involvement with things beyond oneself and one's pleasures promotes meaningfulness, often to the detriment of happiness. These contribute to the view that happiness and meaningfulness are different and that pursuing happiness is not the only goal people have in life.

Two big-picture items asked people how many positive events and how many negative events have happened in their lives. These were both positively correlated with meaning. In contrast, the more negative events, the lower one's happiness. Having more positive events contributed to higher happiness, though the effect was considerably smaller than the effect of negative events (3.24% vs. 14.44% of variance). Thus, again, bad was stronger than good (Baumeister et al., 2001). Regardless, the more novel finding is that experiencing many bad events is linked to high levels of meaningfulness but low happiness.

Stress can be simply a matter of external misfortune visited on the self, but it can also stem from being involved in meaningful yet difficult undertakings. The more stress people recalled having, the more meaningful they rated their lives as being, and also the less happy they were. Much stress is future oriented, and one clear fact about stress (dating back to the classic executive monkey studies by Brady, 1958) is that one can be under considerable stress even if nothing bad ever happens. Stress has more to do with the anticipation of possible bad events (i.e., threats) than with actually enduring misfortune. Meaningfulness connects present to future, and the link between stress and meaningfulness is consistent with that conclusion.

Worrying showed the same pattern. Consistent with intuitions, more worrying was linked to lower happiness. However, perhaps surprisingly, greater frequency of worrying was associated with higher levels of meaningfulness. People with very meaningful lives worry more and have more stress than people with less meaningful lives. Again, we think this indicates that worrying comes from involvement and engagement with important activities that go beyond the self, and beyond the present (worry is ineluctably future-oriented) and so worrying may often be an unavoidable part of a meaningful life, even though it detracts from happiness.

One item asked "how often do you reflect on struggles and challenges you have faced in your

life?" This may be the past-oriented companion to future-oriented worry. This item too yielded relatively strong and opposite correlations. The more people reflected on their prior challenges and struggles, the more meaningful their lives were, but the less happy. Reflecting on past struggles and challenges is likely a matter of integrating past and present, possibly with an eye to the future as well, so this finding is consistent with the temporal integration aspect of meaningfulness.

Helping people in need likewise is one form of meaningful involvement in many lives. It too was linked to more meaning and less happiness.

Participants were asked to predict how many hours they expected to spend in deep thought each day (in hours). Expecting to do a lot of deep thinking was positively correlated with meaningfulness, but negatively with happiness. In contrast, reporting on the amount of time one had recently spent in deep thought had no relation to either meaningfulness or happiness. Perhaps deep thought is not as miserable as people assume! But meaningful involvements often require or stimulate serious thinking and mental effort, and so the more people are involved in ongoing challenges, the more they may expect to engage in such cognitive activity. Such expectations, and by implication such involvements, increase meaning but reduce happiness.

Self

Our theory proposed that one's cultural identity should involve meaning more than happiness. Our findings support this conjecture. Considering issues of personal identity as important was positively related to meaning, but it trended toward a negative relation to happiness. Concern with issues of identity presumably indicates directing effort at constructing the self, and such issues may especially arise during difficult times, which might account for any negativity toward happiness. The important finding, however, is that caring about how one's self is defined within the society is part of having a meaningful life.

Other relevant evidence comes from activities that express the self. We had participants rate a series of 37 activities, including both general activities (working, eating, relaxing) and specific activities (texting, fixing information technology problems, meditating), as to whether each one reflected the self. See Table 5 for the full list. These findings confirmed that doing things that express the self is about meaning, not happiness. The 37 items yielded 25 significant correlations with meaningfulness, all positive. In contrast, only two "reflects me" items correlated significantly positively with happiness, and five actually yielded significant negative correlations. A possible reason for these findings is that expressing the self increases the sense of knowing one's so-called true self, and such knowledge has been linked to higher meaningfulness in life (Schlegel, Hicks, King, & Arndt, 2011). Thus, in general, doing things that express and reflect the self are important for making life meaningful, but they are mostly irrelevant and occasionally even detrimental to happiness. We present the irrelevant and detrimental ones separately, starting with the latter.

Higher meaning but lower happiness were significantly correlated with feeling that the following activities "reflect me": taking care of children, buying gifts for others, watching television, worrying, and arguing. Except for the television item, these items reflect concern for others and exerting effort on behalf of others, as well as being involved in ongoing activities with future goals. Such concern and efforts on behalf indicate meaningful connections with others, but putting others ahead of the self seemed to detract from happiness (at least the portion of happiness that is independent of meaningfulness). These findings are thus consistent with the results we reported earlier on interpersonal connections: Devoting the self to helping others detracts from happiness but increases meaning. The findings about ongoing activities with future goals are consistent with the pattern that meaningfulness connects across time, and it extends that to issues of selfhood.

These findings are also consistent with previous evidence provided by MacGregor and Little (1998). They showed that activities were regarded as more meaningful to the extent that the people felt they could be themselves (in colloquial phrase) while performing them. That is, activities that were consistent with core themes and values of the self brought more meaningfulness than other activities.

Meaningfulness had additional correlates that were simply unrelated to happiness. The more people thought that commuting, talking on phone, cooking, cleaning, maintaining the house, meditating, emailing, social networking, praying, planning, waiting on others, listening, reading for pleasure, snoozing, and balancing finances reflected them, the higher their lives were on meaningfulness. These items were however irrelevant to happiness, all yielding nonsignificant trends in the opposite direction (i.e., toward less happiness). Many of these involve exerting effort and self-regulation, presumably to maintain one's place in society by living up to its standards (commuting, cleaning, maintaining house, emailing, social networking, planning, waiting on others, balancing finances). Although many of these items (commuting, cleaning, maintaining house, meditating, planning, balancing finances) require expending effort, the effort is partly done to benefit the self, so these do not detract from happiness the way working for others does. The "waiting on others" item however did appear here, again consistent with the view that, interpersonally, meaningfulness is about being a giver.

Many of these items also involve linking events across time, such as by doing things that may not be inherently rewarding but that are done in the present for the sake of the future (commuting, cleaning, maintaining house, meditating, emailing, social networking, praying, planning, reading for pleasure, balancing finances). Some readers may think that praying is inherently pleasant, but that item had a trend toward a negative relation to happiness, presumably because people do their most frequent and earnest praying when they experience difficulties, threatening possibilities, and misfortunes. In any case, once again, meaning links across time, whereas happiness does not.

Self-regulation often involves rewarding oneself for meeting goals. The item asking whether people ever reward themselves predicted meaningfulness, such that *not* rewarding yourself went with lower meaningfulness of life. Part of having a meaningful life is learning to reward yourself, presumably according to ongoing plans and schedules and commitments, thus reflecting good self-regulation

We also included some self-perception items. Considering oneself to be wise and creative predicted higher levels of meaningfulness, but those items were irrelevant to happiness. Both wisdom and creativity may indicate an integrative (and meaningful) understanding of events. At the risk of oversimplifying, wisdom is a matter of understanding what is true and real (Worthy, Gorlick, Pacheco, Schnyer, & Maddox, 2011), whereas creativity involves seeing beyond what is real to what is possible. Both wisdom and creativity seem highly human traits that are presumably much more developed among cultural than among merely social (let alone solitary) animals. Hence the links between meaningfulness and both creativity and wisdom align with the idea that meaningfulness is cultural.

Regarding oneself as anxious was linked to higher meaningfulness but lower happiness. Obviously anxiety is unpleasant, so it detracts from happiness. Why a more meaningful life should be linked to seeing oneself as more anxious is open to several interpretations. Presumably having meaningful involvements that link past, present, and future raises more possibilities for threats, leading to worry (which as we saw was also positively related to meaningfulness). If one is involved in a long-term activity that has occupied past efforts and demands more in the present to work

toward an uncertain but appealing future outcome, the possibility of failure is substantial, and this may increase anxiety. Anxiety is strongly linked to social exclusion, so the possibility of being rejected in the future may afflict people whose thoughts link present and future. In contrast, living in the present moment is what happiness is all about, and it would only rarely invoke anxiety.

The anxiety findings thus invoke the possibility that anxiety has a temporal structure that links the present to the future. Terror Management Theory has contended that anxiety is essentially and generally rooted in fear of death (e.g., Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon , 1997), which is a future event insofar to the anxiety about death is experienced by people who are currently alive. More broadly, a survey of the anxiety literature by Baumeister and Tice (1990) concluded that there are two main sources of anxiety, the larger one being social exclusion, and the lesser one being fears of death and injury — but, again, both of these are encountered as possible future events more than as current states. (In fact, the immediate impact of being socially excluded or rejected is not a surge of anxiety but rather an emotional numbness, in which the person typically reports feeling nothing; for meta-analysis, see Blackhart et al., 2009.) A theme of this work has been that meaning links the present to the future, whereas happiness is based in the present. Anxiety detracts from happiness because happiness is reduced when one feels bad in the moment. Anxiety is linked to higher meaningfulness because it is based on connecting the present to possible future events.

Thus, the self is apparently more about meaning than happiness. The self integrates across time, insofar as one is the same person day after day, year after year. Caring about personal identity, doing things that reflect and express the self, and seeing oneself as wise, creative, and anxious all were linked to a meaningful life, but they had negligible or negative relations to happiness.

Conclusions and Integration

Meaningfulness and happiness are positively correlated, so they have much in common. Many factors, such as feeling connected to others, feeling productive, and not being alone or bored contribute similarly to both. Yet the two are distinct, and the focus of this exploratory investigation has been to identify the major differences in correlates of happiness (corrected for meaning) and meaningfulness (corrected for happiness). Correcting highly correlated variables for each other can reverse effects, which may contribute to some inconsistency in the literature. Future research should distinguish happiness from meaningfulness, because many ostensible contributors to happiness are in fact mainly associated with meaning and have little or no direct contribution to happiness except by way of increasing meaning. For example, helping others may actually increase happiness because it increases meaningfulness, which in turn contributes to happiness, but when we corrected for the effect on meaningfulness, the pure effect of helping others was if anything the opposite: a reduced level of happiness.

Our findings suggest that happiness is mainly about getting what one wants and needs, including from other people or even just by using money. In contrast, meaningfulness was linked to doing things that express and reflect the self, and in particular to doing positive things for others. Meaningful involvements increase one's stress, worries, arguments, and anxiety, which reduce happiness. (Spending money to get things went with happiness, but managing money was linked to meaningfulness.) Happiness went with being a taker more than a giver, while meaningfulness was associated with being a giver more than a taker. Whereas happiness was focused on feeling good in the present, meaningfulness integrated past, present, and future, and it sometimes meant feeling bad. Past misfortunes reduce present happiness, but they are linked to higher meaningfulness — perhaps because people cope with them by finding meaning.

The Highly Meaningful But Unhappy Life

Our data enable us to construct a statistical portrait of a life that is highly meaningful but relatively low in happiness, which illuminates the differences between happiness and meaningfulness. This sort of life is not generally considered an ideal to emulate. But people who sacrifice their personal pleasures in order to participate constructively in society may make substantial contributions. Cultivating and encouraging such people despite their unhappiness could be a goal worthy of positive psychology.

Our findings depict the unhappy but meaningful life as seriously involved in difficult undertakings. It was marked by ample worry, stress, argument, and anxiety. People with such lives spend much time thinking about past and future: They expect to do a lot of deep thinking, they imagine future events, and they reflect on past struggles and challenges. They perceive themselves as having had more unpleasant experiences than others, and in fact 3% of having a meaningful life was due to having had bad things happen to you.

Although these individuals may be relatively unhappy, several signs suggest they could make positive contributions to society. High meaningfulness despite low happiness was associated with being a giver rather than a taker. These people were likely to say that taking care of children reflected them, as did buying gifts for others. Such people may self-regulate well, as indicated by their reflecting on past struggles and imagining the future, and also in their tendency to reward themselves.

One can also use our findings to depict the highly happy but relatively meaningless life. People with such lives seem rather carefree, lacking in worries and anxieties. If they argue, they do not feel that arguing reflects them. Interpersonally, they are takers rather than givers, and they devote little thought to past and future. These patterns suggest that happiness without meaning characterizes a relatively shallow, self-absorbed or even selfish life, in which things go well, needs and desires are easily satisfied, and difficult or taxing entanglements are avoided.

Concluding Remarks

Positive psychology has made great strides in learning about how to cultivate happiness (e.g., Lyubomirsky, 2008). Although it is hard to dispute the appeal of happiness, recent work has begun to suggest downsides of valuing and pursuing happiness (Mauss et al., 2011), as well as benefits from unhappy and negative feelings (e.g., Forgas, 1997). Hence we recommend that positive psychology focus some of its energy on understanding meaningfulness, including understanding what differentiates it from happiness. Meaningfulness appears to be central to the difference between feeling happy and Eudaimonia (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2008). Clearly happiness is not all that people seek, and indeed the meaningful but unhappy life is in some ways more admirable than the happy but meaningless one.

Our exploratory findings are broadly consistent with the framework that happiness is natural but meaning is cultural. Although humans use money and other cultural artifacts to achieve satisfaction, the essence of happiness was still consist in having needs and wants satisfied. The happy person thus resembles an animal with perhaps some added complexity. In contrast, meaningfulness pointed to more distinctively human activities, such as expressing oneself and thinking integratively about past and future. Put another way, humans may resemble many other creatures in their striving for happiness, but the quest for meaning is a key part of what makes us human, and uniquely so.

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Table 1: Affect Balance and Fulfilling Basic Wants and Needs

	Happiness	Meaningfulness
Overall		
Life is easy	.35***	-.002
Life is struggle	-.43***	.08
Self healthy (T3)	.31***	.04
Feelings		
Percent time feel good	.65***	.06
Percent time feel bad	-.59***	.04
Percent time feel bored	-.20**	-.22**
Money		
Able buy needs (T3)	.29***	-.03
Able buy wants (T3)	.38***	-.11
Scarcity of money (T2)	-.22**	-.05
How I spend money reflects me (T2)	.14**	.06
Balancing finances reflects me (T2)	-.03	.17**
Economic fluctuations affect happiness	-.14**	.07

*n*s range from 297 to 390. Both meaning indices and happiness indices correlated with one other (that is, from Time 1 to Time 3), $r(329) = .76$ for meaning and $r(325) = .82$ for happiness. Hence, all reports are partial correlations, which corrected the influence of happiness for meaningfulness analysis and meaningfulness for happiness analyses. Correlations are between Time 1 assessments of happiness and meaningfulness and Time 1 outcomes, unless noted by a T and the assessment period in parentheses.

+ $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 2: Past, Present, and Future

	Happiness	Meaningfulness
Thinking about		
Past	-.32***	.08+
Present	.10*	.04
Future	-.18***	.09+
Past & future (combined)	-.31***	.11*
Imagining the future	-.11*	.18***

*n*s ranged from 383 to 387. All reports are partial correlations, which corrected the influence of happiness for meaningfulness analyses and meaningfulness for happiness analyses. Correlations are between Time 1 assessments of happiness and meaningfulness and Time 1 outcomes.
$+ p < .10$ $* p < .05$ $** p < .01$ $*** p < .001$

Experimental study

	Happiness	Meaningfulness	t-test
Future-focused index	4.12	5.11	8.71***
Permanence index	3.81	5.26	10.22***

$n = 124$; 45% male, $M_{age} = 21$. Ratings were on a 1-7 scale. Items that made up the future-focused index were short-term (reverse-coded), long-term, and future-focused. Items that made up the permanence index were fleeting (reverse-coded), short-lived (reverse-coded), lasting, and permanent.

$+ p < .10$ $* p < .05$ $** p < .01$ $*** p < .001$

Table 3: Social /Interpersonal Involvement

	Happiness	**Meaningfulness**
Feeling connected to others	.37***	.27***
Thinking that others feel connected to oneself	.32***	.27***
Recalling hours spent alone (T2)	-.13*	-.14*
Predicting future hours spent alone	-.14*	-.12*
Frequency of time with friends (T2)	.18*	.08
Percent time spent with people one loves	.02	.17**
Relationships are more important than achievements (T3)	.04	.12*
Arguing reflects me	-.13**	.10**
I am a giver (T3)	-.17**	.32***
I am a taker (T3)	.06	-.07
Tries to help the needy	-.06	.23***
Recall time taking care of children	-.06	.23***
Parents:		
Recall taking care of children	-.06	.21***
Non-Parents:		
Recall taking care of children	.002	.05

*n*s range from 297 to 390. All reports are partial correlations, which corrected the influence of happiness for meaningfulness analysis and meaningfulness for happiness analyses. Correlations are between Time 1 assessments of happiness and meaningfulness and Time 1 outcomes, unless noted by a T and the assessment period in parentheses.

+ $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 4: Meaningful Involvement

	Happiness	**Meaningfulness**
How many positive events	.18**	.42***
How many negative events	-.38***	.18**
Stress (T2)	-.47***	.18**
Time spent worrying (T2)	-.24***	.11*
Reflect on struggles and challenges	-.33***	.17**
Expecting to spend time deep thinking	-.14**	.14**
Time spent deep thinking	-.02	.03

*n*s range from 297 to 390. All reports are partial correlations, which corrected the influence of happiness for meaningfulness analysis and meaningfulness for happiness analyses. Correlations are between Time 1 assessments of happiness and meaningfulness and Time 1 outcomes, unless noted by a T and the assessment period in parentheses.
+ $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 5: The Self

	Happiness	Meaningfulness
Extent to which each activity "reflects me" (all T2)		
Working*	.05	.11*
Commuting*	-.01	.11*
Socializing*	.12*	.12*
Relaxing alone*	.03	.01
Eating*	.04	.06
Exercising*	.07	.08
Praying*	-.07	.25***
Watching TV*	-.10*	.15**
Shopping*	.01	.09+
Cooking*	.02	.14**
Cleaning*	-.01	.19***
Talking on phone*	-.03	.16***
Being online*	-.01	.02
Taking care of kids*	-.13*	.28***
Sex*	-.05	.13**
Sleeping*	-.01	.08
Maintaining house	.03	.17**
Waiting on others	-.05	.14**
Worrying	-.28***	.16**
Planning	-.01	.12*
Organizing	-.03	.12*
Listening	-.07	.22***
Partying with alcohol	.08	-.03
Partying without alcohol	.12*	-.01
Reading for pleasure	-.01	.19***
Reading for work	.01	.10*
Balancing finances	-.02	.16**
Snoozing	-.02	.14**
Arguing	-.13*	.11*
Meditating	-.04	.19***
Emailing	-.05	.10*
Texting	.05	.03
Social networking	-.04	.16**
Procrastinating	-.07	.03
Fixing IT problems	-.06	.04
Buying gifts for others	-.13*	.27***
Buying gifts for self	.04	.04
Consider myself (all T3)		
Wise	-.06	.33***
Creative	-.03	.18**

Anxious	-.41***	.16**
Reward yourself (yes=1; no=2)	.04	-.13*

Notes: Items with an asterisk (*) came from Kahneman et al. (2006) paper on daily activities.

For the self-concept items, participants responded using a 1-7 scale, where 1 = not at all and 7 = very. The sentences started with these stems and then the trait of interest was inserted: "In general I consider myself_____;" Taking all things together, I feel I am _____;""Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself _____." These three items were used to create the wise, creative, and anxious indices. All alphas were above .90.

*n*s range from 297 to 390. All reports are partial correlations, which corrected the influence of happiness for meaningfulness analysis and meaningfulness for happiness analyses. Correlations are between Time 1 assessments of happiness and meaningfulness and Time 1 outcomes, unless noted by a T and the assessment period in parentheses.
+ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$