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Exploring the Antecedents of Happiness: Reconceptualization of Human Needs with Glasser's Choice Theory

Turgut Turkdogan

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Abstract

This chapter aims to present a review about the antecedents of happiness by using human needs perspective. The chapter briefly includes the definition of happiness as a scientific matter, definition of the need theories approach for explaining the antecedents of happiness, definitions and discussions about the major need theories and reconceptualization of human needs with Glasser's Choice Theory, and also empirical studies that investigate the relationship between basic needs satisfaction and happiness. It is also thought that the conclusion obtained from this chapter will encourage researchers to investigate the antecedents of happiness with Glasser's conceptual framework and also invite researchers to study in a new research area with a new conceptual perspective.

Keywords: happiness, subjective well-being, human needs, choice theory, William Glasser

1. Introduction

Happiness refers to positive sensations about quality of life, and it is also perceived as an important life value for attaining a good life in almost all over the world [1–3]. Although various philosophical currents have exhibited several attempts to attain a common conceptualization about happiness, it is still a contradictive matter to define a unique individual perception with a universalist perspective. However, scientific approach suggests determining particular criteria for defining this unique perception in the current positive psychology [4, 5].

Happiness is one of the most investigated concepts in the positive psychology field [5], and it is a holistic and also a subjective perception about the quality of life, that includes ``affective

and cognitive aspects of well-being [6]. Positive psychology conceptualizes happiness in terms of *subjective well-being*, and subjective well-being includes three related components termed as (a) positive affect, (b) negative affect, and (c) life satisfaction [4]. Positive affect includes favorable emotions like feeling interested, excited, strong, proud, etc in life; negative affect includes unfavorable emotions like feeling distressed, upset, guilty, hostile, etc. [7]; and life satisfaction is a cognitive evaluation about the quality of life that includes favorable beliefs about having good living conditions and achieving personal life purposes [4, 6]. In light of this conceptualization, feeling positive emotions more frequently and feeling negative emotions rarely in life, and having positive beliefs about the quality of life refers to a good level of subjective well-being [8].

1.1. Discussions about the antecedents of happiness: what makes humans happy?

After defining happiness as a scientific concept, an important discussion has occurred about what the antecedents of happiness are in life. In other words, what makes humans happy? Wilson, who first investigated subjective well-being as a scientific concept in his doctoral dissertation, concluded that the “happy person emerges as a young, healthy, well-educated, well-paid, extroverted, optimistic, worry-free, religious, married person with high self-esteem, high job morale, modest aspirations, of either sex and of a wide range of intelligence” (p. 294) [9]. Moreover, a series of studies examined the validity of Wilson’s conclusion and investigated the variables such as age, gender, income, education level, job satisfaction, health conditions, marriage, personal characteristics, intelligence, religious belief and life values, which are thought to be in relationship with subjective well-being [4, 10, 11].

The level of income or money is one of the most investigated variables in subjective well-being studies. Researchers investigated the relationship between money and subjective well-being, and the general implication about this relationship shows that low levels of income have a significant relationship with the low levels of happiness and money has a buffering effect for preserving individuals from unhappiness. On the other hand, the good level of money does not guarantee happiness in life [10, 12–16]. Also, age is another variable which was highly investigated in subjective well-being studies, and researchers specifically investigated the role of youthfulness for attaining happiness [9]. However, the results show that there is a U-shaped relationship between age and happiness, rather than a linear relationship [4, 10, 13, 17, 18]. Young people and the elderly are the happiest groups in life, but the middle-aged adults have risk factors for being unhappy because of the stressful life events in these years, such as dealing with behavioral and emotional problems of adolescent children, health problems of the aging parents, and making important decisions about the future like marriage or professional career, etc. [13, 17–19]. Another variable investigated most in subjective well-being studies is gender, and it can be said that although females exhibit more negative affections compared to males, there is not a significant variation in the general level of happiness between men and women [10, 11, 15].

To sum up, the researchers concluded that there is a limited effect of sociodemographic variables for explaining the antecedents of happiness. Thus, the new tendency in research indicates that studying psychological variables would bring more important findings, rather than the sociodemographic [11]. After two decades from Myer and Diener’s this conclusion, the

research findings which were obtained from 100 thousand people in 70 countries are also emphasizing the limited effect of the sociodemographic variables (such as health, education, income, living as married, gender, religiosity, trust, unemployment, age, number of the children, etc.) for explaining the happiness [20]. Hence, it seems like a correct decision to explore the psychological predictors of happiness for attaining a comprehensive understanding about the antecedents of the happiness.

1.2. A prominent approach for attaining happiness: need theories

An important discussion about the psychological antecedents of subjective well-being refers to *need theories* that emphasize the basic needs satisfaction for attaining happiness, and the major assumption of need theories claims that happiness is felt only if human needs can be satisfied sufficiently [4, 9]. Fundamentally, this is an old assumption which was propounded by the antique age philosophers, and also named as hedonism. For example, Aristuppus (400 years before Jesus) described the purpose of life as obtaining high level of pleasure, and Hobbes submitted to following human desires for attaining happiness, and also De Sade described the purpose of life as following exciting feelings and pleasure. On the other hand, Aristotle objected to this hedonist assumption and claimed that following just pleasure in life would bring insatiability for human beings, and he also suggested virtue as a life purpose in his eudaemonist view [4, 5].

Obviously, happiness cannot be the only criterion for a good life, and both of the views named as hedonism and eudemonism have great values for the human life. However, the eudaemonist view refers to psychological functioning or psychological well-being, and the hedonist view refers to happiness or subjective well-being in the field of positive psychology [5, 21–23]. Therefore, the studies investigating the antecedents of happiness account for the fact that psychological needs need to be satisfied in order to attain happiness. Besides, the research results support the assumption that satisfaction of the psychological needs make significant contributions to predicting subjective well-being almost all over the world [12, 15, 16, 24, 25–30].

1.3. What are human needs?

At this stage, another important discussion has occurred about what the human needs are. Additionally, is it possible to conceptualize the human needs with a universal perspective for the whole humanity? Although people speak different languages in the world, Chomsky showed that a universal language development process for all humanity is possible [31]. Also, Ekman showed that people from different cultures share universal emotions, and it is possible to identify the emotional expressions in the human face universally [32]. In light of these instances, it is also possible to conceptualize human needs with a universal perspective. First of all, the all living creatures share a universal biological structure. Within this universal biological structure, our nervous system exists and the basic principles of the nervous system are avoiding suffering and approaching to pleasure [33, 34]. Thus, reducing the tension in our nervous system which appears at the lack of the fulfillment of the basic needs is the fundamental view for attaining happiness in the need theories [4–9].

However, humans are not just simple biological creatures, and it is not so easy to explain the complex pattern of human needs. As a matter of fact, the investigation of the human needs has been the focus point of many researchers for a long time. For instance, Murray defended the validity of tension reduction assumption about the basic needs satisfaction and also classified human needs under twenty headlines such as achievement, affiliation, aggression, autonomy, exhibition, nurturance, play, sexuality, understanding, etc. [35]. Although it can be accepted as the first remarkable attempt about classification of the human needs, this classification refers to a wide range of needs that include both supportive and opposite qualities about the human needs in the same conceptual framework. Besides, not every individual feels the absence of these needs equally, and some of these needs are not perceived as essential for every individual. It can be said that only two needs were investigated prominently among these twenty needs, namely affiliation and achievement. In other words, the affiliation need, which refers to establishing close friendships or looking for presence of other people (especially in stressful situations), and the achievement need, which refers to accomplishing difficult things or overcoming obstacles, are the two prominent human needs in Murray's classification system [36].

Maslow's needs hierarchy can be accepted as one of the most famous attempt about classification of the human needs, and these needs are described as physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs, and need for self-actualization [37]. Maslow classified the human needs hierarchically and divided these needs as the bottom level needs (including physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness and love needs) and the top level needs (including esteem needs, and need for self-actualization). Maslow also claimed that the individuals must satisfy the most basic needs in order to satisfy the highly developed needs. The bottom level of needs such as food, security, and also belongingness is common needs which can be observed among other living creatures, and a developed need like esteem can be observed among the developed creatures, but the need for self-actualization can be accepted as a human-specific need. So, it can be said that the need for self-actualization is the most prominent need in this hierarchy. However, self-actualization might be accepted as a theoretical concept rather than an empirical concept, and the scientific measurement of this concept might be seen as a controversial matter [38, 39].

Self-determination theory, which aims to explain the importance of internal motivation for attaining psychological growth and health, presents another classification system about the basic psychological human needs [21]. According to self-determination theory, satisfaction of the basic psychological needs is the key point of psychological well-being for all humans, and these basic psychological needs include autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Correspondingly, Ryff classified psychological needs as self-acceptance, positive relations with other people, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth for attaining psychological well-being [40]. However, these theories actually emphasize positive psychological health, personal growth, and full-functioning in life which were conceptualized in the psychological well-being perspective [5]. On the other hand, the fundamental point that is emphasized in the subjective well-being perspective is about reducing tension which appears at the lack of fulfillment of the basic needs, and satisfying the basic needs for attaining happiness as emphasized in the Glasser's Choice Theory [41].

There are also other current need theories that demonstrate a need-based approach to subjective well-being in addition to Glasser's Choice Theory. For instance, Costanza and his colleagues integrated the approaches of Max-Neff's Matrix of Human Needs and Nussbaum and Glover's Basic Human Functional Capabilities, and they defined the human needs for attaining happiness as subsistence, reproduction and care, security, affection, understanding, participation, leisure, spirituality, creativity/emotional expression, identity, and freedom [42–44]. However, it seems difficult to distinguish the operational definitions of these needs from each other. For instance, subsistence need (food, shelter, vital ecological services, healthcare, etc.) and security need (safety from violence at home and in public, care for the sick and elderly, etc.) include similar essentials for maintaining life in safety. Similarly, affection need (attachment, respect, love and care, etc.) and identity need (status, recognition, sense of belonging, etc.) also include similar aspects to belonging need. It is crucial to state that as the comprehensiveness of an eclectic approach increases, the risk for the internal consistency also increases. Consequently, a conceptual framework with high consistency should aim to achieve the comprehensive definition in the shortest possible way.

Similarly, another need-based approach to subjective well-being aims to integrate the prominent human needs which are emphasized in the major need theories [29]. The determination progress of these needs is based on the empirical research in the literature, and the prominent human needs for attaining happiness are named as basic needs for food and shelter, safety and security, social support and love, feeling respected and pride in activities, mastery, and self-direction and autonomy. The research results, which were obtained from 123 countries about the need-based subjective well-being, support the significance of the relationship between need satisfaction and happiness almost universally. However, this attempt seems to investigate the validity of the general assumptions of the need theories in an eclectic way, rather than presenting a new consistent theoretical perspective for attaining happiness. At this juncture, Glasser's Choice Theory might be accepted as a clear and consistent conceptual framework which aims to explain the basic human needs for attaining happiness with a theoretical perspective.

2. Reconceptualization of the human needs with Glasser's Choice Theory: five basic needs

Choice Theory is accepted as the theoretical background of William Glasser's psychotherapy approach which is called Reality Therapy, and it emphasizes that we always make internal decisions whatever the external conditions are, and the aim of our behaviors is to satisfy our basic needs for attaining happiness in life. In choice theory approach, it is mentioned that humans come into the world with five basic needs in the long evolution process, and these needs are named as survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun [45–48]. Moreover, the major assumption of choice theory about the basic needs is that happiness is felt only if the five basic needs can be satisfied sufficiently and a person who is unhappy has not been able to satisfy at least one of these five basic needs [41, 48].

2.1. Survival need

Survival need defines the biological essentials for maintaining our life, and it includes the basic physiological needs such as food, water, shelter, sex, health, and safety [48–50]. First and foremost, all living creatures feel an enormous desire to survive although the living conditions are so compelling, and directing the behavior of the organism to fulfill the basic biological essentials is the primary function of the nervous system. The tension which appears at the lack of the fulfillment of the basic physiological needs is already an important risk factor for unhappiness [33, 34]. Besides, the pleasure of fulfillment of the basic physiological needs can be considered an important source for attaining objective happiness of the organism, and determining the level of this pleasure is also possible with a biological measurement in today's modern world [34–51].

On the other hand, it can be said that having sufficient resources for physiological needs such as high nutritional value foods, potable water, secure sheltering conditions, and general health insurance is considerably associated with the level of income. Thus, research findings indicate that although a good level of income does not guarantee happiness in life, it has a buffering effect for preserving the individuals from unhappiness about the insufficient resources for basic biological essentials [10, 12–16]. As a matter of fact, when the role of income is considered for attaining survival need satisfaction, it would not be a realistic expectation to expect for a balanced distribution of happiness in such a world in which there is an unbalanced distribution of income [52–55]. Unfortunately, unbalanced income distribution is not the only problem in the world for attaining survival need satisfaction. Millions of people around the world are still trying to combat catastrophes such as epidemic diseases or wars and terrorist attacks. Although the research results support the validity of psychological needs satisfaction beyond physiological needs for attaining happiness [29, 56], and also the psychology currents try to describe and understand the human-specific psychological needs, it would be wrong to ignore that we live in such a world where even the basic physiological needs are not fulfilled adequately yet. Thus, although Glasser emphasized the equality of the importance on five basic needs theoretically and also accepted the physiological and psychological needs as the basic needs as a whole, satisfaction of the survival need can be considered as a control variable for investigating the role of psychological needs in prediction of happiness.

2.2. Love and belonging need

Human beings have an innate orientation about establishing emotional attachments with other people, and love and belonging need defines the desire to satisfy emotional relationships in our lives especially with the people important to us like family members, friends or a girlfriend/boyfriend [45–48]. Actually, love and belonging need is also perceived as a basic human need by the other need theorists as well. For instance, Bowlby believed that humans are in search of bonding with other people starting from cradle till grave, and he built the attachment theory solely based on the love and belonging need [57]. Affiliation need which refers to establishing close friendships or seeking presence of other people (especially in stressful situations) is also a prominent need of Murray's need classification [36]. Maslow accepted belongingness and love need as a bottom level need just like physiological needs or

safety need, and attaining the top level needs like esteem need or self-actualization need is only possible by fulfilling belongingness and love need according to this hierarchical classification [37]. Deci and Ryan also defined the relatedness need as one of the major psychological basic needs for attaining psychological well-being in self-determination theory [21]. Similarly, Ryff determined the need for positive relations with other people as one of the major components of the psychological well-being [40].

Also, the research results show that the love and belonging need is a significant predictor of happiness. For instance; the relation of satisfaction with friends and family members exhibits a significant relationship with subjective well-being [12, 15]. Similarly, perceived social support or social connectedness is a significant predictor of subjective well-being [29, 58–60]. Also, the research results indicate a significant relationship between satisfaction of relatedness need and subjective well-being [23, 27, 28, 30, 61]. Moreover, marriage, which can be considered as an important source for the love and belonging need, is a robust predictor of happiness in life. As a matter of fact, married people are happier than the never married, divorced, or widowed people in life, even after the variables such as age or income are controlled [4, 10, 13, 17, 62, 63]. Furthermore, the research results show that the sociocultural sources of the love and belonging need such as social relations, connectedness and common good orientation in a society are also significant predictors of happiness beyond the individual sources [64].

It should also be emphasized that love and belonging need has a unique importance among the other basic needs in the choice theory. Although it would be quite problematic, it might be possible for an individual to try to fulfill his/her satisfaction of survival, power, freedom, and fun needs all alone without the need of any company. However, it is absolutely impossible to try to fulfill satisfaction of love and belonging need on one's own. Moreover, satisfaction of the basic psychological needs such as power, freedom, and fun in a balanced way is only possible by maintaining interpersonal relationships in a balanced context. Actually, most of the problems we experience in fulfilling our psychological needs arise from the problems in the interpersonal relationships in our lives. Thus, love and belonging need can be accepted as the most difficult need to satisfy in the choice theory [48].

2.3. Power need

Power need is defined as having a sense of control over the processes in our living space by activating our personal capabilities, and these capabilities refer to feelings such as being worthy, competitive, successful, principled, and respected. Correspondingly, the achievement need which refers to accomplishing difficult things or overcoming obstacles is one of the most prominent human needs in Murray's classification system [36]. Furthermore, Maslow conceptualized the esteem need as a top level human need in his hierarchical classification [37]. Deci and Ryan accepted the competence need as one of the major psychological basic needs for attaining psychological well-being as well [21]. Additionally, Ryff's classification system also includes similar needs like environmental mastery, personal growth, and purpose in life for attaining psychological well-being [40].

As a matter of fact, humans as social beings are in an effort to gain a respectful position in their social environment. For instance, we hate to be underestimated by other people, and we try

to stay away from social circles that may harm our self-respect. Also, we are quite competitive for attaining prestigious jobs, titles, and positions. Thus, power need defines the desire for personal growth and success identity which aims to improve our competencies to gain a respectful position in life [48]. Nevertheless, it can be regarded as an important indicator of the power need satisfaction to achieve personal goals in educational degrees, career plans or desired economic standards. On the other hand, the behaviors which are used for power need satisfaction can be accepted as a controversial issue in daily life. The improper use of the power may prompt suppressing, downgrading or even restraining people aggressively. However, the conceptualization of the power need in the choice theory opposes to this view, and choice theory defines the power need as a line of personal empowerment and growth which is far from interpersonal conflicts, and also cares about protecting the benefits of others [46–48].

Research in the literature exhibits supportive results for the significance of the relationship between power need satisfaction and happiness. For instance, self-esteem can be accepted as a robust predictor of happiness in almost all over the world [11, 15, 65]. Also, similar results show that the variables such as assertiveness need [25], learned resourcefulness [66], respect need [26, 29], and competence need [23, 27, 28, 30] are significant predictors of happiness. Furthermore, findings show that having a purposeful and meaningful life, or having a successful goal pursuit in life are also significant predictors of happiness [67–70].

2.4. Freedom need

Freedom need is defined as the desire to have a personal space for acting freely in life, to maintain life, stay away from pressures, and to move with free will when making decisions about the course of life. Freedom need is also considered as a protective factor for the self, by opposing to improper use of power by others. Additionally, satisfaction of freedom need is so crucial to realizing the creative potential of the humans in daily life [47, 48].

Additionally, the major need theories emphasize the importance of freedom as a prominent psychological need under the heading of autonomy need in their approaches [5, 35, 40], and there are also many research findings indicating that satisfaction of autonomy need is a significant predictor of happiness [16, 23, 27–30].

Actually, having the sense of freedom can be considered as a prerequisite for attaining happiness in life. The research results which were obtained from 100 thousand people in 55 countries also emphasize the importance of individualism and the value of human rights in a society as a cultural orientation for attaining happiness [1]. As a matter of fact, happiness is regarded as an important life purpose in the individualist cultures which attach importance to sense of freedom as an indispensable life value. On the other hand, the need for freedom and autonomy can be perceived as an undesired condition that negatively affects the social cohesion in collectivist cultures. Thus, happiness exhibits a consistent association with individualism rather than collectivism almost all over the world [1, 15, 71, 72].

2.5. Fun need

Fun need defines the pleasant occasions in life, such as playing games, following a sense of humor, having hobbies concerning art, literature, or sport, and also discovering new experiences

about life. Also, laughing can be accepted as the best descriptor of the fun need satisfaction in daily life. As a matter of fact, Aristotle argued that the ability for laughing with laughter is the most distinctive feature that distinguishes the human beings from other living creatures in the world. Furthermore, the fun need is accepted as an indispensable condition for learning activities according to the choice theory, and human beings draw away from learning activities as the learning environment become less fun [46–48]. At this juncture, it is crucial to state that although some of the theories accept the play need or the leisure need as a psychological need in their conceptual framework, the fun need has never been conceptualized as a specific psychological need for the human beings in any need theory.

Research in the literature exhibits supportive results for the significance of the relationship between fun need satisfaction and happiness. For instance, leisure engagement has a significant relationship with subjective well-being [65, 73,]. Besides, leisure satisfaction exhibits significant predictive roles on subjective well-being after personality traits like extraversion or neuroticism are controlled [74]. Moreover, the results of a meta-analysis provide strong evidences for positive relationship between leisure engagement and subjective well-being, and leisure engagement which includes games, sports, or cultural experiences appears to be at least as strongly related to subjective well-being as much as the variables like occupational status or income [75]. Thus, it can be said that the conceptualization of the fun need as a specific and important human need for attaining happiness can be accepted as a correct assumption of the choice theory [41].

3. Final considerations

We were able to define a unique individual perception like happiness based on scientific criteria all over the world within a universalist perspective. We were also able to define the important sociodemographic variables in order to achieve happiness all over the world. However, we have not yet reached a unanimous acceptance about which psychological sources are needed for humans to achieve happiness. That is precisely the reason why investigating the psychological antecedent of the happiness can be seen as an interesting area for researchers.

An important approach that will lead researchers to discover the psychological antecedents of happiness can be considered as need theories. As a result of the precious efforts exhibited by the major need theorists, today we are clearly aware that satisfaction of the human needs has unique predictive role for happiness universally. However, we have not yet reached a consensus about conceptualizing human needs with a universal perspective. Although Murray describes certain needs about human nature, some of these needs are not perceived as essential for every individual, and Glasser dissociates his views from Murray by attaining a universal need conceptualization for all human-beings. Furthermore, Glasser theoretically dissociates his views from Maslow by objecting to the hierarchical classification of the human needs, and by attributing equal importance to the five basic needs. According to Glasser, some of these five basic needs can be considered more important for attaining happiness with an individualistic consideration. For instance, the satisfaction of power need may be accepted more important than the freedom need for attaining happiness among some individuals. However, theoretically both the power need and the freedom need are essential needs at a basic level for all human-beings universally, and all of the five basic needs have equal importance. Glasser

dissociates his views from Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory and also Ryff's psychological well-being theory by defending the validity of tension reduction assumption about the basic needs satisfaction for attaining happiness. Also, the current need-based approaches about happiness are trying to reveal the unique predictive role of the basic needs satisfaction in an eclectic way, rather than presenting a new consistent theoretical perspective for attaining the happiness [29, 42]. At this juncture, Glasser's Choice Theory might be accepted as a precious conceptual framework which aims to explain the basic human needs for attaining happiness within a universalist perspective.

The major assumption of choice theory about the basic needs is that happiness is felt only if the five basic needs (survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun) can be satisfied sufficiently and a person who is unhappy has not been able to satisfy at least one of these five basic needs [48]. In a study which can be accepted as the first attempt to explore the validity of this major assumption, the researchers investigated the role of basic needs satisfaction in predicting subjective well being in university life context [41]. The findings of the study showed that five basic needs explained the variance in subjective well being in a large effect, with all of five basic needs significantly contributing to the prediction. Moreover, the findings also support the major assumption of choice theory about the role of five basic needs for attaining happiness. Consequently, the researchers concluded that the students who have the ability to make choices and to express themselves freely, who have an attempt to have fun, who feel themselves worthy and successful, who have enough safety and shelter conditions, and who have good relationships with significant people to themselves in their lives, are more close to happiness than others.

However, no other empirical studies have been found in the literature that directly investigated the antecedents of happiness using Glasser's conceptual framework about human needs. Thus, it would be a new research area to investigate the validity of Glasser's reconceptualization of human needs for attaining happiness. At this point, this theoretical review can be considered as an invitation for researchers to investigate the antecedents of the happiness with Glasser's conceptual framework as a new research area.

Author details

Turgut Turkdogan

Address all correspondence to: tturkdogan20@gmail.com

Department of Psychological Counseling and Guidance, Pamukkale University, Turkey

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