

Human Motives, Happiness, and the Puzzle of Parenthood: Commentary on Kenrick et al. (2010)

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Abstract

It is presumed that happiness, and its associated positive emotions, signal to the individual that an adaptive problem has been solved, thus allowing her to shift attention to other concerns, perhaps those “higher” on the revised motivational hierarchy proposed by Kenrick et al (2010, this issue). In this commentary, we present a sampling of longitudinal and experimental evidence supporting two predictions: (a) that people will feel happy after realizing fundamental human motives, and (b) that in turn, the experience of happiness will galvanize people to fulfill these very motives. However, one conspicuous exception to our argument that happiness is both a consequence and a stimulus of human motives is parenthood, which paradoxically is associated with decrements in well-being. Two broad sets of explanations to account for this puzzle are discussed. The first involves evolutionary accounts: that children interfere with lower level needs, that short-term costs of having children are outweighed by long-term benefits, and that the modern-day context of raising children is at odds with our ancestors’ environments. The second possibility involves measurement: namely, problems with study designs and the difficulty of capturing on paper or computer screen what is precisely so wonderful and elusive that children grant their parents.

Keywords

happiness, positive emotions, hierarchy of needs, motives, parenting paradox, evolutionary psychology

What do most individuals hope to achieve during their lifetimes? Not surprisingly, a happy, healthy life populated with friends, family, and success tops people’s lists of desires (e.g., King & Broyles, 1997). Notably, with the exception of “happiness,” all of these wishes correspond with Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, and Schaller’s (2010, this issue) revision of Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs. In this commentary, we argue that although happiness does not attain the formal status of a fundamental human need, it is intrinsically and bidirectionally associated with all the human motives specified by the revised hierarchy, with one intriguing exception.

From an evolutionary perspective, the experience of happiness and the positive emotions that are its hallmark (e.g., joy, satisfaction, enthusiasm, serenity, interest, pride) indicate to the individual that adaptive problems like nourishing one’s hunger, locating a safe shelter, or maintaining relationships will be or have been solved (Buss, 2000; Hill & Buss, 2008); presumably, the individual is then able to redirect resources and attention to a “higher” step of the motivational ladder. By contrast, negative affect signals that an immediate response is needed to unpleasantness or danger in the environment (Clore, 1994). Accordingly, both well-being and ill-being

likely play a critical role in evolutionary accounts of human motivation and behavior. Our aim here is to begin to explore precisely how each of the fundamental human motives is linked to feelings of well-being. Notably, we believe the relationship can be characterized as representing two causal directions. First, fulfilling each of the motives in Kenrick et al.’s hierarchy is expected to promote enhanced well-being. Second, being a happy person and experiencing a preponderance of positive emotions is expected to bolster the likelihood that a motive is successfully achieved.

To this end, we offer a necessarily cursory review of primarily longitudinal and experimental evidence in support of these two causal pathways.¹ Readers cannot fail to notice, however, that the one conspicuous exception to our contention that happiness is both a consequence and a stimulus of human motives is the parenting motive. Indeed, becoming a parent has

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been found to be associated with decrements in happiness (Baumeister, 1991). Several promising explanations to account for this anomaly are discussed at the end of this article, after a description of the bidirectional relationship of happiness with the other human motives in Kenrick et al.'s renovated hierarchy.

Satisfying Fundamental Human Motives Makes People Happy

Starting at the base of the hierarchy, to nobody's surprise, satisfying one's physiological needs puts people into a happy mood.² In the case of hunger, participants in one study who ate a cooked breakfast reported feeling more content than those who did not eat breakfast (Smith, Kendrick, Maben, & Salmon, 1994). Another investigation confirming the obvious revealed that women who ate an apple or a piece of chocolate felt more joyous than women who ate nothing (Macht & Dettmer, 2006). Indeed, eating a variety of food samples and recalling previous food experiences is associated with pleasant emotions more so than unpleasant emotions (Desmet & Schifferstein, 2008). Similarly, fulfilling the physiological need of a restful night's sleep is also linked to happiness. Better quality of sleep and an earlier bedtime predicted cheerfulness the following day (Totterdell, Reynolds, Parkinson, & Briner, 1994), as did shorter times to the first period of REM sleep (Berry & Webb, 1985). In addition, people who slept normally reported greater positive affect the next day than did those who experienced a night of sleep deprivation (Franzen, Siegle, & Buysse, 2008). Although this area may represent one instance when anecdotal evidence is entirely sufficient, taken together, the experimental evidence suggests that fulfilling immediate physiological needs like hunger and sleep yield an abundance of positive emotions.

For the next human motive—self-protection—the research again shows that enhancing safety and diminishing threats impacts subsequent well-being. For example, families who were originally living in high-poverty areas (characterized by social disorder and violence) were randomly assigned to either receive housing assistance and relocate to low-poverty areas, receive housing assistance, or receive no housing assistance. Those families who were given assistance and moved to neighborhoods low in poverty (which are presumably safer) showed improvements in family well-being relative to families in the other two conditions (Rosenbaum & Harris, 2001). Another study also suggested that relocating from substandard housing to quality housing was associated with enhanced mental health (Evans, Wells, Chan, & Saltzman, 2000). In sum, feeling safe directly impacts a person's sense of well-being. As Diener, Arora, and Diener (2009) showed so persuasively, a sense of safety—assessed by whether individuals have had money or property stolen from them during the past year—strongly correlated with life satisfaction across several hundred thousand respondents in 145 nations.

A wealth of research further shows that social affiliation affects feelings of happiness. In one study, highly affiliative adolescent females reported better moods than their less

affiliative counterparts (Wong & Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). Similarly, a daily diary study demonstrated that people who felt more understood during their daily social interactions showed greater happiness (Lun, Kesebir, & Oishi, 2008). Social affiliation seems to provide a buffer against negativity—for example, participants who had been initially rejected reported increases in well-being when they were reminded of their group membership (Knowles & Gardner, 2008). Indeed, social support has been found to be a highly effective coping strategy in times of strain, distress, or trauma. For example, women who actively sought social support to help cope with cancer after surgery showed greater natural killer cell activity (Levy et al., 1990), and people who experienced the sudden death of their spouse showed better adjustment if they confided in others close to them (Pennebaker & O'Heeron, 1984). Finally, students hypnotized to feel loneliness reported reduced positive affect relative to students hypnotized to feel a sense of belongingness (Cacioppo et al., 2006). Connections with others—whether in person or even just as a cue—enhance feelings of well-being (cf. Brown & Harris, 1978).

Happiness has also been shown to be strongly correlated with (but distinct from) a sense of high status and self-esteem (e.g., Diener & Diener, 1995; Furnham & Cheng, 2000). Establishing the causal relationship, however, has been more difficult. In one experiment, feelings of self-esteem were manipulated by asking participants to repeat either positive or negative self-evaluative statements (e.g., "I am a likeable person" or "I can't seem to do anything right"). Those individuals who repeated positive self-evaluations reported more elation and less depression relative to those who repeated negative ones (Coleman, 1975). However, this benefit appears to hold only for people with relatively high self-esteem (Wood, Perunovic, & Lee, 2009).

Furthermore, relatively low-status members of society report reduced well-being. For example, people with low socioeconomic status indicated greater anxiety following a stressful medical examination (A.E. Simon, Steptoe, & Wardle, 2005), and females living in low-status, poverty-stricken areas reported diminished well-being (Ross, 2000).³ Although experimental evidence is scarce, studies that have boosted people's status in the laboratory have shown a variety of benefits. For example, in an artificially created corporate office setting, participants assigned to play the role of "managers" were rated more positively on multiple dimensions than those assigned to take on the role of "clerks" (Humphrey, 1985). All together, the evidence suggests that greater self-esteem and status may promote well-being.

An entire research literature addresses the relevance of happiness to the mate acquisition and mate retention motives described by Kenrick et al. Beyond just having close friends or family members with whom to affiliate, establishing a romantic relationship and maintaining that relationship have both been consistently found to be related to enhanced well-being. Numerous survey studies report significant correlations between marital status and well-being (e.g., Kozma & Stones, 1983; Mastekaasa, 1994a), but interpreting these data is

problematic. Somewhat more persuasive are large-scale, prospective investigations, which have shown that, on average, people experience a short-term but significant boost to their well-being after marrying (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003). Moreover, being unhappily married predicts reduced well-being (i.e., depressive symptoms) many months later, even when initial levels of well-being are controlled (Beach & O'Leary, 1993). Finally, an innovative study showed that, in a threatening situation, holding hands with a spouse reduces the unpleasantness more than holding hands with a stranger or not holding another person's hand at all, especially when the marital relationship is strong (Coan, Schaefer, & Davidson, 2006). This combined evidence suggests that both acquiring and preserving an intimate relationship yield boosts to one's well-being.

Being Happy Increases the Likelihood of Successfully Realizing Human Motives

According to our simple thesis, not only should satisfying a fundamental human need make one happy, but that happiness in the first place should bring about the successful fulfillment of each need and propel a person through the hierarchy. Beginning with physiological needs, studies show that individuals induced into a joyous mood are more motivated to eat (Macht, Roth, & Ellgring, 2002), consume more food (Patel & Schlundt, 2001), report eating for enjoyment (Macht, 1999), rate food samples as more sweet and pleasant (Greimel, Macht, Krumhuber, & Ellgring, 2006), and sleep more hours each night (Emmons & McCullough, 2003) than those who are induced into a negative mood. Being happy also impacts the likelihood of illness and the experience of pain. For example, participants with a positive emotional disposition were less susceptible to the common cold than those without such a disposition (Cohen, Alper, Doyle, Treanor, & Turner, 2006; Cohen, Doyle, Turner, Alper, & Skoner, 2003), and the experience of positive affect led to a higher tolerance for pain (Alden, Dale, & DeGood, 2001; Cogan, Cogan, Waltz, & McCue, 1987; Tang et al., 2008). In sum, positive feelings may encourage people to more effectively meet their most basic needs.

Positive feelings may also prompt individuals to more accurately judge potential hazards in their environments. Although "good judgment" is always debatable, sometimes it calls for not overreacting to threats. For example, participants in happy moods interpreted fewer homophones as threatening (e.g., *die* vs. *dye*) relative to those in angry or anxious moods (Barazzone & Davey, 2008). In addition, in comparison with dysphoric individuals, nondysphoric individuals looked away from images of threatening faces more so than neutral faces (Bradley et al., 1997). And another study showed that people reading about a happy event subsequently report less risk from potential natural disasters, illnesses, and traumas (Johnson & Tversky, 1983). This evidence suggests that happy feelings help people avoid overestimating threats to their safety and well-being in potentially ambiguous situations. However, other research indicates that happier people do not necessarily deny threats

when they are real. For example, participants with more positive and optimistic beliefs were more, not less, likely to attend to and recall self-relevant threatening health information about vitamin use (Aspinwall & Brunhart, 1996).

Research relevant to the affiliation step of Kenrick et al.'s motivational ladder shows that positive affect undoubtedly plays a role in the drive to develop social bonds. For example, positive affect stemming from a success triggers more attentiveness to the social environment, more efforts to initiate conversation with a stranger, and greater helpfulness toward others (Isen, 1970; McMillen, Sanders, & Solomon, 1977). Furthermore, people in an experimentally induced positive mood were relatively more attracted to another person (Gouaux, 1971; May & Hamilton, 1980), showed increases in communication with a confederate, offered more intimate disclosures (Cunningham, 1988), and felt more connected to others (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Similarly, participants who shared a humorous situation together—a context in which positive emotions are evoked—subsequently felt closer to one another (Fraley & Aron, 2004). Even judges who evaluated the yearbook photos of college students viewed women displaying sincere positive emotion as more sociable; in addition, those same judges were more inclined to approach the women who appeared the happiest and had higher expectations for a pleasant interaction (Harker & Keltner, 2001). In sum, being in a good mood facilitates the development of relationships by encouraging interaction, approach-oriented behavior, and enjoyable exchanges with others (cf. Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005).

With respect to the middle of the motive hierarchy, a number of experimental studies have shown that individuals put into a happy mood feel more efficacious (e.g., Baron, 1990) and describe themselves more favorably (e.g., Barsade, 2002; Sarason, Potter, & Sarason, 1986; Wright & Mischel, 1982). Furthermore, people who display happiness in their facial expressions are rated as more confident (Harker & Keltner, 2001) and dominant (Hareli, Shomrat, & Hess, 2009) than those displaying fear or sadness. These findings suggest that positive emotions encourage feelings of esteem that are recognized not only by the self, but also by others.

With respect to mate acquisition and retention, increasing evidence suggests that individuals characterized by high well-being many years prior to marriage are more likely to get married (Lucas, 2007; Lucas et al., 2003; Marks & Fleming, 1999; Mastekaasa, 1992), to have satisfying relationships (Headey, Veenhoven, & Wearing, 1991), and to stay married (Booth & Amato, 1991; Mastekaasa, 1994b). In a striking finding, relative to their less happy counterparts, women displaying positive emotions in their college yearbook portraits were more likely to be married several years later, more likely to express satisfaction with their marriages three decades later, and less likely to have experienced marital discord or to have been divorced (Harker & Keltner, 2001). It is interesting to note that people who eventually get divorced or separated tend to be less happy prior to marriage (Doherty, Su, & Needle, 1989; Kim & McKenry, 2002; Lucas, 2005,

2007). Collectively, this evidence suggests that being a happy person makes it more likely that one will ultimately get married and that one will enjoy relatively stronger, longer lasting relationships in the future.

The Puzzle of Parenthood

The central tenet undergirding our review is that happiness and its associated positive emotions signal to the individual that one or more adaptive problems have been solved (Hill & Buss, 2008) and essentially give him or her permission to shift attention to other problems—perhaps those that are higher on the motivational hierarchy. Accordingly, we have thus far presented evidence supporting the prediction that people will feel happy after realizing fundamental human motives. Next, we extended this reasoning to argue and provide evidence that, in turn, the experience of happiness should galvanize people to fulfill these very same motives. Taken together, this evidence suggests that the adaptive value of happiness lies not only in its role as a psychological reward for the fulfillment of fundamental human needs described by Kenrick and his colleagues, but also as a stimulus, catalyst, or motivator.

However, a glaring gap in the literature—and the resulting fissure in our arguments—raises an interesting puzzle. That is, research suggests that despite the palpable and widely reported desire of most people to have children, parenthood is not associated with increased happiness but, on the contrary, is most frequently linked to decreased well-being (e.g., Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976; Evenson & Simon, 2005; Glenn & McLanahan, 1982; Glenn & Weaver, 1979)—a phenomenon Baumeister (1991) coined as “the parenthood paradox.” As just one oft-cited example, in a retrospective time use rating study, working women judged taking care of their children slightly more positively than the unpleasant tasks of commuting and housework (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004). To try to understand why this is so, we consider below two broad sets of explanations: the first involving evolutionary accounts, and the second involving issues of measurement.

Evolutionary Perspectives

Several explanations that could account for the lack of a relationship between parenthood and enhanced well-being are rooted in evolutionary psychology: the first is that children interfere with lower level needs, the second is that the short-term costs of having children are outweighed by the long-term benefits, and the third is that the modern-day context of raising children is at odds with our ancestors’ environments.

To begin, the birth of a child is likely to interfere with parents’ physiological needs. Sleep deprivation and fatigue characterize most new moms and dads, along with physical discomfort as a woman’s body recovers from pregnancy and prepares to feed an infant (Fleming, Ruble, Flett, & Van Wagner, 1990; see also Blackburn, 2007). Self-protection and safety become even more salient concerns as parents are no longer concerned with merely their own safety, but also the

safety of their (initially very vulnerable) offspring. Moreover, the birth of a child may interfere with previous social relationships—both because of lack of leisure time and because the interests and activities of childless friends may no longer complement those of new parents.⁴

Status, particularly that experienced in the context of the workplace, may be diminished after children are born. For example, parents may have to contend with daycare issues or afterschool activities that conflict with employment responsibilities. Tellingly, working women with children (but not men) earn less than their childless counterparts (Mason & Ekman, 2008). Furthermore, children may foster feelings of inadequacy in parents, which ultimately diminish self-esteem (e.g., “The baby is still crying, the first-grader still can’t read, the teenager says he hates me . . . I must be doing something wrong”; e.g., Fleming et al., 1990). Finally, successful maintenance of a romantic partnership involves an ongoing commitment to an emotional and physical relationship with one’s partner. However, parenting responsibilities may interfere with the resources and attention that one can dedicate to a partner—a phenomenon supported by several studies showing reduced marital satisfaction in couples with small or teenage children (e.g., Gorchoff, John, & Helson, 2008; Rollins & Cannon, 1974; VanLaningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001). Taken together, the challenges that parents encounter when fulfilling needs beyond those of raising children are likely to be related to their reduced well-being.

Second, the relatively short-term costs of raising a child—which are arguably greatest when the child is young—may be compensated by the long-term advantages. For example, as parents age and become frail, financial assistance comes from grown-up children (Chesley & Poppie, 2009), and caregivers are most often adult daughters (Dwyer & Coward, 1991; Stone, Cafferata, & Sangl, 1987). In addition, companionship for the elderly (by means of telephone calls, visits, and other means of help) tends to come from adult daughters (Spitze & Logan, 1990). And, of course, the long-term advantage of offspring is the survival of one’s genes into future generations. In sum, despite the apparent drawbacks to a parent’s well-being in the short term, children may provide substantial benefits in the long term.

Finally, as Kanazawa (2008) has persuasively argued, in many ways, the demands of rearing children in the modern-day environment are completely at odds with how our ancestors raised their children. For example, current research suggests that children have their most negative impact on parental well-being when they are adolescents or very young (i.e., infant or toddler stage; cf. Compton, 2004). In ancestral environments, adolescents would not have resided at home; instead, they would have lived independently after reaching puberty. Thus, the characteristically rebellious and independence-seeking behavior of teenagers today is constrained by laws that render parents responsible for children until they are 18 years old (Kanazawa, 2008). Moreover, raising children has historically been a collective responsibility, illustrated by the well-known adage, “it takes a village” (cf. Clinton, 1996). Our

ancestors brought up very young children in the context of a larger village, clan, or tribe, which allowed childcare responsibilities to be shared across many individuals—both family members and neighbors. By contrast, the level of distress for modern-day parents is magnified when only one or two individuals are available to respond to a child's cries and needs. Thus, evolutionary explanations for why parenthood is not associated with increased happiness can be traced to the obstacles parenthood poses to other motivational needs, the long-term benefits stemming from having children, and the conflict between ancestral and modern-day environments.

Measurement Issues

Another set of explanations for the apparent inverse relationship between parenting and well-being involves consideration of measurement issues. The more mundane problem is that all of the relevant studies are necessarily correlational and lacking appropriate control groups—a situation that renders the possibility of multiple interpretations and unknown third variables. The more substantively rich problem concerns the difficulty of capturing via paper and pencil what it is precisely so wonderful and elusive that children grant their parents.

For example, perhaps the momentary occasions of joy and meaning that parents derive from their children are not captured by the measures of happiness and positive emotions typically used by researchers (Inglehart, Foa, Peterson, & Welzel, 2008; Loewenstein & Ubel, 2006). In Inglehart and colleagues' (2008) words, the "one minute when your child comes running to greet you with a smile and a hug may be worth a hundred minutes of cleaning up after them" (p. 279). In other words, because happiness is not merely the sum of positive experiences, evidence suggesting that caring for a child is just slightly more enjoyable than commuting and cleaning (Kahneman et al., 2004) does not mean that parents are not happier than nonparents in a more profound, deeper, more substantial way. Indeed, Baumeister (1991) argued that although parenting may not promote well-being, it fosters a sense of meaning and purpose that may be as important to happiness as are fleeting positive moods (see also Rubin, 2009; R.W. Simon, 2008; White & Dolan, 2009). The fact that the loss of a child is considered to be the worst tragedy that can befall an individual across almost all cultures lends further support that extant measures that only ask people how satisfied they are and how often they experience joy, interest, and enthusiasm are somehow failing to tap these essential elements of a happy life and a good life.

Besides promoting a greater and more intensely felt sense of meaning, having children can provide individuals with many other valuable and important resources that contribute to happiness and a life well lived, all of which may be difficult to assess with standard measures of well-being (see Loewenstein & Ubel, 2006). For example, children bestow parents with a legacy—that is, a contribution to society that will persist beyond their own lifetimes. Becoming a parent is also closely tied to an individual's identity. Indeed, most people expect, desire, and actually do have children (Baumeister, 1991).

Regardless of how much happiness is actually derived from children, being a parent is strongly aligned with the culturally prescribed goals and dreams that people envision for their lives. Moreover, the experience of raising children adds to the story that people tell about their lives. Seldom do life stories recount pleasure after pleasure; instead, people incorporate both their trials and triumphs (McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997). As such, life stories that involve children can contribute to purpose in life and cultivate a sense of flourishing and fulfillment.

Finally, being a parent (and, indeed, the sense of being alive) involves encountering a wide range of emotions and experiences (Loewenstein & Ubel, 2006)—not just the high highs but also the low lows. Parents are likely to experience extremely positive emotions (e.g., pride at watching a toddler's first steps) along with extremely negative ones (e.g., anguish at a child's pain). People value having a breadth of emotional experiences, even if that includes negativity and even suffering. Consider, for example, the adage that "'tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all" (Tennyson, 1850). The potential for passionate love (or, in the case of parenting, for joy and contentment) outweighs the potential for disappointment or a broken heart. In sum, despite the apparent disparity in well-being between parents and nonparents, current measures of happiness may be unable to gauge the more powerful and profound—and literally immeasurable—ways that children enhance an individual's life.

Concluding Remarks

All told, we have argued here and provided initial evidence that the fundamental human motives identified by Kenrick and his colleagues share a bidirectional relationship with happiness—namely, we've argued that achieving each motive is rewarded by feelings of happiness and, in turn, that being happy increases the likelihood of satisfying motives. The singular human motive that presents a conundrum and a challenge to our thesis is parenting. Although a variety of explanations—involving evolutionary considerations as well as measurement issues—can account for this exception, the puzzle of parenthood and happiness is an important question that remains to be addressed by future researchers and thinkers. However, setting the parenthood paradox aside, we contend that happiness and positive emotions play a vital role in an upward spiral that ultimately fosters a fulfilling and successful life. In other words, happiness propels a person through the hierarchy of motives both by fostering success and by acting as a reinforcing trigger and incentive.

Notes

1. Where longitudinal and experimental studies are scarce, we also report some correlational findings. Of course, both correlational and longitudinal evidence may be subject to unexplained third variables; nevertheless, we believe that such evidence is better than no evidence at all.

2. This point may seem obvious, but we explore it for the sake of consistency across all of the human motives.
3. It is interesting to note that this effect appears to be accounted in large part by the social disorder (i.e., lack of safety) that characterizes low-income neighborhoods.
4. Other evidence, however, suggests that all groups of new parents (e.g., married vs. unmarried) experience an increase in social affiliation with the birth of a new child (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003).

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The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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