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On the Construction and Sustainability of Happiness: Where Does My Happiness Come From?

Megan Morgan, Matt Webb, Justin Stephens, Julia Turner, Laura Frazee, Elizabeth Whittaker, John Martin, Brittany Zaremba, Brittany Newsome, Anna Bokman, Brooke Baker, and Robin M. Kowalski

INTRODUCTION

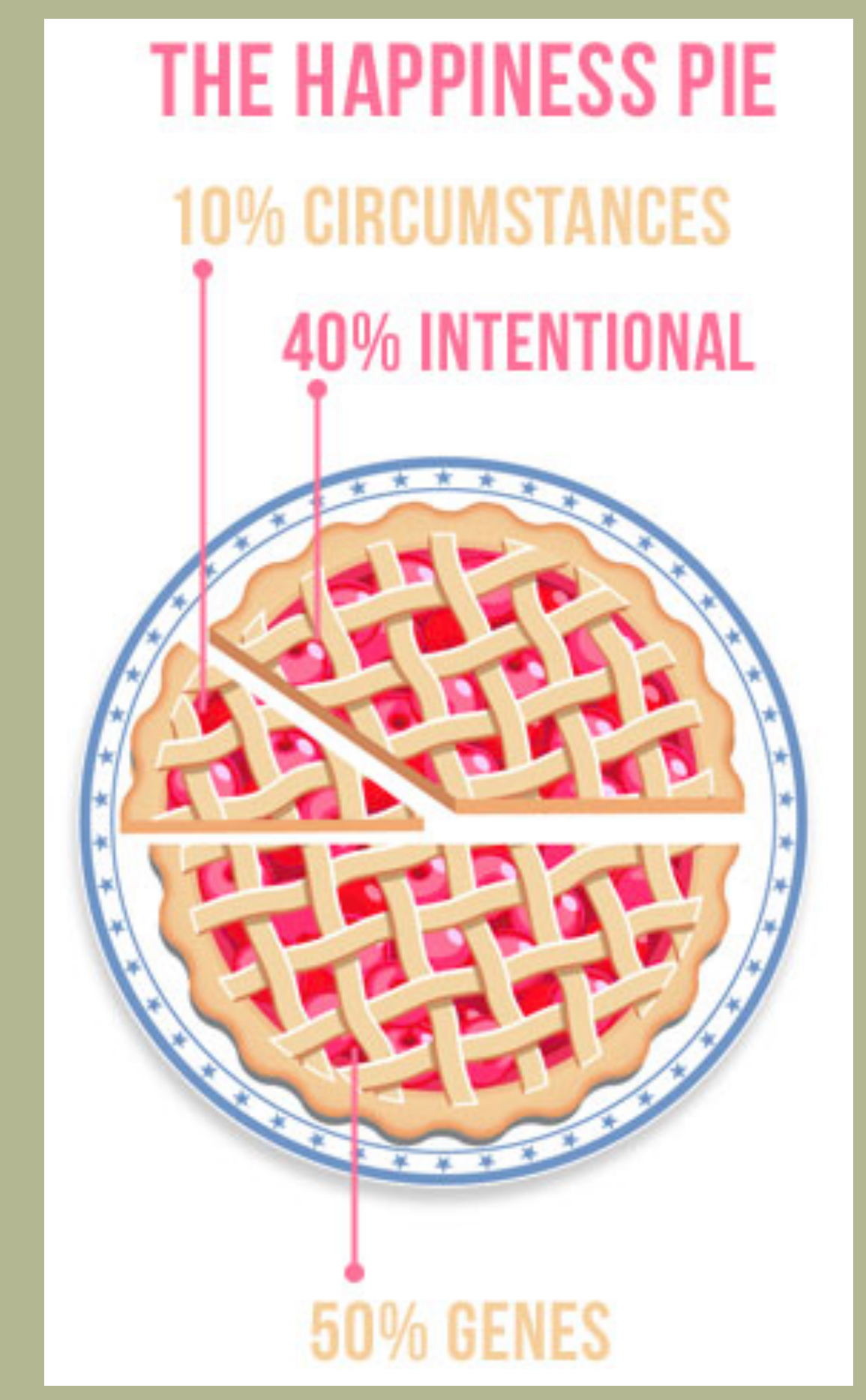
Research suggests that an individual's happiness is attributed to three sources²:

- Genetics and personality (50%)
- Situations and environment (10%)
- Voluntary behaviors (40%)

Most people around the world desire happiness, and know whether they are happy or not¹

Researchers suggest that too many people believe they need to pursue happiness, rather than cultivate it²

There is a lack of empirical research on happiness factors, their duration, and how these factors may relate to the three sources of happiness



Lyubomirsky's (2008) research indicates that up to 40% of total happiness can be attained by engaging in intentional activity.

METHOD

Three hundred and forty-seven undergraduate students (69.4% female, 84.6% Caucasian) participated in this study

Participants listed all possible items they perceived to contribute to their overall happiness (e.g., people, places, things)

Participants also rank-ordered top three items they considered the most significant contributors to their happiness and reported:

- Typical duration of happiness for each item
- How happy participant would be if each item was removed from his or her life

Participants also completed personality and happiness measures

Table 1. Regression analysis (N = 347)

Variable	β	SE	t
Extraversion	.32	.03	7.36***
Agreeableness	.21	.05	4.64***
Conscientiousness	.14	.05	3.37***
Neuroticism	-.35	.04	-7.75***
Openness to experience	.03	.04	0.65

$R = .66^{***}$, $R^2 = .43^{***}$; Adjusted $R^2 = .42^{***}$
 * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

RESULTS

The total number of happiness items participants expressed ranged from 0 to 77 (M = 28.58; SD = 13.74)

The top three reported happiness items were:

- "Family" (20.27%)
- "Friends" (15.18%)
- "Religion" (8.17%)

All items were also classified as either human needs or wants:

- The first and second most frequently reported items were classified as needs, and the third most frequently reported item was classified as a want
- "Family" was generally agreed to reflect genetic and environmental happiness sources, whereas "friends" and "religion" reflected the voluntary (and potentially personality) category

Most participants reported their happiness would be stripped away only if their top happiness item was removed from their lives

The majority of people gave priority to items that made them happy for "years." As priority of the items decreased, so did duration.

Sixty-four percent of participants reported that their top happiness item generally gave them happiness for years, whereas duration typically declined across second and third choice items (57.6% , 50.4%). Interestingly, 20.5% of participants reported that their third most significant contributor to their happiness typically only lasted for a few hours.

Personality accounted for 43% of the variance in happiness, but some predictors were better than others (see Table 1)

DISCUSSION

Family, friends, and religious views were the strongest contributors to happiness in this study

- May suggest how genetics, the environment, and intentional activities influence us

Personality accounted for nearly half of the variance in happiness, consistent with current literature¹

- Genetics/personality = 50%

People may place greater value on factors that lead to prolonged levels of happiness

It is hoped that future, longitudinal research will shed light on the following topics:

- Building and maintaining happiness during hardship
- How social resources and other resources that are short-lasting versus long-lasting contribute to our happiness

References
¹Diener, E. (2000). Subjective well-being: The science of happiness and a proposal for a national index. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 34-43.
²Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener. (2005). The benefits of frequent positive affect: Does happiness lead to success? *Psychological Bulletin*, 131(6), 803-855.