

## CHAPTER 63

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# FRIENDSHIP AND HAPPINESS

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FRIENDSHIP is a personal relationship that is cherished across the lifespan. A unique aspect of this precious bond pertains to its role in psychological well-being as has been specified in a number of theoretical arguments (e.g., Argyle, 2001; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Myers, 1993). Decades of research have consistently documented that having friends, and friendship experiences like intimacy and friendship quality, are related to happiness. Notably, this relationship is not specific to one age or cultural group. Rather, friendship is a reliable correlate of happiness across age (e.g., Holder & Coleman, 2009; Hussong, 2000; Pinquart and Sörensen; 2000), ethnic (e.g., Taylor, Chatters, Hardison, & Riley, 2001) and cultural (e.g., Chan & Lee, 2006) groups.

In this chapter, we first focus on what is meant by friendship and happiness, and specify the domains of friendship studied in relation to happiness. We then review the theoretical arguments and empirical research pertaining to the role of friendship in happiness, and evaluate the importance of friendship experiences in happiness. Finally, we discuss directions for future research that would improve our understanding of the association between friendship and happiness.

## MEASUREMENT OF HAPPINESS AND FRIENDSHIP

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### Assessing happiness

Happiness refers to the cognitive and affective evaluations of one's own life (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999) and is defined in terms of global life satisfaction and the preponderance of positive affect (PA) over negative affect (NA). The cognitive component of happiness is typically measured with the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985) and PA and NA are regularly assessed with The Positive and Negative Affect

Schedule (PANAS) (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Researchers have also relied on a variety of others measures, ranging from multiple item measures of overall happiness (e.g., Oxford Happiness Inventory) to single items of happiness, when investigating the association of friendship with happiness (e.g., Blieszner, 1995; Cheng & Furnham, 2002; Ellison, 1990; Gladow & Ray, 1986).

## Assessing friendship

Of the various empirical definitions of friendship, that suggested by Hays (1988) best captures the previous conceptualizations. According to Hays (1988, p. 395) friendship is a “voluntary interdependence between two persons over time, which is intended to facilitate the socio-emotional goals of the participants, and may involve varying types and degrees of companionship, intimacy, affection and mutual assistance.” As the definition suggests, friendship is an affective and qualitative bond that involves the experience and satisfaction of several provisions. Theory and empirical work also suggest that friendship is a mixed blessing since it involves varying degrees of conflict (Berndt & McCandless, 2009; Demir & Weitekamp, 2007; Solano, 1986). Thus, friendship could be considered as having two major dimensions, overall quality (representing various provisions) and conflict.

An essential aspect of friendship is that individuals are likely to have several close friendships. This highlights the need to recognize the quantitative aspects of friendship as well. Recent research suggests that individuals have three to five close friends in general (Demir & Özdemir, 2010; Demir, Özdemir, & Weitekamp, 2007; Sheets & Lugar, 2005) and they can be differentiated in their degree of closeness (e.g., best, close and casual friendships) (Demir & Özdemir, 2010). However, simply assessing the number of friends one has, or the frequency of social interactions, does not provide insight into the quality of the friendship experience(s). The effects of friendship on happiness are best understood by distinguishing between friendship quality and quantity (Cantor, 1979; Demir & Weitekamp, 2007). Ideally, researchers should assess the number of friends one has *and* the overall quality of each of these friendships.

Studies investigating the association of friendship with happiness in several areas of research (e.g., gerontology) have assessed a range of variables. Specifically, research has focused on the number of friends, frequency of social activity, amount of time spent together, friendship satisfaction, and specific relationship provisions (e.g., support) or overall friendship quality. The quantitative aspects of friendship are typically assessed through self-reports of number of friends (e.g., Requena, 1995) and of the frequency of social contact with them (e.g., Ellison, 1990). As for the assessment of friendship satisfaction, researchers have typically used single-item self-report measures (e.g., Lyubomirsky, Tkach & DiMatteo, 2006). Investigators assessing friendship quality have either relied on scales developed for their studies to assess a specific provision of friendship (e.g., social support; Gladow & Ray, 1986) or have used measures of overall friendship quality that encompasses various theoretically identified provisions (e.g., Hussong, 2000). Well-established measures of overall friendship experiences that have been used frequently are the Network of Relationships Inventory (NRI) (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) and the McGill Friendship Questionnaire-Friend's Functions (MFQ-FF) (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999).

## DO FRIENDSHIP EXPERIENCES MATTER FOR HAPPINESS?

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A belief commonly held by scholars and non-scholars alike, is that having friends and close relationship experiences plays an essential role in happiness. Indeed, this idea has been proposed and elaborated on since Aristotle (see Pangle, 2003). It is only more recently that researchers have begun to shed more light on the roles of friendship and friendship experiences in the promotion of happiness. For instance it has been noted that establishing and maintaining friendships contributes to happiness by fulfilling a fundamental human need for social interaction (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Lyubomirsky, 2007). Other explanations have suggested that receiving support from a friend in times of need and the experience of intimacy in the friendship (e.g., self-disclosure) influence well-being (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008, Lyubomirsky, 2007; Reis, 2001; Taylor, 2010). Another view highlights the role of companionship and the pleasurable aspects of friendship (Argyle, 2001; Cooper, Okamura & Gurka, 1992; Demir & Weitekamp, 2007; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008). According to this perspective, spending time with friends and engaging in enjoyable activities might explain why friendship experiences contribute to individual happiness. Overall, the existing theoretical arguments elucidate why friendship experiences matter for happiness.

### Review of the empirical literature

It is important to highlight that research investigating the association of social relationships with happiness has mainly focused on romantic relationships and marriage (Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Saphire-Bernstein & Taylor, Chapter 60, this volume)—a point that is reflected in frequently cited reviews of the literature (Diener et al., 1999). Fortunately, this gap has begun to close. Here we provide a select review of studies that investigated the role of various friendship domains in happiness.

Several studies have shown that the number of friends one reports having and frequency of social interaction with friends are related to happiness. This association has been observed across age and ethnic groups (Berry & Hansen, 1996; Blieszner, 1995; Burt, 1987; Demir & Weitekamp, 2007; Ellison, 1990; Lee & Ishii-Kuntz, 1987; Mancini & Orthner, 1980; Taylor et al., 2001; Watson, Clark, McIntyre & Hamaker, 1992; Ying, 1995) as well as in different cultures (Chan & Lee, 2006; Requena, 1995). However, the strength of the association between the quantitative aspects of friendship and happiness has been small with correlations typically in the  $r = 0.10$ – $0.20$  range. This observation has been confirmed in recent meta-analyses (Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006; Pinquart & Sörensen, 2000).

Compared with friendship quantity, research focusing on the role of friendship satisfaction and quality of friendships in happiness reports larger effect sizes. For instance, studies assessing satisfaction yield correlations in the  $r = 0.20$ – $0.50$  range (Cooper et al., 1992; Diener & Diener, 1995; Lyubomirsky et al., 2006; Rojas, 2006). Those assessing quality, either in relation to a single provision (e.g., support; Baldassare, Rosenfiled & Rook, 1984) or overall (Hussong, 2000), found moderate relationships to happiness (in the  $r = 0.20$ – $0.40$  range). This link has been observed in children (e.g., Holder & Coleman, 2009), adolescents (Cheng & Furnham,

2002; Demir & Urberg, 2004; Hussong, 2000), young and middle-aged adults (Demir et al., 2007; Demir & Weitekamp, 2007; Walen & Lachman, 2000) and the elderly (Baldassare et al., 1984; Gladow & Ray, 1986; see Pinquart & Sörensen, 2000). Importantly, the relationship between friendship quality and happiness is also reported across age groups and cultures (Camfield, Choudhury, & Devine, 2009; Chan & Lee, 2006; Demir et al., 2012; Lu, 1995, 1999).

As proposed earlier, since individuals are likely to have several friends and differentiate the degree of closeness between them, research should assess not only the number of friends one has, but also the overall quality of each of these relationships when investigating their role in happiness. Some recent studies that gathered relationship quality data for the participant's best and two next closest friends (Demir, 2007; Demir & Özdemir, 2010; Demir et al., 2007) found that the quality of each of these friendships (e.g., best friendship, first close friendship, second close friendship, etc.) was related to happiness to varying degrees. However, best friendship quality was more strongly associated with happiness than less close friends. In two of these studies (Demir, 2007; Demir et al., 2007) the role of friendship quality in happiness for less close friends varied as a function of best friendship quality. Specifically, a high level of first close relationship quality was related to higher levels of happiness only at a high level of best friendship quality; it did not make a difference to the individual's happiness when the best friendship was of a low quality. This interaction highlights the importance of best friendship experiences in happiness and suggests that the benefits associated with less close friendships are contingent on high quality experiences with one's best friend. As reviewed earlier, the literature indicates that the more friends an individual has, the happier he or she will be. However, in light of the findings just described, it is reasonable to suggest that it might not be the number of friends per se, but rather the degrees of friendship quality within one's network of closest friends that matters most to happiness.

Finally, a few studies have investigated the role of friendship conflict (including frequency, resolution, and management) in happiness. Some of these found a negative association with correlations in the  $-0.10$  to  $-0.30$  range (Berry, Willingham, & Thayer, 2000; Demir, 2010; Demir & Urberg, 2004; Demir & Weitekamp, 2007; Walen & Lachman, 2000) whereas others did not observe a link between the two constructs (Demir & Özdemir, 2010; Demir et al., 2007; Hussong, 2000). These conflicting findings highlight the need for more research on this topic.

Overall, the literature suggests that the role of friendship quality in happiness is stronger than that of friendship quantity. To date the only meta-analysis has focused on older adults, and this reported larger effect sizes for friendship quality relative to quantity, with life-satisfaction as the outcome (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2000). A comprehensive meta-analysis is needed to enable a better understanding of the relationships among friendship experiences and happiness. Ideally, this would investigate the roles of different friendship domains (i.e., number, satisfaction, quality, and conflict) in happiness, by taking various assessments of the constructs into account and exploring the potential moderators (e.g., age) of the friendship-happiness link.

## IMPORTANCE OF FRIENDSHIP TO HAPPINESS

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While the research indicates that friendship experiences (regardless of the domain assessed) are associated with happiness, their relative importance is unclear. Although Argyle (2001)

suggested that social relationships are the “greatest single cause” of happiness, this perspective has recently been challenged. Following a review of the associations between happiness and number of friends and marital status, Lucas and his colleagues (Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006; Lucas, Dyrenforth, & Diener, 2008) argued that the role of social relationships in happiness is overstated. Although Lucas et al. (2008) acknowledged that quality of social relationships could be more important than the quantity, they did not review any studies, but highlighted that issues such as shared method variance that could complicate the interpretation of results.

Is the role of friendship in happiness overstated? Even though no comprehensive meta-analysis is available, our understanding of the topic can be facilitated by taking the theoretical and empirical literature into account.

Many of the theoretical arguments focus on close relationships in general and rarely specifically highlight the importance of friendships to happiness. With the exception of Argyle's (2001) overreaching statement, several scholars proposed that social relationships are but one of the most commonly reported correlates with happiness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Diener et al., 1999; Myers, 2000; Reis, 2001). Argyle (2001), Edwards and Klemmack (1973) and Myers (1993) argued that friendship experiences are a major source of happiness when addressing the link between friendships and happiness. Empirical evidence is consistent with these propositions in that various domains of friendship experiences are consistently associated with happiness, with friendship quality (and satisfaction) being more strongly related than quantity.

Another way to consider the importance of friendship to happiness would be to examine its role relative to other major predictors. It is well-established that personality is one of the strongest predictors of happiness, accounting for as much as 50% of the variance (Diener et al., 1999). Could it be that the association between friendship and happiness is no longer significant once personality is taken into account? Evidence suggests that this is not the case: friendship experiences make an incremental contribution to happiness relative to the influence of personality (Demir, 2012; Demir & Weitekamp, 2007), a finding that has been replicated in different cultures (Doğan & Demir, 2009; Lu, 1999).

One issue in interpreting findings on the importance of friendship to happiness is that of shared method variance (Lucas et al., 2008). Both friendship experiences and happiness are typically assessed with self-report measures, and this practice probably inflates the associations obtained. Importantly however, the friendship–happiness relationship has been observed with other methods too including observational, experience sampling and longitudinal assessments (Berry & Hansen, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003; Larson, 1990; Lu, 1999). In addition, self-reports of friendship quality (e.g., self-disclosure) are moderately correlated with observed behaviors (Grabill & Kerns, 2000), and observed social interactions are positively associated with happiness (Berry & Hansen, 1996). Although these studies lend support to the importance of friendship to happiness, further mixed-methods research is warranted.

Another related issue pertains to the fact that most of the research linking friendship to happiness is correlational. The assumption that friendship experiences lead to happiness is challenged by the possibility that being happy influences friendship experiences (e.g., Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). For instance, in a longitudinal study among non-married elderly women, Adams (1988) reported that changes in well-being influenced number of friends rather than the other way around. Clearly, more research is needed before definitive conclusions about the directionality of the associations are drawn.

In sum, findings from different samples, cultures and research methods suggest that friendships are indeed important for happiness. Although it is unlikely that friendship is the greatest or only source of happiness, it is one of the most robust and frequent correlates with this outcome.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN THE STUDY OF FRIENDSHIP

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There are some important theoretical and methodological issues that need to be taken into account when investigating the relationship between friendship and happiness. In this section, we first describe some of these. We also suggest avenues for future research.

First, although there are well-established measures to assess friendship experiences, friendship is only one of the types of personal and social relationships that people have (McCarthy, 1989). It is important for researchers to clearly differentiate friendship from other close relationships, especially since individuals are likely to consider their relatives (e.g., siblings) and romantic partners as their friends (Demir & Weitekamp, 2007; Sheets & Lugar, 2005). Arguably, research results will be confounded if some participants identify those with whom they have familial or sexual relationships as friends, yet others do not.

Second, people have a range of definitions of friendship. These may be inconsistent with the literature or may overlap with other close relationships (e.g., siblings). Individuals report having fewer close friends than originally stated when presented with clearer definitions of friendship (Demir & Özdemir, 2010; Reisman, 1981). Thus, we recommend that researchers provide participants with an easy to understand definition that specifies the criteria against which to identify a friend (e.g., same sex, non-romantic partner, etc.). Assessing friendship without a clear articulation of the definition or without differentiation from other personal relationships weakens confidence in the conclusions from the results.

Third, it would be useful for research to examine the role of cross-sex friendships in happiness. To date, studies have overwhelmingly centered on same-sex friendships despite individuals establishing and maintaining cross-sex friendships across the lifespan (Monsour, 2002).

Fourth, while the relationship of friendship to happiness is well-established, less is known about the moderators and mediators of this association (Demir & Özdemir, 2010). Investigating when and how friendship influences happiness will further our understanding of the both constructs. For example, theory indicates that the role of relationship experiences in happiness might be more important for women than men (e.g., Turner, 1994). In the specific case of friendship, however, the results have not been consistent (Demir & Urberg, 2004; Hussong, 2000; Patrick, Cottrell, & Barnes, 2001). Moreover, cross-cultural research suggests that the associations of friendship satisfaction and quality with happiness are similar across gender (Demir et al., 2012; Diener & Diener, 1995). Further research is needed to investigate how gender might moderate the association between friendship and happiness.

Age too has been considered to be a potential moderator, with suggestions that the role of friendship in happiness might change across the lifespan (Hill, DelPriore, & Major, Chapter 65, this volume; Ishii-Kuntz, 1990; Pinquart & Sörensen, 2000). Friends are an important source of happiness among adolescents and single young adults, but their influence might

decline once individuals are in a committed romantic relationship or are married, and are busy solving different adaptive problems, such as finding a job and establishing a family (Hill, DelPriore, & Major, Chapter 65, this volume). Thus, during early and middle adulthood, family relationships might have a greater influence on happiness; while in old age, friends may once again become a major source of happiness (Ishii-Kuntz, 1990). Research supports this pattern. For instance, Demir (2010) showed that for single, young adults, friendship quality strongly predicted happiness, but this was not true for young adults involved in a romantic relationship. Several studies also found that for married or cohabiting young or middle-aged adults, friendship experiences contributed less or not at all to well-being relative to relationship experiences with romantic partners and family members (e.g., Bertera, 2005; Walen & Lachman, 2000). Finally, in old age, interactions with friends have a stronger influence on happiness compared to those with family members (see Antonucci & Akiyama, 1995). A recent meta-analysis supported this by showing that in old age contact with friends (but not quality) was more strongly associated with happiness than contact with family members (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2000). In summary, evidence shows that friendship differentially affects happiness across the lifespan. More research is needed to investigate the correlates of this pattern and how it is impacted by the interaction of cross-cultural variables.

Another potential moderator of the friendship–happiness link could be the successful resolution of developmental tasks (Erikson, 1980). A few studies indicate that identity formation, a developmental task of late adolescence and young adulthood, influences the relationship between close relationship quality and happiness (Demir, 2008 (study 2); Demir, 2012). For instance, Demir (2012) found a stronger association between friendship quality and happiness in young adults with a better sense of who they are (i.e., displaying higher levels of identity formation) relative to those with low levels of identity formation ( $r_s = 0.39$  vs.  $0.23$ ). Further research on how progress toward or resolution of developmental tasks across the lifespan might moderate the friendship–happiness relationship would be valuable.

Last, while friendships are associated with happiness, little is known about the specific processes accounting for this link. Two recent studies with American samples addressed this limitation by investigating theoretically identified variables as potential mediators. Demir and Özdemir (2010) reported that satisfaction of basic psychological needs (e.g., autonomy, competence, and relatedness; Deci & Ryan, 2000) within the friendship, mediated the association between friendship quality and happiness. In another study, Demir et al. (2011) found that perceived mattering, defined as the “feeling that one is important to specific other(s)” (Marshall, 2001), accounted for the relationship between friendship and happiness. Importantly, the mediating roles of needs satisfaction and perceived mattering in these studies were obtained not only for the best friends but also for the next two closest friends of the individual, suggesting the generalizability of the models across friendships which differ in degree of closeness. It is the task of future research to identify other mediators so as to improve our understanding of the role of friendship in happiness.

## CONCLUSION

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Decades of research have shown that friendship experiences, regardless of how they are assessed, are an essential, consistent, and robust correlate of happiness across the lifespan

and across cultures. The evidence also indicates that friendship quality is more important than number. Given our current knowledge, it would be redundant to document the positive association between friendship and happiness unless different methods are used to assess friendship (e.g., observational studies) and relatively understudied ethnic and cultural populations are studied. Future research should also focus on theoretically specified variables that might explain when and how friendship is associated with happiness. This research has the potential to help us further understand the role of these two important variables—friendship and happiness—in our lives.

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