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The importance of very high life satisfaction for students' academic success

Susan Antaramian^{1*}

Abstract: This study investigated whether very high levels of life satisfaction were associated with academic success at the college level. Three-hundred fifty-seven university students reported on their life satisfaction and various indicators of educational functioning. Participants with very high life satisfaction (top 10%) were compared to those with average and low levels of life satisfaction to explore differences in these academic factors. Results indicated that although both groups were satisfied with life, the students with very high life satisfaction were at a significant advantage over those with average life satisfaction in terms of academic performance, including greater student engagement, academic self-efficacy, and approach-oriented achievement goals and lower academic stress. The most satisfied students also earned higher Grade Point Averages (GPAs) than their less satisfied peers. There were no differences in educational functioning between the average and low life satisfaction students. These findings suggest that very high life satisfaction is associated with academic advantages that are not present among students with average or low satisfaction levels.

Subjects: Educational Psychology; Mental Health; School Psychology; Positive Psychology; Higher Education

Keywords: life satisfaction; mental health; happiness; student engagement; academic achievement

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The pursuit of happiness is an important goal for many people. But is happier always better, or can there be too much of a good thing? When it comes to students' performance in school, what is the ideal level of happiness for promoting the best academic outcomes? The present research seeks to answer these questions by comparing college students with extremely high life satisfaction to students with average and low levels of life satisfaction in terms of their academic performance. Study results showed that the happiest, most satisfied students were more invested in their educational experiences, had greater confidence in their academic abilities, experienced less academic stress, were more positively motivated, and earned higher GPAs than the students with average and low satisfaction. These results suggest that pursuing happiness to the maximum extent can have a positive impact not only on emotional health but also on academic success.

1. Introduction

At the start of the positive psychology movement, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) issued a call for a broader definition of mental health beyond just the absence of psychological symptoms. This movement has led to more widespread recognition that complete mental health is characterized by not only a lack of problems or distress, but also the presence of strengths and positive qualities that allow individuals to flourish and thrive. As a result, researchers have increasingly investigated a wide range of positive indicators of healthy functioning, such as subjective well-being. Reflecting the degree to which an individual experiences life positively, subjective well-being is often considered a multi-faceted construct that includes both cognitive and emotional factors (Diener, 1984). Life satisfaction is regarded as the cognitive component of subjective well-being and involves a global evaluation of the quality of one's life. Because it is the most stable component of subjective well-being, life satisfaction is often studied as the best indicator of an individual's perceived life quality (Huebner, Suldo, & Gilman, 2006).

1.1. The importance of life satisfaction

Life satisfaction has been linked to many advantageous outcomes. For example, research consistently shows that individuals with high life satisfaction tend to have more positive social relationships, receive more social support, and experience greater marital satisfaction compared to those with lower life satisfaction (Barger, Donoho, & Wayment, 2009; Diener & Seligman, 2002; Pavot & Diener, 2008). Furthermore, individuals with high life satisfaction are at an advantage in terms of occupational success. High life satisfaction is associated with better job performance, greater career satisfaction, increased organizational commitment, and decreased turnover intentions (Erdogan, Bauer, Truxillo, & Mansfield, 2012). Life satisfaction is also related to health and longevity. Higher levels of life satisfaction are associated with better overall physical health and fewer long-term health conditions (Siahpush, Spittal, & Singh, 2008). Moreover, individuals with high life satisfaction have a significantly lower risk of mortality than individuals with low life satisfaction (Lyyra, Törmäkangas, Read, Rantanen, & Berg, 2006; Xu & Roberts, 2010).

Additional evidence indicates that life satisfaction is related to positive educational outcomes as well. For example, several studies have demonstrated that high life satisfaction, in addition to an absence of psychological distress, is an important facilitator of student engagement and academic achievement among university students (Antaramian, 2015; Renshaw & Cohen, 2014). Furthermore, college students with high life satisfaction tend to be more satisfied with their academic experiences (Duffy, Allan, & Bott, 2012; Ojeda, Flores, & Navarro, 2011). Life satisfaction is also associated with more positive academic expectations, increased academic self-efficacy, greater perceived progress toward goals, and less academic stress (O'Sullivan, 2011; Ojeda et al., 2011). Some research suggests that positive life satisfaction is even related to higher Grade Point Averages (GPAs) among college students (Howell, 2009; Rode et al., 2005).

1.2. Optimal levels of life satisfaction

Based on these research findings, life satisfaction is not just a desirable outcome itself but also an important factor in facilitating optimal functioning (Diener, 2012). However, this research evidence does not necessarily indicate whether very high life satisfaction is always advantageous. It is possible that the highest level of life satisfaction is necessary for promoting optimal outcomes, or conversely, it may be that moderate life satisfaction is associated with just as many advantages as extremely high levels.

Few studies have directly investigated the optimal level of life satisfaction for facilitating positive outcomes. However, Diener and Seligman (2002) compared college students in the highest 10%, lowest 10%, and middle 27% of life satisfaction and positive emotions. In comparison to individuals with average and low subjective well-being, those students scoring in the highest range had more positive social relationships and lower levels of several psychopathology symptoms, suggesting some benefits of having the highest possible life satisfaction levels. However, the students with the highest subjective well-being did not differ from those with average levels on several variables,

including GPA, conscientiousness, perceived financial resources, time spent exercising, or participation in religious activities. Similar findings were obtained by Oishi, Diener, and Lucas (2007). In their analyses of multiple data-sets with diverse samples, results consistently indicated that individuals with the highest life satisfaction and positive emotions had the most positive social relationships. However, it was the individuals with moderate life satisfaction who had the highest income levels, educational attainment, and political engagement (Oishi et al., 2007). Accordingly, these findings seem to indicate that very high life satisfaction may be more important for social relationships than for achievement-related domains. Oishi and colleagues (2007) suggest that the ideal outlook to facilitate achievement may be one that is mildly negative in order to promote motivation, hard work, and desire to improve.

Moreover, studies with adolescents have yielded mixed findings regarding the optimal level of life satisfaction for students' academic success. Specifically, findings suggest that adolescents with very high life satisfaction have higher levels of academic self-efficacy, greater school satisfaction, and more positive attitudes toward teachers than their peers with average life satisfaction (Gilman & Huebner, 2006; Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2010; Suldo & Huebner, 2006). In contrast, however, prior research has yielded no differences between youth with high and average life satisfaction in participation in structured extracurricular activities, academic aspirations, general attitudes toward school, or grades (Gilman & Huebner, 2006; Proctor et al., 2010). Thus, the optimal level of life satisfaction for facilitating academic success is unclear.

1.3. The current study

Based on the inconsistent findings in previous studies regarding the optimal level of life satisfaction for achievement-related outcomes, the current study seeks to provide further investigation of life satisfaction as it relates to students' academic success. This study expands on prior research by specifically comparing students with very high life satisfaction to those with average and low life satisfaction in terms of their educational performance. Consistent with the methodology used by Diener and Seligman (2002), individuals with very high (highest 10%), average (middle 25%), and very low (lowest 10%) levels of life satisfaction were evaluated. Furthermore, the current study adds to the existing literature by examining college students on a wide range of educational variables, including student engagement, academic self-efficacy, academic stress, achievement goals, and GPA. Based on extensive research supporting the advantages of life satisfaction, it was expected that high life satisfaction would be beneficial for college students' academic success. Specific research hypotheses included the following:

- (1) In comparison to students with low life satisfaction, students with very high life satisfaction would have more favorable academic profiles, including greater engagement, higher academic self-efficacy, lower stress, more positive achievement goals, and higher GPAs.
- (2) Additionally, students with high life satisfaction would also have more favorable academic profiles than students with average life satisfaction.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 357 undergraduate college students from one mid-Atlantic university. Fifty-four percent of the sample was female, while 46% was male. Approximately 80% of participants were Caucasian, 8% were African-American, 3% were Asian, 3% were Hispanic or Latino, and 5% were from other racial groups. The participants included 94 freshmen, 119 sophomores, 75 juniors, and 69 seniors, and the average age was 19.8 years.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Life satisfaction

The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) was used to assess participants' life satisfaction. The SWLS is a reliable and well-established measure that includes five statements reflecting a positive evaluation of life quality. Respondents rate their agreement with each on a seven-point ordinal scale. Alpha coefficients for the SWLS have ranged from .79 to .89 in previous research (Antaramian, 2015; Pavot & Diener, 1993), and in the present sample, alpha was .86.

2.2.2. Student engagement

Student engagement is a wide-ranging educational outcome that incorporates feeling connected to and involved in both academic and non-academic school experiences (Krause & Coates, 2008). Participants' student engagement was measured with the engagement questionnaire developed by Krause and Coates (2008). The scale assesses college students' involvement in several dimensions of their university lives. Three subscales were used in the present study. The intellectual engagement subscale includes 5 items evaluating students' engagement with course material and interest in their studies. The faculty engagement subscale consists of 11 items that assess students' connection to and interaction with faculty. The beyond-class engagement subscale includes six items pertaining to students' feelings of belonging in the broader university community. Respondents rate their agreement with each item on a five-point ordinal scale. In prior research, Cronbach's alphas for these subscales have ranged from .71 to .86 (Krause & Coates, 2008), and in the present sample were .84, .89, and .85 for the intellectual, faculty, and beyond-class subscales, respectively.

2.2.3. Academic self-efficacy

Academic self-efficacy reflects students' confidence in their capacity to successfully accomplish school-related tasks and is consistently related to academic achievement at the college level (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Wright, Jenkins-Guarnieri, & Murdock, 2013). Students' academic self-efficacy was assessed using the self-efficacy scale developed by O'Sullivan (2011). This scale includes 10 items that describe academic behaviors, such as completing assignments by deadlines, concentrating on studies, and remembering information from class. Participants rated their confidence in their ability to engage in each behavior on a five-point ordinal scale. Internal consistency of the scale is good, with alpha coefficients of .72 and .84 in prior research (O'Sullivan, 2011) and .85 in the current sample.

2.2.4. Academic stress

Academic stress can be considered a negative emotional state in response to extensive academic demands (Putwain, 2007). Students' academic stress was measured with a modified version of the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983; O'Sullivan, 2011). This seven-item scale includes statements about students' stress related to their school experiences. Respondents rate their agreement with each statement on a six-point ordinal scale. Previous research has yielded an alpha coefficient of .91 for the scale, and in the current study, alpha was .90.

2.2.5. Achievement goals

Achievement goals represent the purpose or focus of behavior directed toward accomplishment (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). The Achievement Goal Questionnaire-Revised (AGQ-R; Elliot & Murayama, 2008) was used to assess participants' achievement goals. This 12-item scale was designed to assess four types of achievement-related goals, which are distinguished based on whether they are mastery-oriented or performance-oriented, and whether they involve approach or avoidance behaviors. Mastery goals focus on learning information and accomplishing tasks, while performance goals focus on performing well relative to other people. Furthermore, approach goals are positively oriented toward obtaining success, while avoidance goals are negatively oriented toward avoiding failure (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Combining these two dichotomous dimensions yields four types of goals, including mastery-approach, mastery-avoidance, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance goals. Generally, both mastery-approach and performance-approach goals tend to be associated

with positive educational outcomes, such as deep processing of information, intrinsic motivation, and better exam performance. In contrast, mastery-avoidance and performance-avoidance goals tend to be associated with more negative outcomes, such as superficial processing of information, disorganization, anxiety, and worse exam performance (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Elliot & Murayama, 2008).

On the AGQ-R, three items assess each of the four types of goals. Each item states an academic goal, and respondents rate their agreement on a five-point ordinal scale. In the current data, internal consistency of the mastery-avoidance and performance-avoidance subscales was higher for a two-item version of the subscales than for the three-item version. Thus, the item “I am striving to avoid an incomplete understanding of the course material” was excluded from the mastery-avoidance subscale, and the item, “My goal is to avoid performing poorly compared to others” was excluded from the performance-avoidance subscale, and all analyses were completed with the modified two-item subscales. Internal consistency of the subscales has been high in prior research, with alphas ranging from .83 to .94. In the present sample, Cronbach’s alphas for the mastery-approach, modified mastery-avoidance, performance-approach, and modified performance-avoidance subscales were .85, .78, .86, and .87, respectively.

2.2.6. Grade point average

GPA was used as a measure of academic achievement and was assessed through self-report. Participants were asked to provide their cumulative GPA on one open-ended question. GPA is measured on a traditional four-point scale at this university.

2.3. Procedure

Approval for the study was obtained from the ethical review board at the university. Participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses. All participants volunteered for the study and provided informed consent indicating their agreement to participate. After completing the consent form, participants were given a link to an online survey, which included the above measures and demographic questions. The survey took approximately 15–25 min to complete.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics and correlations

Descriptive statistics and correlations among all study variables are reported in Table 1. Life satisfaction was significantly correlated with most of the academic outcomes. The only non-significant

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Life satisfaction	25.51	6.03	–										
2. Intellectual engagement	3.38	.84	.20**	–									
3. Faculty engagement	4.04	.61	.22**	.47**	–								
4. Beyond-class engagement	3.94	.88	.27**	.27**	.31**	–							
5. Academic self-efficacy	3.69	.62	.25**	.59**	.37**	.25**	–						
6. Academic stress	4.02	1.10	–.16**	–.14*	–.09	–.08	–.05	–					
7. Mastery-approach goals	3.97	.80	.23**	.52**	.33**	.18**	.51**	.02	–				
8. Mastery-avoidance goals	3.24	1.04	.07	.22**	.07	.08	.23**	–.08	.33**	–			
9. Performance-approach goals	3.99	.87	.14**	.29**	.26**	.17**	.35**	.11*	.49**	.27**	–		
10. Performance-avoidance goals	3.84	1.07	–.05	.15**	.12*	.09	.15**	.10	.24**	.35**	.63**	–	
11. GPA	3.09	.50	.11*	.23**	.32**	.20**	.37**	.07	.21**	.13*	.30**	.13*	–

Notes: Above analyses were completed with the entire sample, *N* = 357. GPA = Grade Point Average.

**p* < .05.

***p* < .01.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of the life satisfaction groups

	Low (N = 34)	Average (N = 97)	High (N = 32)	Total sample (N = 357)
<i>Gender</i>				
Male	55.88%	48.45%	40.63%	45.94%
Female	44.12%	51.55%	59.38%	54.06%
<i>Ethnicity</i>				
African-American	11.76%	5.15%	3.13%	8.40%
Caucasian	73.53%	80.41%	90.62%	80.11%
Other ethnicity	14.71%	14.43%	6.25%	11.48%
<i>Class standing</i>				
Freshman	23.53%	20.62%	12.50%	26.33%
Sophomore	32.35%	37.11%	50.00%	33.33%
Junior	29.41%	16.49%	18.75%	21.01%
Senior	14.71%	25.77%	18.75%	19.33%

correlations with life satisfaction were with the avoidance-oriented achievement goals. Moderate correlations among the academic outcomes suggest that they are related but unique constructs.

3.2. Life satisfaction group classification

A total life satisfaction score for each participant was calculated by adding the scores on the five SWLS items, yielding a possible total ranging from 5 to 35. Participants were classified into groups based on this total score, using methodology similar to that of Diener and Seligman (2002). The high life satisfaction group consisted of individuals who were in the top 10% of the entire sample, while the low life satisfaction group included individuals in the bottom 10% of the sample. A comparison group having average life satisfaction consisted of the middle 25% of the sample. The remaining 55% of the participants were not included in subsequent analyses.

Based on this classification, 32 participants were identified as having high life satisfaction. These individuals had a total life satisfaction score ranging from 33 to 35, which reflects reporting the highest possible agreement on almost every SWLS item. Using the widely-cited score interpretation proposed by the scale authors (see Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2009), these individuals can be considered

Table 3. Means (and standard deviations) of the life satisfaction groups on educational variables

	Life satisfaction			F	Sig.	η^2
	Low (n = 34)	Average (n = 97)	High (n = 32)			
Intellectual engagement	3.16 _a (.81)	3.26 _a (.91)	3.88 _b (.69)	7.71	.001	.09
Faculty engagement	3.91 _a (.58)	3.93 _a (.63)	4.52 _b (.38)	13.77	<.001	.15
Beyond-class engagement	3.54 _a (1.06)	3.92 _{a,b} (.88)	4.30 _b (.82)	5.69	.004	.07
Academic self-efficacy	3.41 _a (.74)	3.58 _a (.59)	4.19 _b (.56)	15.52	<.001	.16
Academic stress	4.44 _a (.93)	4.07 _a (1.00)	3.54 _b (1.13)	6.56	.002	.08
Mastery-approach goals	3.55 _a (.91)	3.88 _a (.86)	4.40 _b (.58)	8.91	<.001	.10
Mastery-avoidance goals	3.18 (1.05)	3.20 (1.07)	3.52 (1.19)	1.15	.320	.01
Performance-approach goals	3.90 _a (1.00)	3.86 _a (.85)	4.45 _b (.64)	5.97	.003	.07
performance-avoidance goals	4.12 (.98)	3.77 (1.04)	4.06 (1.20)	1.78	.172	.02
GPA	3.12 _a (.50)	3.01 _a (.49)	3.41 _b (.38)	8.48	<.001	.10

Notes: Degrees of freedom for each univariate F test are 2, 160. Means having different subscripts are significantly different at the .05 level.

extremely satisfied. The low life satisfaction group included 34 participants whose life satisfaction scores ranged from 8 to 16 (none of the study participants had a total life satisfaction score less than 8). Thus, all of the individuals in this group scored below the SWLS mid-point of 20 and could be considered *slightly dissatisfied* to *extremely dissatisfied*. The average life satisfaction group consisted of 97 individuals with life satisfaction scores ranging from 26 to 28, which falls above the scale's mid-point and can be interpreted as *satisfied* (Diener et al., 2009).

3.3. Demographic characteristics

Demographic characteristics for the three life satisfaction groups and the entire sample are presented in Table 2. Chi-square tests were conducted to determine if demographic representation differed among the life satisfaction groups. Results indicated no significant relationships between group membership and gender, $\chi^2(2, N = 163) = 1.54, p = .46$; between group membership and ethnicity, $\chi^2(4, N = 163) = 4.35, p = .36$; or between group membership and class standing, $\chi^2(6, N = 163) = 6.37, p = .38$.

3.4. Group differences in educational outcomes

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine differences among the life satisfaction groups in the educational outcomes. MANOVA assumptions were tested and found to be within acceptable ranges. Analyses indicated an overall main effect of life satisfaction on educational outcomes, Wilks' lambda = .62, $F(20, 302) = 4.12, p < .001, \eta^2 = .21$.

Subsequent univariate *F*-tests revealed significant differences in all three dimensions of student engagement, academic self-efficacy, academic stress, both types of approach-oriented goals, and GPA. The only non-significant group differences were in mastery-avoidance goals and performance-avoidance goals. Results of the *F*-tests and the means and standard deviations for each group are reported in Table 3. Post hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD test were conducted to determine which groups were significantly different. The high-satisfaction group and the low-satisfaction group differed on all significant educational variables, and effect sizes for these differences were large, with Cohen's *d* ranging from .66 to 1.27. Additionally, the high-satisfaction group significantly outscored the average-satisfaction group on intellectual engagement ($d = .73$), faculty engagement ($d = 1.03$), academic self-efficacy ($d = 1.07$), mastery-approach goals ($d = .65$), and performance-approach goals ($d = .73$). In comparison to the average-satisfaction group, the high-satisfaction group also had lower stress ($d = -.51$) and higher GPAs ($d = .86$). The average and low groups did not differ significantly on any of the variables investigated.

4. Discussion

The current study investigated the academic performance of college students with varying levels of life satisfaction. Results indicated that students with the highest life satisfaction scored more favorably than the students with the lowest life satisfaction scores on almost every academic outcome investigated, supporting the first research hypothesis. The only non-significant differences between the high satisfaction and low satisfaction groups were in the two avoidance-oriented goals, which are not generally related to better academic performance (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Elliot & Murayama, 2008). The differences between these groups are consistent with prior research demonstrating the relationship between life satisfaction and positive educational outcomes (Duffy et al., 2012; Howell, 2009; Ojeda et al., 2011; O'Sullivan, 2011; Rode et al., 2005), and highlight the importance of life satisfaction for academic success at the college level.

Furthermore, the high life satisfaction students also significantly outscored the students with average life satisfaction on all of the same academic domains, with the exception of beyond-class engagement, supporting the second research hypothesis. Accordingly, although the students with average life satisfaction may be just as engaged with the university community, the students with higher life satisfaction were at an advantage in terms of greater engagement with course material and with faculty, increased academic self-efficacy, decreased academic stress, greater approach-oriented academic goals, and higher GPAs. Effect sizes for these comparisons were moderate to

large, suggesting practically meaningful differences between these two groups. In contrast, the average and low life satisfaction groups did not differ on any of the academic domains evaluated. Thus, even though both the average and high groups scored above the mid-point of the SWLS and are therefore considered satisfied, the academic profile of the students with average life satisfaction was more similar to that of the low satisfaction group, who scored in the dissatisfied range. Accordingly, there was no evidence to indicate that some degree of dissatisfaction is necessary to promote peak academic achievement. Instead, these findings suggest that it is beneficial for students to be not simply satisfied, but *extremely* satisfied in order to facilitate optimal academic success.

The significant advantage for the high life satisfaction students in comparison to the average life satisfaction students is contradictory to prior research which found that moderate well-being, rather than extremely high well-being is equally or more beneficial for achievement-related outcomes (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Oishi et al., 2007). This inconsistency may be explained by the use of well-being indicators that included both emotional and cognitive components of well-being in the previous studies, while the current study used only the cognitive indicator of life satisfaction. It is possible that extremely high positive emotions interfere with achievement, while extremely high life satisfaction has the opposite effect. Additional research is needed to examine whether there are different optimal levels of well-being depending on whether cognitive or emotional factors are assessed.

4.1. Practical implications

The results of the present study have several practical implications. Educators working at universities may be able to support students by conducting brief life satisfaction assessments to identify those students with average and below-average levels who may therefore be at risk for greater academic difficulty. Furthermore, interventions aimed at increasing life satisfaction may be implemented with the students who are most at-risk. Prior research has demonstrated, for example, that interventions targeted toward increasing certain character strengths, such as gratitude, hope, and curiosity, have been effective in increasing life satisfaction (Proyer, Ruch, & Buschor, 2013). The current study results suggest that such interventions could be beneficial in promoting overall well-being as well as enhancing students' educational performance.

4.2. Limitations and directions for future research

There were several limitations in the current study that should be noted. First, the data were collected from students at a single university. Although the sample was fairly representative of the population at this university, additional research is needed with diverse participants to determine if these findings are applicable to other populations of university students. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the study limits conclusions about the direction of the relationship between life satisfaction and academic performance. Future longitudinal research may help to establish whether very high life satisfaction does, in fact, precede academic success. Finally, all data were collected through self-report, which can produce issues with common method variance as well as inaccurate or biased responses. Accordingly, it would be valuable for additional studies to investigate objective academic indicators, such as university-reported GPA.

5. Conclusion

The current study offers a valuable contribution to the research literature on the well-being of college students. The significant differences across a wide range of academic outcomes highlight the importance of life satisfaction in facilitating many aspects of successful educational performance. Especially noteworthy is the consistent distinction between students with average levels of life satisfaction and those with very high life satisfaction. These findings add to the existing literature by providing evidence not only that life satisfaction is advantageous for academic success, but also that very high life satisfaction is more optimal than simply average levels. Thus, promoting life satisfaction to the highest possible degree may become an important initiative at colleges and universities in order to facilitate peak student performance.

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