

Hope and Happiness

David G. Myers

DURING MUCH of its first century, psychology has focused on negative emotions: on aggression more than love, on conflict more than peace, on fear more than courage. A PsycInfo electronic search of *Psychological Abstracts* since 1967 reveals 5,548 articles mentioning anger, 41,416 on anxiety, and 54,040 on depression, but only 415 on joy, 1,710 on happiness, and 2,582 on life satisfaction. In all, there are 21 articles on negative emotions for every article on positive emotions.

But the tide is changing. During the 1980s, articles mentioning well-being, life satisfaction, or happiness quadrupled from 200 to 800 annually. This new scientific pursuit of happiness and life satisfaction (together called "subjective well-being") has asked: How happy are people? And who is happy?

ARE ONLY A FEW PEOPLE HAPPY?

We are "not born for happiness," observed Samuel Johnson. Modern books for the would-be happy, written by clinicians who spend their days with the unhappy, agree. "One-third of all Americans wake up depressed every day," says Father John Powell in *Happiness Is an Inside Job*. Professionals estimate that only 10% to 15% of Americans think of themselves as truly happy. But when asked about their happiness, random samples of people paint a brighter picture. In National Opinion Research Center surveys, three in ten Americans say they are "very

happy"; only one in ten say "not too happy"; and the rest, six in ten, describe themselves as "pretty happy." Diener (Myers & Diener, 1996) has assembled data from 916 surveys of 1.1 million people in 45 nations representing most of the human population. He recalibrated the self-reported well-being on a 0 to 10 scale (where 0 is the low extreme, such as reporting oneself "very unhappy" or "completely dissatisfied," 5 is neutral, and 10 is the high extreme). The average human, as shown in figure 18.1, responded at a moderately positive 6.75.

Number of Surveys

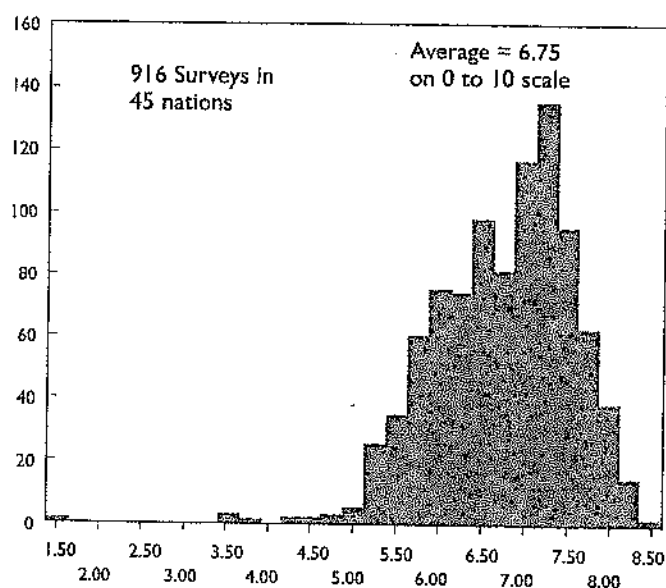


Figure 18.1. Subjective well-being, as self-reported in 916 surveys of 1.1 million people in 45 nations (with answers calibrated to a 0 to 10 scale, with 5 neutral).

(From Myers & Diener, 1996.)

The set point for happiness, therefore, appears to be set slightly to the positive side of neutral. This serves to give the occasional stone in the emotional shoe signal value. When something goes awry, it alerts the organism to do something to alleviate the negative mood.

WHO IS HAPPY?

By searching for predictors of subjective well-being, psychologists and sociologists have exploded some myths. Consider some illustrative findings (see Myers, 1993, Myers & Diener, 1995, for further evidence).

Are There Happy and Unhappy Times of Life?

Many people believe so with the stress-filled teen years, the midlife crisis years, and the declining years brought on by old age representing major episodes. But as illustrated by one 16-nation survey of 170,000 people (figure 18.2), no time of life is notably happier and more satisfying. In every age group, there are many happy and some unhappy people.

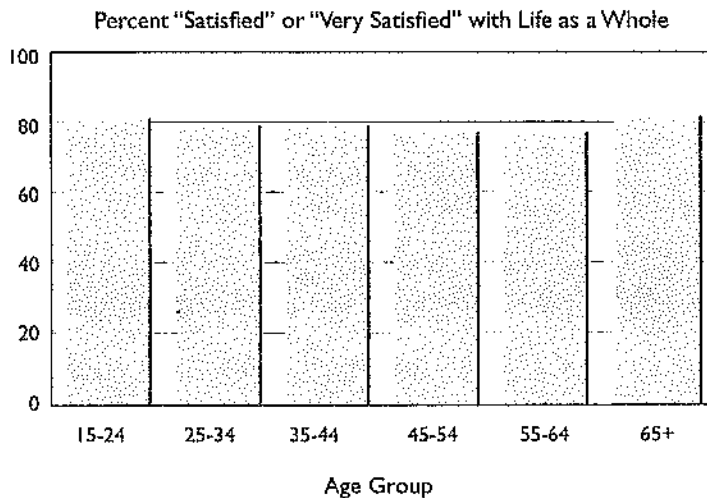


Figure 18.2. Age and well-being in 16 nations. Data are from 169,776 people representatively sampled from 1980 to 1986, as reported by Inglehart (1990).

Does Happiness Favor One Gender?

Are men happier, because of their greater incomes and social power? Are women happier because of their reportedly greater capacity for inti-

macy and social connection? Despite gender gaps in misery—women are much more vulnerable to disabling depression and anxiety, and men to alcoholism and antisocial personality disorder—gender gives no clue to subjective well-being. Men and women are equally likely to declare themselves “satisfied” or “very happy” (figure 18.3).

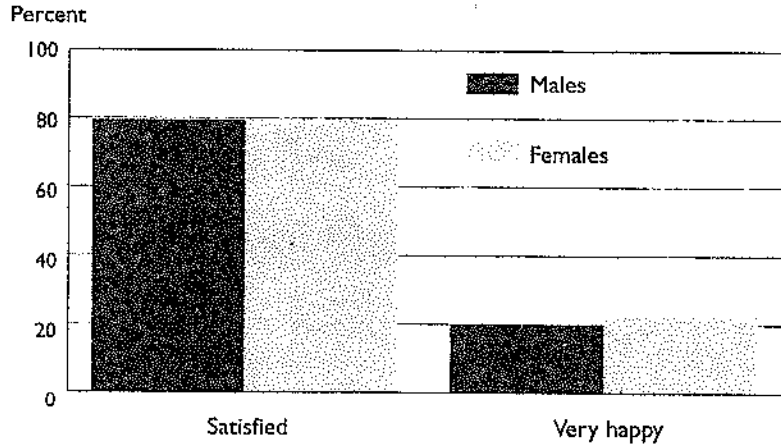


Figure 18.3. Gender and well-being in 16 nations. Data are from 169,776 people representatively sampled from 1980 to 1986, as reported by Inglehart (1990).

Does Money Buy Happiness?

In 1997, 74% of entering American collegians declared that a “very important” or “essential” life goal was “being very well off financially.” As figure 18.4 shows, that was nearly double the 39% who said the same in 1970. Is wealth indeed linked with well-being, as these modern materialists believe?

More concretely, are rich people happier than the not-so-rich? Food, shelter, and safety are basic to well-being, which explains why satisfaction with finances is a moderate predictor of well-being in very poor countries, such as Bangladesh and India (Diener & Diener, 1995). But once able to afford life’s necessities, people seem to adapt to increasing affluence. In North America and Europe, the income-happiness corre-

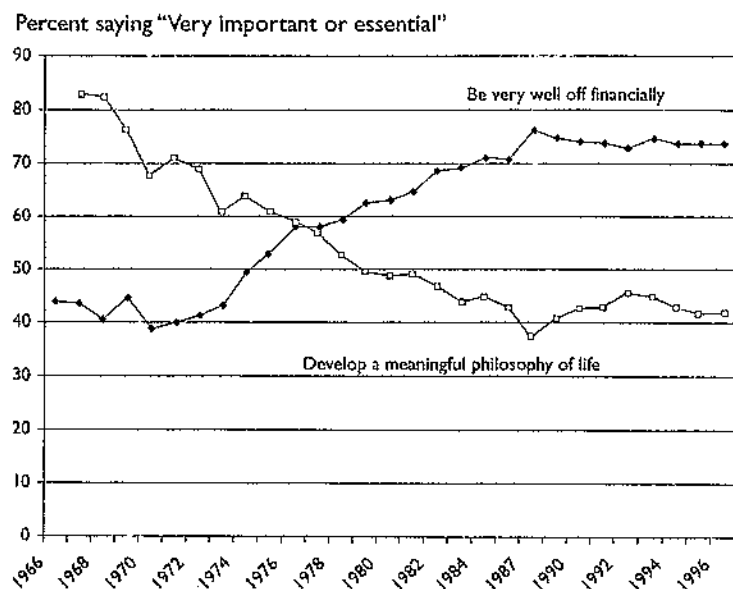


Figure 18.4. Changing materialism. Annual surveys of more than 200,000 entering American collegians revealed an increasing desire for wealth from 1970 to the late 1980s (Dey et al., 1991; Sax et al., 1997).

lation, though positive, has become "surprisingly weak (indeed virtually negligible)," reports Inglehart (1990, p. 242). Even the super rich and state lottery winners express only slightly greater than average happiness (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978; Diener, Horwitz, & Emmons, 1985). Although its utter absence can breed misery, wealth does not guarantee happiness.

If even a *little* more money would buy a *little* more happiness, then has happiness grown over time as income has increased? In 1957, as economist John Galbraith was about to describe the United States as *The Affluent Society*, Americans' per person income, expressed in today's dollars, was about \$9,000. Today, it is about \$20,000, defining a doubly affluent society—with double what money buys. We own twice as many cars per person and eat out two and a half times as often. Home air conditioning, dishwashers, and clothes dryers have become commonplace instead of rare.

So, are we happier than forty years ago? Apparently, we are not. As figure 18.5 indicates, the percentage of Americans who report they are "very happy" has declined slightly since 1957, from 35% to 30%. Meanwhile, the divorce rate doubled. The teen suicide rate tripled. Arrests for juvenile crime quadrupled. Depression rates have soared. Much the same story can be told of many other industrialized nations. Although people in affluent countries enjoy better nutrition, health care, education, science—and are somewhat happier than people in very poor countries—increasing real incomes has not been accompanied by

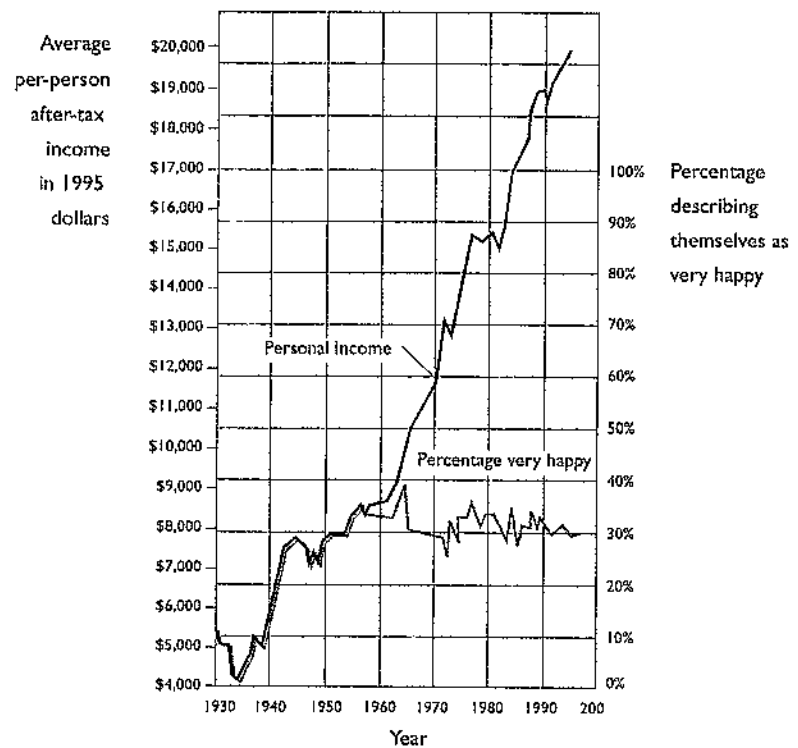


Figure 18.5. Does economic growth boost human morale? Inflation-adjusted income has risen, happiness has not. Income data from Bureau of the Census (1975) and Economic Indicators. Happiness data from the periodic General Social Survey, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago.

increasing happiness. Simply said, *economic growth in affluent countries has not boosted human morale.*

THE TRAITS OF HAPPY PEOPLE

If happiness is similarly available to those of any age or gender, and to people at all but the lowest income levels, then who are the very happy people? Through life's ups and downs, some people's capacity for joy persists. In one National Institute of Aging study of five thousand adults, the happiest of people in 1973 were still relatively happy ten years later, despite changes in their work, their residence, and their family status (Costa, McCrae, & Zonderman, 1987).

Across many studies, four positive traits have marked happy lives (Myers & Diener, 1995). First, happy people like themselves. Especially in individualistic countries, they exhibit high *self-esteem*, by agreeing with statements such as: "I'm a lot of fun to be with" and "I have good ideas." Perhaps not surprisingly, given the moderately happy human condition, most people do report positive self-esteem. They not only score above the scale midpoint on self-esteem tests, but also exhibit a self-serving bias, by believing themselves more ethical, intelligent, unprejudiced, sociable, and healthier than the average person (Myers, 1999).

Second, happy people tend to be *extroverted*. Although we might have expected that introverts would live more contentedly in the serenity of their unstressed contemplative lives, the consistent finding is that whether alone or with others, whether working in solitary or social occupations, extroverts are usually happier.

Third, happy people typically feel *personal control*. Feeling empowered rather than helpless, capable rather than victimized, they also perform better in school, achieve more at work, and cope better with stress. Deprived of control over one's life, as happens when in prison, in nursing homes, or when living under totalitarian regimes, people suffer lowered morale and worsened health. Severe poverty demoralizes people when it erodes their sense of control.

Fourth, happy people are commonly *optimistic*. One could reason that pessimists, whose low expectations are so often exceeded, would

constantly be surprised by joy. "Blessed is he who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed," said Alexander Pope in a 1727 letter. Optimists, when undertaking something new, expect to succeed and thus tend to be more successful, healthier, and happier.

With each of these trait-happiness correlations, the causal traffic could go either way. Does optimism make people happier, or are happier people more optimistic? If the former (as suggested by other chapters in this volume), could people become happier by thinking, talking, and acting as if they had happiness-associated traits such as optimism?

Happiness, like cholesterol, seems variable but within the constraints of a genetic leash. This is partly because happiness-predicting traits such as extraversion are genetically predisposed. Thus, Lykken and Tellegen (1996) estimate from their study of 254 identical and fraternal twins that 50% of individual differences in happiness is heritable. Even identical twins raised apart often are similarly happy.

THE RELATIONSHIPS OF HAPPY PEOPLE

Close, supportive, committed relationships also mark happy lives. Despite Sartre's surmise that "Hell is other people," and despite all the stresses that mark our close relationships, those who can name several soul-mate friends are healthier and happier than those lacking such close relationships (Burt, 1986; Cohen, 1988; House, Landis, & Unger, 1988). Our honoree, Martin Seligman (1991), contends that today's epidemic depression stems partly from impoverished social connections in increasingly individualistic Western societies. Individualistic societies offer personal control, harmony between the inner and outer person, and opportunity to express one's feelings and talents, but with the risks of a less embedded, more detached self.

For more than nine in ten people, one significant alternative to aloneness is marriage. Broken marital relationships are a source of much misery. Among Americans saying their marriage is "not too happy," a mere 3% live very happy lives (among 32,139 people sampled by the National Opinion Research Center since 1972). But among those in a "very happy" marriage, 57% declare their lives as "very happy." Most

currently married people do report their marriages as happy, which helps explain why 40% of married adults, compared to 24% of never married adults, declare they are "very happy." Even slightly less happy are the divorced and separated (see figure 18.6).

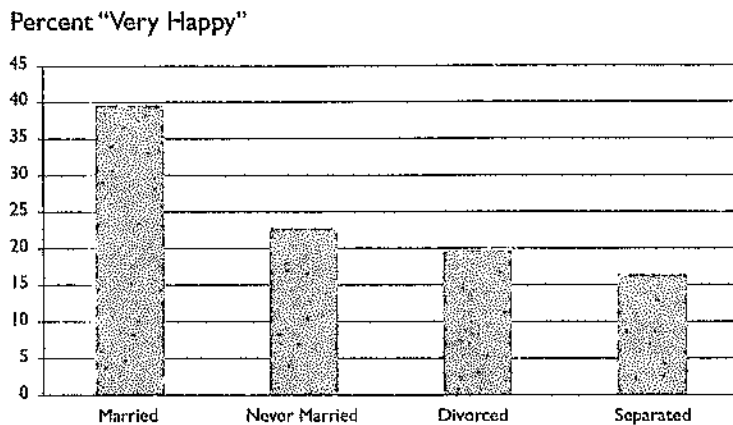


Figure 18.6. Marital status and happiness. Data from 32,139 participants in the General Social Survey, National Opinion Research Center, 1972 to 1994.

THE FAITH OF HAPPY PEOPLE

Although the accumulating studies of religiosity and happiness cannot speak to the truth of the claims of any religion, they do help us sort among conflicting opinions over whether religious faith is conducive or corrosive to a sense of well-being. Is religion, as Freud believed, an obsessional neurosis entailing guilt, repressed sexuality, and suppressed emotions? Or was C. S. Lewis right to presume that "Joy is the serious business of heaven"?

In Europe and North America, religiously active people report higher levels of happiness and satisfaction with life. Consider a Gallup Organization (1984) national survey. Those responding with the highest spiritual commitment (agreeing, for example, that "my religious faith is the most important influence in my life") were twice as likely, as compared

to those lowest in spiritual commitment, to declare themselves "very happy" (figure 18.7). In National Opinion Research Center surveys of 32,000 Americans since 1972, religious attendance also predicts self-reported happiness. One meta-analysis of research on elderly people found that the two best predictors of life satisfaction were health and religiousness (Okun & Stock, 1987).

Percent "Very Happy"

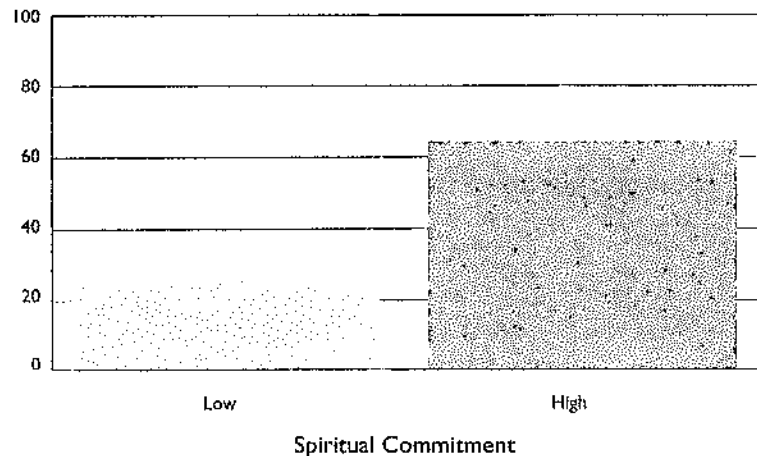


Figure 18.7. Spiritual commitment and happiness. Data from Gallup (1984).

Other studies have probed the connection between faith and coping with a crisis. Compared to religiously inactive widows, recently widowed women who worship regularly report more joy in their lives (Harvey, Barnes, & Greenwood, 1987; McGloshen & O'Bryant, 1988; Siegel & Kuykendall, 1990). Compared to irreligious mothers of disabled children, those with a deep religious faith are less vulnerable to depression (Friedrich, Cohen, & Wilturner, 1988). Those with a strong faith also recover greater happiness after suffering divorce, unemployment, serious illness, or bereavement (Ellison, 1991; McIntosh, Silver, & Wortman, 1993).

Researchers seek to explain these positive links between faith and

well-being: Is it the supportive, close relationships often enjoyed by those in faith communities (of which there are some 350,000 in the United States alone)? Is it the sense of meaning and purpose that many people derive from their faith? Is it the motivation to focus beyond self (as reflected in the Gallup Organization's consistent finding of doubled rates of volunteerism and quadrupled rates of charitable giving among weekly church and synagogue attendees compared to nonattendees)?

Supportive evidence exists for each of these conjectures. Pertinent to this volume (and to my writing from a place called Hope), there remains also another possibility: that religious worldviews, by offering answers to some of life's deepest questions, encourage a more optimistic appraisal of life events; in addition, a sense of hope emerges when confronting what Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (1991) call "the terror resulting from our awareness of vulnerability and death." Different faiths offer varied paths, but each offers its adherents a sense that they, or something meaningful in which they participate, will survive their deaths. Aware of the great enemies, suffering and death, religious faith offers a hope that in the end, the very end, "all shall be well and shall be well and all manner of things shall be well" (Julian of Norwich).

This hope-filled perspective on the fragility of life emboldens some to think that life has value. What is worth preserving, forever, must be of ultimate value. Moreover, a hope-filled utopian vision of peace, justice, and love can direct one's involvement in the here and now. It defines an ideal world—a back-to-the-present vision—and fuels courage to pursue it. Thus Martin Luther King (1964) could declare, "I have a dream," a vision of a future reality, of a world liberated from oppression, suffering, and death. With a dream worth dying for and a hope that even death could not kill it, he could also declare, "If physical death is the price I must pay to free my white brothers and sisters from a permanent death of the spirit, then nothing can be more redemptive." As Reuben Alves (1972) stated, "Hope is hearing the melody of the future. Faith is to dance to it."

REFERENCES

- Alves, R. (1972). *Tomorrow's child: Imagination, creativity, and the rebirth of culture*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Brickman, P., Coates, D., & Janoff-Bulman, R.J. (1978). Lottery winners and accident victims: Is happiness relative? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36, 917-927.
- Burt, R.S. (1986). *Strangers, friends and happiness*. GSS Technical Report No. 72. Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago.
- Bureau of the Census (1975). *Historical abstract of the United States: Colonial times to 1970*. Washington, DC: Superintendent of Documents.
- Cohen, S. (1988). Psychosocial models of the role of social support in the etiology of physical disease. *Health Psychology*, 7, 269-297.
- Costa, P.T., Jr., McCrae, R.R., & Zonderman, A.B. (1987). Environmental and dispositional influences on well-being: Longitudinal follow-up of an American national sample. *British Journal of Psychology*, 78, 299-306.
- Dey, E.L., Astin, A.W., & Korn, W.S. (1991). *The American freshman: Twenty-five year trends*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.
- Diener, E., & Diener, M. (1995). Cross-cultural studies of life satisfaction and self-esteem. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68, 653-663.
- Diener, E., Horwitz, J., & Emmons, R.A. (1985). Happiness of the very wealthy. *Social Indicators*, 16, 263-274.
- Ellison, C.G. (1991). Religious involvement and subjective well-being. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 32, 80-99.
- Friedrich, W.N., Cohen, D.S., & Wiltturner, L.T. (1988). Specific beliefs as moderator variables in maternal coping with mental retardation. *Children's Health Care*, 17, 40-44.
- Gallup, G., Jr. (1984, March). Commentary on the state of religion in the U.S. today. *Religion in America: The Gallup Report*, No. 222.

- Harvey, C.D., Barnes, G.E., & Greenwood, L. (1987). Correlates of morale among Canadian widowed persons. *Social Psychiatry, 22*, 65-72.
- House, J.S., Landis, K.R., & Umberson, D. (1988). Social relationships and health. *Science, 241*, 540-545.
- Inglehart, R. (1990). *Culture shift in advanced industrial society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- King, M.L., Jr. (1964, June 6). I have a dream. *New York Times*, p. 10.
- Lykken, D., & Tellegen, A. (1996). Happiness is a stochastic phenomenon. *Psychological Science, 7*, 186-189.
- McGloshen, T.H., & O'Bryant, S.L. (1988). The psychological well-being of older, recent widows. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 12*, 99-116.
- McIntosh, D.N., Silver, R.C., & Wortman, C.B. (1993). Religion's role in adjustment to a negative life event: Coping with the loss of a child. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 65*, 812-821.
- Myers, D.G. (1993). *The pursuit of happiness*. New York: Avon.
- Myers, D.G. (1999). *Social psychology* (6th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Myers, D.G., & Diener, E. (1995). Who is happy? *Psychological Science, 6*, 10-19.
- Myers, D.G., & Diener, E. (1996, May). The pursuit of happiness. *Scientific American, 54-56*.
- Okun, M.A., & Stock, W.A. (1987). Correlates and components of subjective well-being among the elderly. *Journal of Applied Gerontology, 6*, 95-112.
- Sax, L.J., Astin, A.W., Korn, W.S., & Mahoney, K.M. (1997). *The American freshman: National norms for Fall 1997*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.
- Seligman, M.E.P. (1991). *Learned optimism*. New York: Random House.
- Siegel, J.M., & Kuykendall, D.H. (1990). Loss, widowhood, and psychological

distress among the elderly. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *58*, 519-524.

Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (1991). A terror management theory of social behavior: The psychological functions of self-esteem and cultural worldviews. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, *24*, 93-159.