Happiness and Insight: Searching for the Causal Connection
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Abstract
Insight problems require a specific kind of thinking in order to find an answer. One model describes the process of realizing the solution to an insight problem as adding a random link to connect separate clusters of semantic activation nodes (Schilling, 2005). While certain aspects of insight are still unknown, one relationship has become evident in recent years: increased happiness enhances individual ability to solve insight problems (Lyke, 2009). Research has also shown that the ability to solve insight problems can be magnified by practicing mindfulness meditation (Ostafin & Kassman, 2012). These two correlations imply that the underlying cognitive process of insight might indeed be linked to more fundamental constructs. While also examining the difficulties in finding the causal direction between insight and happiness, this paper will explore the possibility of defining insight and happiness as two constructs which amplify each other in the logistics of a positive feedback loop.

The drive to perform most activities in life can be reduced to an aspiration to achieve happiness. Certain philosophies, like Aristotle’s Eudaimonia (Robinson, 1989) or the Buddha’s teachings, have suggested that all misery is self-inflicted, and that through perfection of one’s mental faculties, true happiness is within reach. In Buddhist thought, the origin of both suffering and enlightenment is internal, and is therefore independent of external circumstances (Batchelor, 1999). Shifting one’s perspective from viewing outside conditions as the source of elation or misery to seeing one’s own mind as the cause for all states of being requires reframing of perceived situations. This notion resonates with the model of insight, which suggests that the ability to solve certain kinds of problems relies on reframing them mentally so as to find a novel solution (Schilling, 2005).

Mounting empirical evidence suggests that the process of cognitive reframing can be honed and improved (Ostafin & Kassman, 2012) and that this process can be harnessed to improve well-being (Lambert, Graham, Fincham & Stillman, 2009). A high level of well-being has been shown experimentally to be related to a greater ability to solve insight problems, in turn creating a positive feedback loop of insight and happiness (Lyke, 2009). This paper will explore one interpretation of insight as a process of transcending cognitive frameworks, present evidence for the bidirectional relationship between insight and happiness, and suggest a technique for insight enhancement.

Insight Problem Solving

Experimental evidence shows that there are two kinds of problems: incremental problems and insight problems (Gick & Lockhard, 1995). Incremental problem solving entails a stepwise process of consciously making connections between pieces of evidence, while the moment of insight enables the acquisition of a solution to a problem with no specific intake of information, in an “aha!” moment. According to Schilling (2005), the model of semantic networks is adequate in describing the cognitive process of in-
Happiness

The study of happiness has increased substantially in the last few decades, constellating around the concept of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Much research has been conducted in order to operationalize colloquial terms such as well-being, resilience and a mindful state of being (Lyubomisky, Sheldon & Schkade, 2005; Tugade & Fredrickson 2004). Measuring happiness has proven to be a difficult endeavor, however, because such definitions differ between cultures and languages, and has shifted substantially over time. Hedonism, for example, assumes that merely having a greater amount of total positive affect in one's life outweighs the negative affect, thus leading to happiness (Ito & Cacioppo 1999). Although this notion makes some good predictions for self-reported happiness (Veenhoven, 2003), another theory has overtaken it in the last few years.

Subjective Well-Being (SWB; Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999) has been gathering more support as an account of happiness, as numerous studies (reviewed in Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999) have demonstrated its predictions to be more accurate than those of hedonism. According to this theoretical construct, there is a cognitive component to the experience of well-being. Thus, satisfaction with life is more than the sum total of positive and negative experiences; a cognitive appraisal of one's general satisfaction with life is also required. Thus, this theory incorporates assigning perceptual stimuli from the world into a cognitive framework as a significant component of happiness. Recently, some psychologists (for example, see Ryan, Huta & Deci, 2008) have suggested that although happiness could be viewed as an end in itself, its presence or absence in life could impact creativity and perceptual focus. According to the Broaden-and-Build theory, for example, positive emotions facilitate novel and exploratory patterns of thought and behavior (Fredrickson, 2001).

There is evidence that to the extent that positive emotions broaden the scopes of attention and cogni-
can also accommodate other theories of insight, many of which can be easily grounded with real-life analogs. Mayer (1995) postulates that insight is the shattering of a mental block and in the case of happiness, this could mean breaking through anxiety or depression; another hypothesis proposes that insight is the disentanglement from functional fixedness (Bassok, 2001), which in terms of well-being denotes observing a difficult situation as a challenge or a lesson. Yet another theory supposes that insight depends on reorganizing visual information or reformulating a problem (Mayer, 1995), which is necessary for transcending existing cognitive frames of reference. All these theories are pertinent to the experience of insight as a moment of sudden realization, coming to see the answer to a problem without scrupulously studying its every facet. They are also easily incorporated into the theoretical framework this paper proposes of insight as reframing of everyday situations.

Given the conceptual similarity of happiness and insight problem-solving, it makes sense that there would be a correlation between the two—and there is. Lyke (2009) found a positive correlation between scores on the SWLS and the ability to solve insight problems. The difficulty in further exploring the correlation lies in finding whether or not there is a causal relationship: do happy people have more insight, or are more insightful people happier? Could the two be a part of the same latent construct? Although a relationship between happiness and insight has been demonstrated, finding a causal connection between insight and happiness can be more elusive, both methodologically and epistemologically. It could be argued that certain people have a greater potential to develop and practice insightful modes of thought. In this case, insight might be the realization of a potential personality construct, such as trait Openness (Fields, 2011). From an epistemological point of view, the bidirectional influence between insight and happiness may imply that the two are a part of a more complex latent construct. Future research could attempt to devise a scale that would measure SWB as

The Interaction between Insight and Happiness

The predictive power attributed to the theory of small-world networks is robust, as it aptly describes any natural network: from social connections to chemical bonds to the electrical grid in the United States to the flickering rate of fireflies (Buchanan, 2003). In the case of semantic networks of meaning, Schilling (2005) suggests that the moment of insight is when separate semantic networks (clusters of ideas) become abruptly connected by a random link, making two areas of cognitive processing suddenly related. The simplicity of Schilling’s definition of insight, as a shortcut between semantic clusters which decreases semantic distance,
well as ability to solve insight problems. In integrating both constructs into one scale, the existence of a new construct that incorporates both the capacity to solve insight problems and SWB can be tested. In order to appease both the epistemological and methodological issues, much work still needs to be done.

Although the causal direction between insight and happiness still unknown, one tested method of improving the chances of solving insight problems is the practice of mindfulness meditation. A recent study (Ostafin & Kassman, 2012) demonstrated for the first time that mindfulness meditation significantly predicts success in solving insight problems. The authors of the study suggest that employing mindfulness meditation may offer an advantage when trying to change the habitual processes of the mind in cases when prior knowledge, functional fixedness of an object, or a certain schema may hinder solving a novel problem. This study also shows that those who practice mindfulness meditation are not significantly better at solving non-insight problems than the control group. In other words, mindfulness meditation seems to cultivate a specific kind of cognitive flexibility that applies only to certain kinds of problems. Although not well understood, this mechanism shows an unequivocal relationship between mindfulness meditation and the ability to solve insight problems.

Certain facets of the relationship between insight problem solving and happiness are apparent, despite our limited understanding of the mechanism involved. Practice of mindfulness meditation can lead to a greater ability to solve insight problems, as is often represented by real life situations that require restructuring of a given cognitive framework. Subsequently, a greater rate of well-being can lead to a more creative and flexible thought pattern, thereby increasing one's ability to solve insight problems. Thus, initiating this kind of a recursive feedback loop is likely to be beneficial in order to attain long-lasting happiness (as measured by the SWLS) and increase the potential for insightful reframing of problems. Further research should be conducted in order to truly understand the underlying mechanisms of the constructs in question. Nonetheless, our inability to account for the overarching process does not mean that we are unable to harness the causal relationship to our benefit. Increasing insight can increase happiness, and happiness is, quite possibly, what we all strive to achieve.

References


