

# Journal critique: "money, sex, and happiness: an empirical study" assignment

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The degree to which various life factors influence happiness varies on an individual and cultural basis, but certain patterns can be identified. In a study published in the Scandinavian Journal of Economics, David G. Blanchflower and Andrew J. Oswald attempt to quantify the degree to which sexual relations are linked to personal happiness. Can an increasing our sexual activity increase our happiness? Do monogamous sexual relationships lead to more happiness? The study attempts to shed some light on these long-standing questions, and has found that sexuality does indeed have a strong influence on happiness (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004, p. ). In their review of related literature, Branchflower and Oswald found that while happiness itself has been studied extensively, no previously existing literature explored correlations between sexual relations and happiness (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004, p. 2). Research literature exists regarding the relationship between happiness and its correlation with other factors, however, such as unemployment, positive and negative major life events, and average stress levels (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004, p. 3). However, the authors claimed that there had been no published effort to link happiness to sexual experiences.

The researchers did find that a previous study done by Edward Laumann and Robert Michael on sexual patterns did touch on related topics, but did not relate those sexual patterns to happiness (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004, p. 2). The researchers used pre-existing data on sexual behavior and happiness from a large number of survey participants in the U. S General Social Survey. The data was collected from approximately 16, 000 American men and women over a twenty-four year period, 1988 to 2002 (Blanchflower &

Oswald, 2004, p. ). The survey data was gathered in face-to-face conversations with participants on a wide variety of topics. Data on happiness was determined by the answer to the question, " Taken all together, how would you say things are these days ??? would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy? " (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004, p. 5), and the responses to this question were related to the responses to questions regarding other variables. Respondents were assured that the survey data would be kept anonymous.

For this study, Oswald and Blanchflower then applied statistical analysis techniques to the previously gathered survey data to determine the correlation between aspects of sexuality and happiness. In this study, the authors analyzed the relation between gender, age, sexual orientation, education level, income, and happiness. Through their analysis of the data gathered, Blanchflower and Oswald found that more frequent sexual activity is strongly correlated with increased happiness, for both men and women (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004, p. 9).

However, the researchers did not determine if a causal link exists between happiness and sexuality. The study found a number of interesting and useful facts, however. According to the study, those in monogamous relationships having sexual relations with a single person are the happiest overall. They found that the average American has sex only two or three times a month, though married people and those under forty years of age were found to be slightly more sexually active on average. Interestingly, education seemed to play a role in sexuality as well.

Increased sexual activity was more strongly correlated with increased happiness in highly educated people, and highly educated women reported a lower number of sexual partners when compared to less educated women on average. In terms of sexual orientation, researchers found that it does not have a strong correlation with happiness, and they concluded that homosexual individuals were no more or less happy than heterosexuals on average. Income was found not to result in a higher than average number of sexual partners or a higher than average frequency of sexual encounters.

This study is a significant addition to the understanding of happiness, and provides a foundation for further exploration. This is the first published study to prove a positive correlation between the frequency of sexual activity that a person has and their level of happiness (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004, p. 1). This study also explicitly states a number of various secondary correlations between the variables examined, for example that men and women both appear to gain the same level of happiness from higher levels of sexual activity, and that those that engage in adultery or relations with prostitutes are significantly less happy on average.

These conclusions come from an examination of the relationship between sexual orientation, marital status, sexual frequency, income, education, and happiness. Perhaps most significantly, the study contains a large section of various figures on the statistical relationships between happiness and various sexuality-related factors. This serves as a foundation for future research, and has been cited by many studies since its publishing (Google,

2009), such as a study examining the psychological benefits of marriage (Zimmermann & Easterlin, 2006).

Though it was collected entirely from self-reported data, the aggregated data in the study was collected across two decades among a large sample of American women and men, so they are reliable enough to be at least part of the basis of further research. Although it is an important addition to the corpus of knowledge on happiness, significant flaws are present in the methodology of this study. Firstly and perhaps most significantly, Blanchflower and Oswald declined to consider causation in their research, preferring to simply identify the statistical correlation between the various variables (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004, p. ). While this is useful as a foundation for future study, and the statistical relationships identified suggest various possibilities (for example, sex may cause happiness), no definitive conclusions on the causes of happiness can be made from this data. The data only implies that some causal relationship likely exists, but the study does not attempt to identify the direction of the causal relationship.

For example, based solely on the correlation between sexual activity and happiness identified in this study, one cannot determine if greater happiness causes more frequent intercourse to occur among couples, or if more frequent intercourse causes greater happiness. This is a significant limitation, and specifically limits its usefulness in terms of a practical application of the study's conclusions. More research on causality is needed in order to apply the results of this study in practice. In addition to

unanswered questions related to causation, a significant limitation of the study is that it relies entirely on self-reported data.

Due to taboos and societal pressure around sexual subjects, self-reported data may be less than reliable, especially due to the face-to-face nature of the survey. The gender and personality of the interviewer may even strongly influence the responses given in such a face-to-face setting. This unreliability is shown in certain anomalies in the data. For example, males in the study reported significantly more sexual activity than females in the study, a fact which would only be possible if either men or women were incorrectly reporting their sexual histories (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004, p. 7).

Despite its limitations, the study showed some very interesting figures and suggested some surprising conclusions related to sexual behavior. For example, contrary to popular opinion, the happiness-maximizing number of sexual partners was only one, and the most frequent sex was reported by married couples (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004, p. 11). In other words, the study shows that traditionally monogamous, married couples engage in sexual relations most often and are the happiest overall. This data shows that traditional sexual behavior between lovers is not only the most socially accepted; it also brings the greatest happiness.

Likewise, while the study mentions that higher income is indeed correlated with higher levels of happiness, it is not correlated in any way with more frequent sexual relations or greater numbers of sexual partners, contrary to popular belief. In fact, the study showed that income does not have any significant effect on the sexual behavior of Americans in any measurable way

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(Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004, p. 11). This is interesting, because one would expect the higher social status due to higher income to result in greater availability of sexual partners, especially among men.

However, this does not appear to be the case. It would be interesting to see if this trend applies to nations where income level plays a more significant role in social status and mate attraction than it does in the United States. The credibility of the study can certainly be challenged based on their method. Blanchflower and Oswald conducted their study based on a wide time-frame and a large group of participants. However, the reliability of the face-to-face interviews, and even the general nature of the questions asked in those interviews, can easily be questioned.

Together with the noted anomalies in the data and the lack of any causal conclusions in the study, the utility of this study is limited. If the authors would attempt to take a different approach, perhaps attempting some sort of controlled study or a truly anonymous study that fact-checked each persons' responses vs. those of their sexual partners to ensure data accuracy, the data may be more reliable. If the authors would also design the study instead of taking pre-existing data from a general study, they may be able to ask specific questions to identify which way the possible causal link flows between happiness and sexual activity.

Certain aspects of the study were difficult to understand, due to the usage of advanced statistical techniques. Most of the data in the appendix is presented as coefficients to ordered-logit happiness equations, which took the author of this critique a large amount of time to understand the basics

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of. To fully understand the significance of the other statistics that were not fully explained in the main body of the study, further study of advanced statistics is required. Other than this limitation, the study was fairly straightforward with clear results presented.

In the end, this study presents interesting information that is useful for further study in happiness and sexuality. Particularly, the correlation between sexual activity and happiness is a significant clue that needs further exploration. The link between monogamous relationships with frequent sexual intercourse and happiness is also important to explore, as proof of this may have practical benefits to the general population. However, this study is of no direct benefit to the practical world, as the lack of an exploration of causal relationships in the data and various aspects of unreliability limit its usefulness.

References Blanchflower, D. G. , & Oswald, A. J. (2004). Money, Sex and Happiness: An Empirical Study. *Scandinavian Journal of Economics* Retrieved from Wiley InterScience. Google. (2009). Citations of Branchflower: Money, sex and happiness: An Empirical Study. Retrieved 10 30, 2009, from Google Scholar: <http://scholar.google.com/scholar?start=0&hl=en&cites=15563100334718409949> Zimmermann, A. C. , & Easterlin, R. A. (2006). Happily Ever After? Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce, and Happiness in Germany. *Population and Development Review* , 511-528.