

# Some dark thoughts on happiness analysis essay sample

[Experience](#), [Happiness](#)



Jennifer Senior discusses her research concerning positive psychology and whether or not happiness is teachable and highlights some of the darker sides of happiness. To start the article, Senior reveals her score on her test from the Authentic Happiness Inventory. The test designed by Chris Peterson of the positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. This test is intended to numerically score ones level of happiness. In a scale of 1 to 5, Jennifer got a grade of 2. 88. This indicated she was below average for most rankings such as “ age, education level, gender and occupation” (422).

Senior states she is at the 50 percent mark for her given zip code. She stated that liking her job was helpful to her happiness and that her religious views did not. She also stated that she believes unhappy thoughts can take over ones thinking. I decided to find what the literal definition of happiness was, to better understand this research. Happiness in the Meriam Webster Dictionary is defined as a state of well-being and contentment, a pleasurable or satisfying experience, good fortune or prosperity, or a state of being happy. Upon reading this I decided to also so what the definition of happy is.

Happy is defined as favored by luck of fortune, notably fitting, effective, or well adapted, and enjoying or characterized by well-being and contentment. So is happiness a measure of fortune and wealth? Is it measured by how well adjusted a person is? Or is someone who is only content with life happy?

How could one test possibly determine such an array of factors reliably?

Senior gives some information on the test itself in the next section of her article. The test is titled The Authentic Happiness Inventory. It was designed by Chris Peterson at the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. Upon taking the test myself, I found that you choose from a

group of statements, instead of actual questions. Some of the statements ranged from feeling like a failure to feeling especially successful, and from saying whether your life is bad or good. The test results themselves are coming from “unrepresentative respondents” (422), meaning they are from anyone who happened to log on and take the test, not a random selection. The happiest zip codes belong to Branson Missouri, Peterson states “I think it was two or three” (422), when asked about the number of people from Branson who took the test.

Branson, Missouri and all of the other happiest zip codes only had a few responders, the happiest zip codes ran through the Bible belt and up. While the unhappiest all started with zip code prefix of 110, this is an area that a lot of office buildings in midtown Manhattan are located. So is Manhattan really the unhappiest, or is there a possibility that a bunch of bored office workers found the test and took it as a kind of joke around the office? It is hard to say why the people who took the test did so. The article shifts focus, looking at some of this history of positive psychology. The Boston Globe found that the most popular course offered at Harvard was on positive psychology. In just one year enrollment in the category went from 380 students to 855. In the 1840's, Samuel Smiles, led a class on “mutual improvement” in England. The class began with 2 or 3 male attendants and grew to such a large number it ended up taking over a former hospital to contain all of the students. Samuel Smiles published what is considered the first book in this category, titled Self-Help, which is still in publication to this day. In the past a lot of books were written by “gurus” who would claim you

could reach happiness by following a few easy steps. Would we question our happiness if we were not prompted to?

Had there never been and self-help books or courses would we ever see a need for them? Taking a look at the literal act of studying happiness actual scientific testing on the happiness is a more recent event. There are positive psychology books being published regularly and classes on the topic are being offered more frequently. The University of Erasmus at Rotterdam has been publishing the Journal of Happiness Studies since 2000. In 1998 Martin Seligman, of the University of Pennsylvania, held a conference to “ shift the emphasis of psychology away from pathology and toward functionality, resilience, and well-being” (424). There is also a lot of literature published about these studies of happiness and certain conditions involved with being either happy or unhappy. Seligman’s Authentic Happiness talks about Mobius syndrome, a kind of facial paralysis, in which the person affected cannot smile. Stumbling on Happiness talks about alexithymia, literally meaning “ absence of words to describe emotional states” (425). A study done on nuns found that nuns who had a good outlook and were passionate about their faith lived longer. The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less by Barry Schwartz, studied two different groups of men getting colonoscopies done.

It found that both stated they had less pain and discomfort if the instrument was left inserted for a few seconds after the procedure was complete, even if this made the procedure last longer because we as humans “ remember our experiences by their highs, lows, and how they end”(425). Studies show that 40% of married people describe themselves as happy, while only 24% of

single people did. Studies on religious people have showed that worship is a source of happiness, and those people are less likely to commit suicide, become involved in drugs, or criminal activity. Rich people are not happier than the general public, studies have shown, including people who have won the lottery and are on the Forbes 100 list. There are hardly any reports on happiness and raising children. Gilbert states that, “ It really violates our intuition, yet every bit of data says children are an extreme source of negative affect, or none at all. It’s hard to find a study where there’s one net positive (426). Are these things proof that the literal definition of happy, of good fortune and prosperity or well adjusted, is wrong? Senior compares what people think about people in other states and locations happiness, finding that usually these comparisons are untrue.

Different studies and polls found that the Swiss and Canadians rank themselves among the happiest, while the Japanese are less happy. European countries tend to rank themselves the least happy, with Russia coming in last. Is happiness really based on location? I find that just because people don’t like the snowy weather doesn’t mean that they are unhappy during the holiday season. Families seem to come together and rejoice in each other’s company during this bad weather season. “ And no matter where they live, human beings are terrible predictors of what will make them happy” (426). Senior discusses how we fill in the gaps, where we tend to remember only happy events and feelings and phase out bad ones. She discuss how our imaginations work in rationalizing situations and feelings, setting ourselves up for big disappointments, but deal with the successfully

at the same time. Is this the point when something bad happens in our lives and we say to ourselves, "It's okay, we always find a way through this"? Senior discusses on a creation myth for happiness created by Seligman.

Seligman came up with two points, people have to change and "Raising children didn't just mean correcting their failings but isolating and nurturing their strengths" (427). Senior goes on to discuss whether change can be made from will power alone. She talked extensively with Seligman about the disillusion of his first marriage and the effect it has had on his relationship with his children from that marriage. Seligman did not come up with the previous two points until his second marriage. Senior goes on to explain details about Phillip Brickman's research on happiness, he is famous for doing a happiness study on lottery winners. She points out that "There's an untold distance between knowing happiness and knowing about it" (428), providing that Brickman in Ann Arbor climbed to the tallest building and jumped to his death, shocking his fellow colleagues. Can people really change, so quickly I am reminded of the saying, you can't teach an old dog new tricks. Scientists who research happiness, use this equation:  $H = S + C + V$  (Happiness = genetic set point + our circumstances + what we voluntarily change).

V = what we voluntarily change is what Seligman is specifically focused on. He states, "By engaging and cultivating our strengths, he says, and by deploying our virtues, we can lead a fulfilling, meaningful life" (428). 50% of our affect has been found to be genetics according to research. Senior discusses the differences between pleasures and gratifications, stating that

pleasures are something that makes us feel good and gratifications are something that employs and boosts our strengths. So if 50% is our genetics that means there is no changing that circumstance. What if you're born into poverty, in a third world country with no assistance? Are you already doomed by your circumstance? How much of this could you actually change yourself? Would a person in these circumstance actually be unhappy? I see teenagers in America today who all have iPhones yet don't seem happy, they are always wanting the next new gadget to fulfill their happiness. But give a child in a situation like the one I mentioned above, a soccer ball or a pair of used shoes and they seem to explode with happiness.

So is  $H = S + C + V$  really an accurate calculation? Some scientists would argue yes, why others would state it's just a theory. Senior introduces Julie Norem, a professor and author of *The Positive Power of Negative Thinking*, she states, "There's no credible evidence that dispositional optimism is changeable"(429), meaning there is no scientific evidence that proves you can be happy by changing your thinking. Another critic of positive psychology, Barbara Held, author of *Stop Smiling, Start Kvetching*, is more of a "culture critic"(429), she believes that Seligman's statement that wholesome actions produces happiness cannot be tested in a scientific manner and is more of a moral. She discusses happiness being a right versus being a value. Some people believe that to be happy you must be lucky, but luck isn't something you can make yourself. Adam Phillips, a British psychologist and author, believes that happiness is a side effect. His research has looked at "functionality and well-being" (429). He states, "It's

something you may or may not acquire, in terms of luck.” “ Everyone feels themselves prone to feelings and desires and thoughts that disturb them. And were being persuaded that by acts of choice, we can dispense with these thoughts.

It's a version of fundamentalism. "(429). Phillips discusses the difference between moral and emotional differences, stating that in regular novels these would be no comparison between what the two would look like, but in a positive psychology book, it would show exactly what happy person looked like compared to an unhappy person. Phillips states, " Anyone who could maintain a state of happiness, given the state of the world, is living in a delusion" (430). Senior discusses a study of undergraduates who were depressives and non-depressives. The study showed that depressives were more rational and the happy students were in a " mild state of delusion" (430). She points out that depressives can see the world for what it really is, while happy people are blind with faith and optimism, citing the example of past president George Bush being an optimistic leader and wondering if he would have sent our troops to war had he been a pessimistic thinker. Upon asking Seligman about his thoughts on President Bush, he did not wish to discuss political speeches or candidates.

But he did say, " You have to optimistic enough to get voters to vote for you, but you have to pessimistic enough to do serious, great stuff"(430). Senior concludes by noting that happiness is as confusing as ever. If The director of the Positive Psychology Center compares being cynical and pessimistic with the ability to do great things of a serious nature, than he must be just as



conflicted on the subject as the skeptics. Even the definition of happiness itself is conflicting, we go from luck and fortune to well-being, to being well adapted. Do any of these terms actually define what true happiness is? Is the happiness I feel the same happiness another person feels, is it derived from the same place? I feel happy when I get mail from an old friend, when my 6 year old read a tough word on her own, when my husband orders out so I don't have to cook. How can you scientifically measure any of these instances? When I think of the things, people and places that make me feel happy and then look at the literal definition of happy and happiness, the two do not go together.

#### Works Cited:

Senior, Jennifer. "Some Dark Thoughts on Happiness." *Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*. Twelfth Edition. Ed. Brad Potthoff. London. Longman, 2012. 422 - 430. Print.