

## The Science of Well-Being

Spring 2006, Department of Psychology, Stanford University

Course Instructors: Hazel Markus and Katie Curhan

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**Course description:** What is well-being, who experiences it when, and which practices best foster it? A cultural psychology approach to the study of positive psychology, this course integrates related findings from the fields of personality psychology, behavioral economics, behavioral genetics, neuroscience, and social psychology. Particular focus on conceptions and practices of well-being as a function of sociocultural context (e.g., nation, region, gender, age, and social class). Limited enrollment. Preference given to students who have taken Cultural Psychology. Application required. Class sessions will be comprised of short lectures followed by group discussions regarding the lectures, readings, films, and weekly experimentation with various well-being enhancement techniques.

### Course Requirements:

- 50% of the grade will be based on your Final Project, which consists of both a short oral presentation in class and a 10-12 page double spaced term paper due **June 12th**. The Project involves a literature review of a topic of your choice related to the course. Examples of possible topics include the study of awe, flow, humor, wisdom, social relationships, novelty, altruistic behavior, politics, religion, work, the development of well-being in children, and ways of well-being in sociocultural contexts other than those presented in class (e.g., other ethnic contexts within or outside the U.S.). In the paper, we expect to see 6-8 pages of literature review followed by 3-4 pages of how you think your findings fit with topics in the course. Cite at least 6 sources that can be found using the PSYCINFO electronic database. You will present your findings briefly in class, including some prescriptive tips for the class regarding how to increase well-being based on your research. Given the classroom's technology, we recommend using the Microsoft Powerpoint program for your oral presentation.
- 20% of the grade will be based on weekly 2 page double-spaced response papers that show thoughtful reflection and genuine engagement with the week's required readings/films and well-being enhancement techniques. (Papers will be graded as: check-plus, check, check-minus, or no pass). Response papers are due Monday night at midnight before each Wednesday's class so we can incorporate your reflections into Wednesday's discussion. Late papers will be graded down slightly. There will be a total of 6 response papers (preceding Weeks 2-7).
- 30% of the grade will be based on your level of involvement with and contribution to class. In addition to being an active discussion participant, during one session you will briefly summarize some of the readings for the class (a general overview meant to remind others of, but not substitute for, the content of the readings) and have 2 questions in mind regarding the reading that could stimulate group discussion if needed.

Note. The exchange of materials for this course is completely electronic. All required readings

can be found on the course website. Please submit all written assignments in electronic form via email.

### **Psych 135 Schedule**

#### **Week 1, April 5th: Course Introduction. Theories of well-being and its measurement.**

No readings required. General course overview followed by lecture and group discussion.

#### **Week 2, April 12th: Where does well-being come from? Cultural-historical, personality, and biological answers.**

##### Well-being enhancement technique:

- Assess your “Values in Action” signature strengths using the VIA Signature Strengths Questionnaire at [www.authentichappiness.org](http://www.authentichappiness.org). Then choose an unavoidable task that you find tedious and invent a way to perform the task using one of your signature strengths.

##### Required Readings:

- McMahon, D. M. Happiness a history. Conclusion chapter.
- Diener, E. & Lucas, R. E. (1999). *Personality and subjective well-being*. In Kahneman, D., Diener, E., & Schwartz, N. (Eds). Well-being: The foundations of hedonic psychology. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Isen, A. M. (2005). *A role for neuropsychology in understanding and facilitating influence or positive affect on social behavior and cognitive processes*. In Snyder, C. R., & Lopez, S. J. (Eds). Handbook of Social Psychology. New York: Oxford University Press.

##### Suggested Readings if you would like more information on these topics:

- Abbe, A.; Tkach, C., & Lyubormirsky, S. (2003). The Art of Living by Dispositionally Happy People. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 4, p385, 20.
- Plant, S. Artificial paradises (2000). In Plant, S. (Ed.) Writings on drugs. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.

**Week 3, April 19<sup>th</sup>: Objective Well-Being? The behavioral economics approach to the study of individual and national well-being.**

Well-being enhancement technique:

- Write a letter of appreciation or gratitude to someone who has contributed importantly to your well-being, but whom you have never properly thanked. Practitioners say this technique works best when delivered in person, but you might need to mail it and follow up with a phone call if the recipient lives far away.

Required Readings:

- Stutzer & Frey. (2001). Happiness and Economics: How the economy and institutions affect human well-being. Chp.4 "Income," p73-93.
- Kahneman, D. (1999). Objective Happiness. In Kahneman, D., Diener, E., & Schwartz, N. (Eds). Well-being: The foundations of hedonic psychology. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Suggested Readings:

- Myers, David G. (2000). The Funds, Friends, and Faith of Happy People. *American Psychologist*. 55, 56-67.

**Week 4, April 26<sup>th</sup>: The construction of well-being; Well-being by nation and region (2 classes on this topic)**

Well-being enhancement technique:

- Practice mindful meditation for 10 minutes a day this week. We will discuss techniques in the Week 3 class.

Required Readings:

- Kitayama & Markus. The pursuit of happiness and the realization of sympathy: Cultural patterns of self, social relations, and well-being. Book chapter.
- Oishi, S. (2002). The experiencing and remembering of well-being: A cross-cultural analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28, pp. 1398-1406
- Wierzbicka, A. (2004) Happiness in cross linguistic and cross-cultural perspective. *Daedalus*.

Suggested Readings:

- Tsai, J.L., Knutson, B., & Fung, H.H. (in press). Cultural variation in affect valuation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.
- Christopher, S., Christopher, J.C. & Dunnagan, T. (2000). Culture's impact on health risk appraisal psychological well-being questions. *American Journal of Health Behavior*, 24(5), 338-348.
- Plaut, V., Markus, H., & Lachman, M. (2002). "Place matters: Consensual features and regional variation in American well-being and self." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83, pp.160-184..

**Week 5, May 3<sup>rd</sup>: The production of well-being: Well-being in the media. (Plus spillover from nation/region).**

Well-being enhancement technique:

- Write your own obituary from the perspective of your grandchildren, emphasizing your legacy.
- Special assignment: Bring something from the media related to well-being to “show and tell” during class. (E.g., video taped commercial, web or magazine advertisement, excerpt from a film, etc.)

Required Reading and Film:

- Excerpts from Butler-Bowdon. (2003). Fifty self-help classics. Yarmouth, Maine: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
- FILM: Eat, drink, man, woman. Directed by Ang Lee. On reserve at Green Library.

**Week 6, May 10<sup>th</sup>: Demographics of happiness: Well-being by gender, age**

Well-being enhancement technique:

- Design and test your own well-being enhancement technique.

Required Readings:

- Excerpts from Nolen-Hoeksema, S. & Rusting, C. (1999). Gender differences in well-being. In D. Kahneman, E. Diener, & N. Schwarz (Eds.), Well-being: The foundations of hedonic psychology. New York: Russell Sage.
- Excerpts from Argyle, M. (1999). Causes and correlates of happiness. In D. Kahneman & E. Diener & N. Schwarz (Eds.), Well-being: The foundations of hedonic psychology. New York: Russell Sage.
- Löckenhoff, C., Carstensen, L. (2004). Socioemotional selectivity theory, aging, and health: The increasingly delicate balance between regulating emotions and making tough choices. *Journal of Personality. Special Issue: Emotions, Personality, and Health*, 72, pp. 1395-1424.

Suggested Readings:

- Rowe, J. & Kahn, R. (1997). Successful aging. *Gerontologist*, 37, pp. 433-440.
- Lyubomirsky, Sonja; Dickerhoof, Rene. (2006) Subjective Well-Being. In Worell, J. & Goodheart, C. D. (Eds). Handbook of girls' and women's psychological health: Gender and well-being across the lifespan. New York: Oxford University Press. pp. 166-174.

**Week 7, May 17th: Well-being by social class.**

Well-being enhancement technique:

- Pick your favorite ending (of a movie, poem, or piece of music). Come to class prepared to explain it, if asked.

Required Reading and Film:

- Markus, Curhan, & Ryff (2006). Educational Attainment and Models of Well-Being in America: A Sociocultural Analysis. Working paper.
- FILM: Junebug. Directed by Phil Morrison. On reserve at Green library.

Suggested Readings:

- Kusserow, A. S. (1999). Crossing the great divide: anthropological theories of the Western self. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 55(4): 541-562.
- Lamont, M. (2000). The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class and Immigration. New York, NY, Russell Sage Foundation..

**Week 8, May 24th.: Class presentations**

**Week 9, May 31st.: Class presentations**

**Week 10, June 7th: Class presentations**

**Week 11, Monday, June 12<sup>th</sup>: Final paper due by midnight.** Late papers will be graded down one letter grade per day late.