

# Myers and Diener (1995) ‘Who is happy?’

## Methodology and procedures:

The methodology used was a **literature review**, therefore there are no procedures. Myers and Diener selected the topic for their review (happiness) and searched the literature for relevant studies (secondary sources). **These studies used a range of methods** such

as correlations and observations to investigate factors affecting **subjective well-being**. Myers and Diener **collated this research** under different areas and wrote up their review, drawing conclusions about factors affecting happiness.

## Findings:

*(Note: more detail can be found in the WJEC summary of this research.)*

### Myths of happiness:

<b>Age</b> <b>No real difference</b> A survey of roughly 170,000 people from 16 different countries (Ingelhart, 1990) revealed that no time of life is notably happier or unhappier than others.	<b>Gender</b> <b>Generally no difference</b> 80% of men and 80% of women said they were at least ‘fairly satisfied’ with life (Ingelhart, 1990).	<b>Race</b> <b>No real difference</b> People of different nationalities scored similarly on tests of self-esteem.	<b>Culture</b> <b>Large differences found</b> Nations differ in happiness even when income differences are controlled. For example, in Portugal, about 10% of people say they are very happy, whilst in the Netherlands, 40% of people say the same.	<b>Money</b> <b>Moderate correlations</b> 75% of Americans beginning college said that ‘being very well off financially’ was a ‘very important’ life goal and was ranked more important than ‘raising a family’ for example.
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### Happy people:

<b>Traits</b> <b>Self-esteem, personal control, optimism, and extraversion.</b> Happy people tend to like themselves and feel a sense of personal control. They are also optimists and are more extraverted. It is not known if these traits cause happiness or being happy leads to these traits.	<b>Relationships</b> <b>Those with more friends are happier.</b> People who can name several friends are healthier and happier than people who have few or no friends. Married people are more likely to describe themselves as ‘very happy’ than those who never married, are divorced or separated.	<b>Flow</b> <b>People with greater work satisfaction have better life satisfaction.</b> Work should help the individual reach a ‘flow’ state, where one is so caught up in an activity that the mind does not wander, one becomes oblivious to surroundings and time flies (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).	<b>Faith</b> <b>Religious people report higher levels of happiness.</b> Surveys have shown that people who are strongly religious are twice as likely to say they are ‘very happy’. Faith seems to help people to cope with a crisis.
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## Conclusions:

Myers and Diener used their research to develop ideas about a theory of happiness. It contained three elements.

1. **Adaptation.** Only events within the last three months have a significant effect on well-being as the response to either positive or negative events fades over time.
2. **Cultural worldview.** An individual’s culture influences how life events are interpreted, which in turn affects well-being.
3. **Values and goals.** Having goals and making progress towards them can predict well-being. Therefore, things like money are only important if they are relevant to a person’s life goals.

They dismissed the idea that factors such as age, sex and money were important indicators of happiness, instead focusing on things like personality traits and relationships. They noted that the research on psychological well-being was a **‘welcome complement’ to studies of depression and anxiety** and believed that by researching who is happy, it could help people rethink their priorities and **better understand how to build a world that enhances human well-being.**



## Ethical issues:

### Risk of stress, anxiety, humiliation or pain:

Some of the studies Myers and Diener used in the review may have caused anxiety or stress to their participants by asking about their well-being.

### Risk to the participants' values, beliefs, relationships, status or privacy:

Some of the studies Myers and Diener used in the review asked for personal information such as well-being, religion or relationship status. Revealing this may have been uncomfortable for some participants.

## Social implications:

### Socially sensitive research:

Some of the findings and conclusions of Myers and Diener highlight differences between groups in society. For example, the fact that religious people report higher levels of satisfaction or that there are cultural differences (like 10% of people in Portugal saying they are 'very happy', compared to 40% in the Netherlands).

### Benefits for society:

In their conclusions, Myers and Diener note that the research could be used to help 'better understand how to build a world that enhances human well-being'.

## Methodology and procedures:

### Culture-biased research:

Many of the studies were focused on Western cultures and used Western definitions of happiness when designing the questionnaires.

### Potential for researcher bias:

A literature review involves researchers selecting previous research and pooling it together to draw conclusions. There is a possibility of researcher bias in selecting the studies and interpreting the results.

### Use of self-report data:

The studies used in the literature review required individuals to report on their subjective well-being, meaning that their responses were subject to validity issues like social desirability and demand characteristics.

### Use of correlational studies:

Many of the studies used were correlational, for example those that looked at the relationship between income and well-being. Correlation does not prove causation and there may be other factors involved.

