

Introduction:

In the documentary *Happy*, directed by Roko Belic, the audience learns that 50% of a person's happiness is determined by genes, 10% is determined by the individual's circumstances, (examples being income, job, etc.), and the remaining 40% is based on how the individual interprets the world and the life they've been given. It can be viewed like so: at birth all humans are dealt an undetermined hand of cards. It's not up to our families, jobs, or incomes to provide us with the mental stabilities needed to gain happiness, it's solely up to the way we choose to perceive our hand of cards. If life were a game of Black Jack it would be only the individual's job to gain a perfect 21.

Our happiness is determined by our own perception. This can be exhibited in many ways, so I will provide you with two extremes. The first is a man who lives in Dhravi, the biggest slums in Asia. These slums spread over more than 525 acres, house over one million people, and account for around 54% of Mumbai's population. I met this man last Spring while in India. The second example is a story that I watched in the documentary *Happy*. This is a man from Japan who has fallen into the routine of an overworked businessman who can't seem to get a break.

A middle-aged man wakes up just after dawn in The Dhravi Slums, Mumbai. His family and all of their ancestors have lived in these slums. He gets up each morning and strolls through narrow, dark walkways between the door-less rooms and emerges in the industrial section of the slum. He walks into his workspace: a small room encased with piles upon piles of recycled trash. Piles which only contain plastic and have been separated by color. He and two other men spend the day in this meager, unlit room melting the endless piles of plastic. Far past sundown he returns to his family with open arms and an enlarged grin. He'll hug his baby tight and proudly say "bas-Allah", or thank you, to his wife who has spent the day carrying water from the communal pump, into their home, and cooking for the family.

Another man around the same age wakes up on a similar morning, though in a far more hurried and pressed manner. He is a businessman from Japan. Each morning this man slumps onto a brutally crowded train and squeezes between hundreds of equally exhausted and overworked citizens. He spends the majority of his day managing a large and ever growing white-collar business. Deep into the night he slumps back onto the train and returns home. Accompanied yet again, by many other sleep deprived, hard workers. Upon his return home this man offers outstretched arms to his young daughter's running embrace. He attempts to play but is far too exhausted. Without dinner and another word to his family, this man slithers to bed and allows his child to be entertained by her stay-at-home mother; a mother who, similar to the other 70% of women in Japan, stopped working after the birth of her first child.

These stories provoke many questions. What is *true* happiness and what does it take to be *happy*? While researching I quickly realized that in order to learn a sufficient amount about a topic that's so abstract and personal, I would need to engage others who could provide a first person account of their "happiness experiences." So I conducted a survey.

Methodology:

My goal was to get feedback from a diverse and unique crowd of individuals. To do so I sent my survey to family and friends who fell under the eight social identifiers (ability, Age, Ethnicity, Gender, Race, Religion, Sexual Orientation, and Socio-Economic Status). I was

hoping to obtain an array of backgrounds and therefore hear about varying obstacles and unique ways in which each of the interviewees overcame them. I decided to mostly send the survey to adults who I thought had gained enough knowledge to sufficiently answer the questions. This is why most of my interviewees are above the age of 50. In the end I received 19 responses. Below you can refer to the Survey.

Happiness Survey

Race:

Ethnicity:

Gender:

Religion:

Age:

Birthplace:

Where you live currently:

Occupation (or grade in school) What makes you happiest?

What makes you happiest?

a. What path have you taken to achieve this happiness?

b. What are some decisions you've made that lead to this happiness?

What factors beyond your control have contributed to your happiness?

a. What obstacles have you been faced with? If applicable, how did you overcome them?

b. Did these obstacles change the perception of your happiness?

Have you achieved "complete" happiness?

If so, how? If not, why?

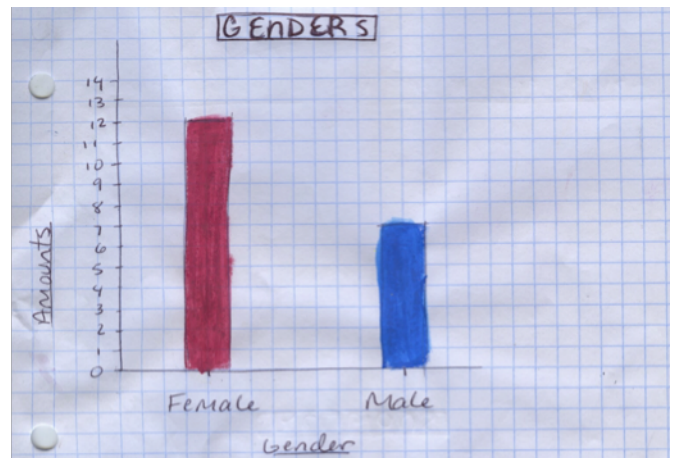
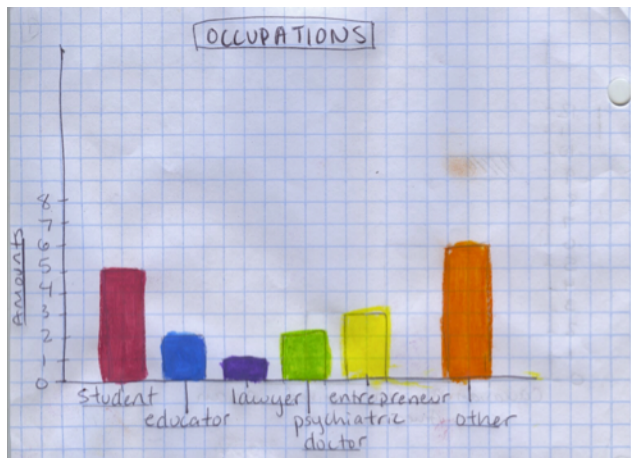
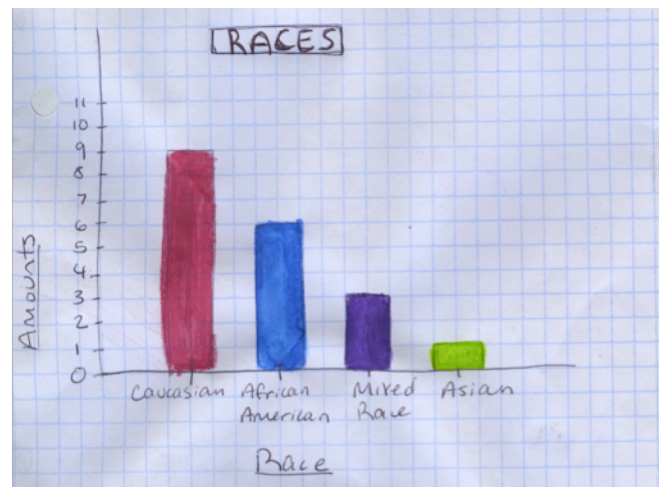
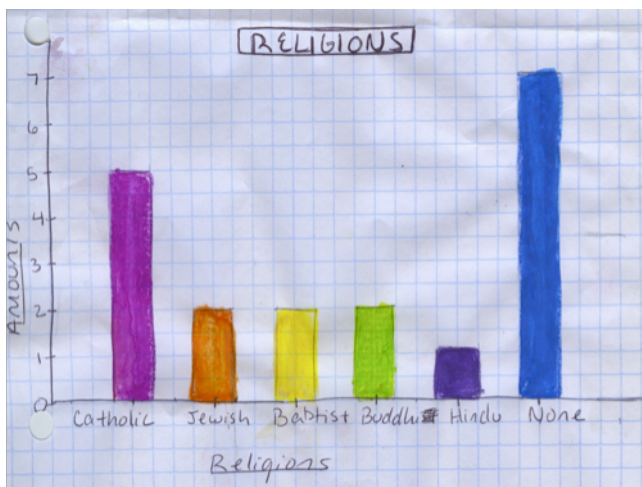
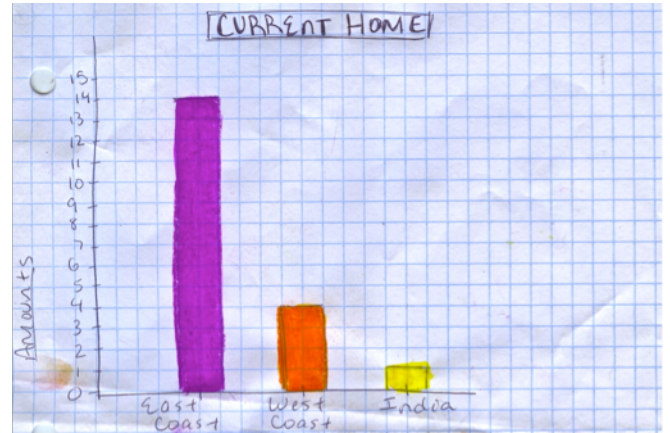
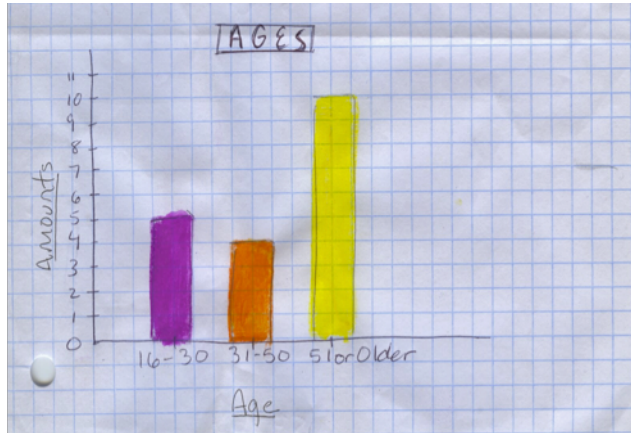
Results:

In the end I was very pleased with the responses as well as the diversity of those who responded. I found that even though everyone came from very different backgrounds and places, each person had faced their own obstacles, learned how to overcome them (to a comfortable extent), and through this, were able to gain acceptance of their lives, their circumstances, and themselves as a whole.

Below are graphs to show details about the interviewees.

Discussion:

Through this survey I found that the first step in an individual's happiness process are Obstacles. One that's perceived as most important by society is money; lack there of, and the desperation to always have and be making more. Tim Kasser explains: "America is about twice as wealthy as we were 50 years ago, but studies have shown that the happiness levels of Americans have remained the same." In response, Roko Belic explained in his documentary: "When money buys you out of the burdens of homelessness and not knowing where your next



meal will come from, it changes your happiness dramatically. But once your basic needs are met, more money doesn't buy more happiness." These quotes prove that the man in the Dhruvi Slums and his family can be, and most likely are, far happier than the man who is never satisfied with his life and therefore works himself to death. The documentary *Happy* also teaches its viewers that the happiness of an individual who earns five thousand dollars versus fifty thousand dollars a year is drastic. This is because the two amounts of money determine if you lead a stable life and have access to necessities. Though the happiness of people who earn

between fifty thousand and fifty million dollars a year isn't affected by money at all. This is due to the fact that once an individual has reached a level of financial stability, no amount of money can drastically alter their happiness.

The obstacles that proved to be the hardest in my survey were family and race. The toughest was family. Here are some examples: "My father died when I was 17. His illness began when I was 11 and since I was the youngest I was home throughout all of it." This is an example of a circumstance, as we discussed earlier, that has a negative effect on your happiness. Here is a second example: "Growing up my dad was an active alcoholic so that was hard and confusing to deal with as a child." Clearly these unfortunate familial situations provoke negative feelings and can deeply burden one's happiness. As we stated earlier, 50% of our happiness is due to genes. Through this fact that the previous quotes we know that obstacles can not only be inherited from our families, they can grow far worse from your family's circumstances as well.

The second most apparent obstacle was race. Nine of my interviewees were Caucasian while the remaining ten were an array of races including African American, Asian, and Mixed. For the minorities who engaged in my survey, race was a very (if not the most) prominent topic in their responses. Here is an example: "Life is full of obstacles – Being born Black in the 1950s, growing up during a time when society wanted to limit me, not only because of my race, but because of my gender." At the diversity conference I attend called SDLC (Student Diversity and Leadership Conference), each time we study race, we come to the conclusion that for minorities, race is far more evident in their every day, minute-to-minute lives, than for Caucasians. At SDLC teenagers in the twenty-first century came to this conclusion. We can only imagine how amplified this hyper awareness to race was for a black woman during the civil rights movement.

Though race proved to be one of the largest obstacles, all of the minorities also said their race caused them to grow in wonderful and extraordinary ways: "Being a black man and growing up in the 70s in a small town in the northern part of America was both a blessing and a hindrance. I was allowed to profit and stand on the shoulders of the people who fought for civil rights and allowed me the freedoms I had. I grew up during a time when there were so many opportunities interlaced with the continuing stigma of lost identity and direction." This quote illustrates that most individuals overcome or learn to move past their obstacles, especially those of race. In an article titled "Race and Happiness" written by Jason Marsh, we learn that "African Americans are happier today than they were in the 1970s, while whites have remained just as happy as they were then." This is encouragement that people can face their obstacles head-on, overcome them, and result in being a far more grounded being. In the book "Spiritual Consciousness" by Swami Mukerji, we're told just that: "All obstacles are really "coal" feeding the "flame" of the spirit. They spur a man on. The vibrations are often blessings in disguise. They drive the lesson home."

Obstacles teach us about the world, expose us to new emotions and situations, then force us to engage in self-growth and inner maturation. This growth being, overcoming your obstacles in a way that doesn't allow one to step over them, wash their hands, then turn their back on it forever, knowing that it's still hovering and teasing their every move. But instead, to conquer your obstacles in a way that teaches us to have a deeper understanding of the world we've been placed in and where we, as individuals, fit into it.

All of these gains eventually lead to acceptance. Acceptance of your family, acceptance of your race, and acceptance of the hand of cards you were dealt at birth. One of my interviewees stated: "I learned that my past may define who I am but not what I am. It does not

have to determine my present or my future.” This best describes the acceptance that most individuals are lucky enough to achieve.

I found that once everyone in my survey had experienced a sufficient amount of obstacles, processed them, and allowed inner growth, only then were they able to fully accept the world they were born into and learn how to lead a life that pleased them most: “The path to happiness becomes straighter, more level, and easier to follow once you have reached a point in life of patience, understanding and acceptance.”

My research culminated with the most important level of acceptance one can achieve. Complete acceptance of one’s circumstance, which leads to the realization that everyone controls their own happiness. We can’t rely on our environment or others to create happiness for us. We can only provide it for ourselves. In an article titled “Citizens of the Poorest Countries are Happiest in the World,” a poor woman from Paraguay who sells tea on the streets explained: “Life is too short, and there is no place for sadness.” This is a very simplistic example. Just as the man who lives a happy life in the Dhruvi Slums, this woman has created a positive life through acceptance of the cards she was dealt. One of my interviewees stated it perfectly. They recently came to this conclusion that: “At first, I did not even think that happiness could be possible...then I began to search inside of me for the small things that made me happy, the situations that brought me peace and the ability to let down those mental barriers and erase those demons that disrupted my happiness.” This is an example of the enlightening acceptance most people are able to achieve. And once we do achieve this outlook, it feels as if thousands of demons have been lifted off of your shoulders. For it’s the moment we are truly able to take control of our lives.

Conclusion:

My research suggests that each individual’s perception of their situation is what can make or break their happiness. As someone stated in their survey: “When I have those moments of HUGE happiness (or even the small ones), I stop and relish what is going on...[I] roll around in it. Let all that it is wash over me and into me and then tuck it safely away in the deepest part of my memory...I use all of it as a shield against all things bad that can happen. I know between the happiness and the sadness, if I work at it, I can find peace and be content.” The stories that were captured in the survey gave me far better examples of the obstacles that cause us to doubt, struggle with, or even give up on happiness. We are constantly encountering obstacles, some larger and some smaller. Though in the end, they all provide us with new learning opportunities. Obstacles are constant means of broaden our mindsets and gaining new modes of conquering. And through these triumphs, individuals reach greater levels of acceptance. This is when we realize that no matter what our circumstances are, we choose to how to interpret them. This is the most important lesson: claiming your own happiness and placing all of the responsibilities into our own two hands. For once this is achieved, obstacles appear far smaller and a comforting level of happiness becomes quite tangible. This quote is the ideal: “My trick is to first see the obstacle- it may overwhelm me for a while; then I go wine and moan about it for a bit, then I pick myself up and figure out what to do about it- Whether I have to go over it, around it, through it or ask for some help with it.”

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The 19 gracious people who took the time to fill out my survey, thank you.

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