Happiness: Exploring Relationship with Information and Place in Information Science Research and Education

Naresh Agarwal
Assistant Professor
Graduate School of Library & Information Science
Simmons College
300 The Fenway Boston, MA
agarwal@simmons.edu

ABSTRACT

Research in information seeking behavior has looked at the way a person goes about looking for information when faced with a need for information. However, the relationship between happiness and information and how this information impacts happiness is often left out of the picture. Also, higher education in the field has not explored happiness as a learning outcome even though research has shown that a person can learn and practice to be happy. This paper discusses the concepts of information and happiness. Though a listing of my 7 commandments in life, a preliminary attempt will be made to highlight the possible inter-relationships between happiness and information. This is a step in the direction to try and find synergies between information and happiness. Also, the possible role of happiness in Information Science research and in Information Science education will be discussed. By recognizing happiness as a construct and taking up the teaching and learning of happiness, we should be able to bring about transformative learning.

Keywords
Happiness, information, subjective well-being.

INTRODUCTION

As human beings, we have an unending thirst for information. Every day, whether in our work lives, at home, for leisure or to satisfy a curiosity, we are looking for information. Researchers in the field of information seeking behavior have been studying the information needs of a person and the way s/he goes about seeking information. A number of researchers have looked at the role of affect and subjective factors, before, during and as outcomes of the information search process. See, for example, Kuhlthau's information search process model (1991). A book edited by Diane Nahl and Dania Bilal (Nahl and Bilal, 2007) brings together research in information science that deals with the relationship between information and emotion. The contributors summarize theoretical frameworks and the role of affective dimensions in macro, micro and special information environments. However, a search on the subject index at the end of the book had the word *happiness* missing from it. The author could easily find only two studies in information science that recognized happiness as a construct – 1) Gwizdka and Lopatovska (2009) that utilized Kahneman (2000)'s measure of 'objective happiness' in asking participants 'how happy are you right now' on a 5-point Likert scale before a search and 2) González-Ibáñez, Shah and Córdova-Rubio (2011) that looked at smiling as an expression of happiness during collaborative information seeking. Thus, the study of how information affects our state of happiness or rather, how we allow ourselves to be affected by this information coming our way is an area requiring greater attention. Research in information science has largely left out happiness from its purview even though happiness or lack of it affects us all. Stress in libraries is a major issue. Another big question is whether happiness can be taught, and if it can, why is it left out from the curriculum of library and information science (LIS) schools? While higher education in LIS concentrates on learning outcomes such as critical thinking, ethics, problem solving, communication skills, leadership, etc., happiness does not even make it as a candidate for a student learning outcome (even though empirical research in psychology has shown that up to 40% of our happiness is within our power to change – see Lyubomirsky, 2007, who bases her conclusions on two decades of empirical research on happiness http://www.faculty.ucr.edu/~sonja).

In this theoretical study, I will seek to discuss the concepts of information and happiness, as well as the possible role of happiness research in Information Science and in Information Science education. Though a listing of my 7 commandments in life, a preliminary attempt will be made to highlight the possible inter-relationships between happiness and information. Thus, the research questions are

– "What is the relationship between information and happiness? Is there a place for happiness in information science? Is there a place for happiness in information science education?" Future work will explore each of the commandments in depth and arrive at theoretical models linking the concepts of information and happiness.

The paper is a preliminary attempt to help shed light on the synergies between information and happiness, considering the fact that happiness and well being is central to all of us in the field. Let us look at the concepts of information and happiness in the next section.

INFORMATION AND HAPPINESS

While there has been a lack of clear consensus on what exactly *information* means (Case 2007, p.40), Case uses the anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1972, p.453)'s definition of information as any difference that makes a difference to a conscious, human mind. Case elaborates, "..information is whatever appears significant to a human being, whether originating from an external environment or a (psychologically) internal world". Here, perceived difference is a basic "unit of mind" that can be inferred through study of both humans and animals (Case 2007, p.40). See, for example, Pisula's book (Pisula, 2009) on curiosity and information seeking in animal and human behavior. For an elaborate treatment on the concept of information, see Case (2007), pp.40-67.

Happiness "…was neglected in psychology for many decades….Surely, psychologists must have thought, happiness is a kind of homespun, folk category of thing that may have a certain use in bar-room gossip, but has no place in scholarly research articles." (Nettle, 2005, p.7). Nettle goes on to argue that terms found in psychology research such as utility, hedonic tone, subjective well-being, positive emotionality are aspects of happiness. "..if people spend a lot of their time thinking about the notion of happiness, then that is a pretty good reason for studying it." (p.9).

Happiness has been studied in different fields ranging from philosophy to psychology to social sciences to economics. The Journal of Happiness Studies reports on interdisciplinary topics on happiness and lists among its subjects as social sciences, quality of life research, sociology, philosophy and personality and social psychology. In psychology, it has been studied under the field of positive psychology, a branch of psychology which emphasizes the importance of using the scientific method to determine how things go right. (Peterson, 2006). See, for example, Gable and Haidt, 2005; Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson, 2005; Lyubomirsky, King and Diener, 2005, as well as a number of empirical studies by Sonja Lyubomirsky. It is also the subject of numerous self help books and spiritual and social discourse. Ben-Shahar (2007) writes, "In fact, the study of happiness is unique neither to our hemisphere nor to our postmodern age. People everywhere, and always, have sought the key to happiness. Plato institutionalized the study of the good life in the

Academy, while his star student, Aristotle, opened the competing Lycaum to promote his own take on flourishing. More than a century earlier, and on another continent, Confusious walked from village to village to share his prescription for fulfillment" (p. ix). The religions and gurus of India – ranging from the 15th century mystic, Kabir, to brilliant Swami of the last 19th century, Vivekananda, to modern day Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (founder of the Art of Living www.artofliving.org) and H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama have all espoused and carried forward the idea of happiness.

Ben-Shahar (2007) defines happiness as "the overall experience of pleasure and meaning. (p.33). Accoding to Ben-Shahar, a happy person enjoys positive emotions while perceiving one's life as purposeful. "The definition does not pertain to a single moment but to a generalized aggregate of one's experiences: a person can endure emotional pain at times and still be happy overall." (p.33). In his interesting hamburger model of happiness, Ben-Shahar defines 4 archetypes – rat race, nihilism, hedonism and happiness, based on one's emphasis of present or future benefit or detriment. Interestingly, he places happiness in the quadrant where there is both present benefit as well as future benefit.

Kalat and Shiota (2007) define happiness as a state of mind or feeling characterized by contentment, love, satisfaction, pleasure, or joy. Nettle (2005) comes up with a typology of 3 levels of happiness: Level 1) momentary feelings such as *joy* and *pleasure*; Level 2) judgments about feelings such as *well-being* and *satisfaction*; and Level 3) quality of life such as *flourishing* and *fulfilling one's potential* (p.18). Each level adds to the content of the level below.

There are certain lessons I have learnt over the years through experience, and which I try to follow. I call these my 7 commandments (Figure 1). I give a talk based on these at the end of each of my classes, and have shared these at various fora. The talks have been received positively.

1. Be happy always, no matter what. Don't let events (good or bad) disturb your state of bliss." (Agarwal, April 2011)
2. Have 0 expectations from every other person in the world, and 100% from yourself. When you don't expect, you'll never be unhappy and everything you get is a bonus (see Agarwal, May 2007)
3. Never compare with those around you. Just give in your 100% and don't worry about the results. (see Agarwal, July 2007)
4. Everything happens for one's own good. We get what is best for us.
5. Live in the present moment. Don't worry about the future (it will take care of itself, if you take care of the present) and the past (we can never change it).
6. You can do the impossible! Remove the dust that is cloaking that power within you. Let your inner spark glow! Whenever we see greatness around, we see people who've removed more of this dust.
7. For every person that you see, meet and talk to, imagine that you're seeing, meeting and talking to God. The essence is to identify with each person in the world as your own.

Figure 1. My 7 commandments in life.

We spend most of my lifetime basing our happiness on the external environment – what other people say of us, the events that happen in our lives or the outcomes of our pursuits (Figure 2). If we think about it, we spend our time

allowing ourselves to be blown about like fig leaves – one whiff of air and we're blown in one direction. Another whiff and we're blown in the other. One person comes and says something nice about us and we become elated. Another person comes and says something nasty or insensitive and we lose all our composure. We are, in a sense, remote-controlled by the events happening around us and the words spoken to us or about us. We often do more harm to ourselves by dwelling on people's words than the words themselves, or losing our sleep when things don't go the way we want them to. The only thing to guard is our state of bliss. Thus, we need to practice and perfect the art of being happy by drawing happiness from within.
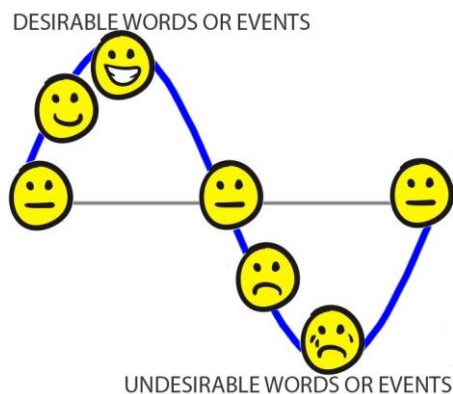
Figure 2. Impact of words and events on our happiness.

Here, the words that we are affected by are nothing but information that comes our way. In fact, when we look at Gregory Bateson (1972)'s definition of information as *any difference that makes a difference* to a conscious, human mind, we see a direct relationship between information and our propensity to be affected and be happy or unhappy as a result of it. The events affecting us can be seen as the context of information behavior (see e.g. Agarwal, Xu and Poo, 2011; Agarwal, 2011).

The idea is also to identify with each person in the world as our own. When we dislike someone or are scared of someone, it is basically because we lack sufficient information about the person. The moment we have enough information about the person and form a shared context, we will lose our inhibitions and start identifying with the person as our own (7th commandment).

PLACE OF HAPPINESS IN INFORMATION SCIENCE
While happiness has been largely studied in a number of different fields, it hasn't found it pride of place yet in information science (though subjective behaviors and affective dimensions have been studied for a number of years now). There is a lack of research in the space intersecting happiness and information (save for exceptions such as Gwizdka and Lopatovska, 2009 and González-Ibáñez, Shah and Córdova-Rubio, 2011). Recent studies

have started exploring happiness and other emotions in blogs and social networks.

In a recent study, Mogilner, Kamvar and Aaker (2011) examined the emotions reported on 12 million personal blogs, along with surveys and lab experiments. They concluded that the meaning of happiness shifts systematically over the course of one's lifetime.

Happiness is also studied as a sub-type of another construct *emotion* or as a corollary to a construct such as *subjective well-being* (see e.g. Bollen *et al.*, 2011). Subjective well-being or SWB was an expression coined by Ed Deiner (www.pursuit-of-happiness.org) to denote the aspect of happiness that can be empirically measured.

Gruzd, Doiron and Mai (2011) used automated sentiment analysis to study a sample of 46,000 Twitter messages that reference the 2010 Winter Olympics.

Similarly, there are other studies that explore emotion through a content analysis of blogs and social networking tools. See, e.g., Mitrovic, Paltoglou and Tadic (2011), Thelwall, Buckley and Paltoglou (2011) or Dodds *et al.* (2011). Hongladarom (2007) claims that there are strong logical connections between open source software, open society and happiness. He posits that web 2.0 creates a level of happiness by ensuring that information is shared in an open and transparent manner.

CAN HAPPINESS BE TAUGHT? PLACE OF HAPPINESS IN INFORMATION SCIENCE EDUCATION
Ben-Shahar (2007), in his book, "Happier" (www.talbenshahar.com), covers a lot of what he taught in his very successful class on positive psychology at Harvard University. His class grew from 6 students to 380 students (where more than 20% noted that the course improves the quality of one's life) to 855 students. Ben-Shahar (2007) writes, "The cash-value that I primarily sought for the students was not in hard currency or the currency of success and accolades but rather in what I've come to call the ultimate currency, the end toward which all other ends lead: happiness." (p. viii). He says that the class was not merely a class on the theory of "the good life". "Students, beyond reading articles and learning about the research in the field, were asked to apply the material. They wrote papers in which they grappled with their fears and reflected on their strengths, set ambitious goals for the week and for the coming decade; they were encouraged to take risks and find their stretch zone (the healthy median between their comfort and panic zones)." (p. viii).

Education in Library and Information Science has largely ignored happiness as a construct, while exploring other learning outcomes such as communication skills, ethics, leadership, critical thinking, etc. Empirical research has shown that up to 40% of one's happiness is within an individual's power to change (Lyubomirsky 2007).

Simmons College, for instance, has its core purpose listed as *transformative learning that links passion with lifelong purpose* (http://www.simmons.edu/strategy2015/map/). Such a transformative learning that links passion with purpose will need to have happiness as an important ingredient, for learning to combine with life-long purpose. The 'happiness' quadrant in Ben-Shahar (2007)'s Hamburger model of happiness combines present benefit [transformative learning that links passion with] and future benefit [lifelong purpose].

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

I have briefly discussed the possible relationship between information and happiness, and made a case for the place of happiness in information science research and in information science education. By recognizing happiness as a construct and taking up the teaching and learning of happiness, we should be able to bring about transformative learning. Future work will explicate the 7 commandments in greater depth and build a theoretical model of happiness and link it with the concept of information.

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