

Happiness and Ignorance

Aaron Cheung
Joanna (Jung) Lee
Moses Park
Verónica Rolán
Sam Sun

Word Count: 3972

Happiness and Ignorance

Introduction:

In this paper we look at the relationship between ignorance and happiness defined as the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his or her own life-as-a-whole favorably (Veenhoven 2008: 2). We explore the differences of happiness found in ignorance and happiness found in knowledge by reviewing contributions from previous research. Although our answer might change for specific case studies (table 1), overall, we argue that bliss is better with knowledge. Like Mill, we argue that it is better to be an unhappy Socrates than a happy fool; namely, that it is better to be enlightened than ignorant, regardless of the outcome (Veenhoven 2000). Mill acknowledges that both ignorant and knowledgeable people can be in bliss, but an enlightened person experiences greater pleasures than an ignorant person. Socrates would have experienced higher enjoyments from being enlightened and therefore Mill argues that even in sadness, knowing and anticipating those higher pleasures would be better than being a fool knowing only mediocre experiences of happiness. Thus, if happiness is more profound with knowledge than ignorance and the sadness with knowledge is still better than the top experience of ignorance, then knowledge is truly bliss. This paper examines the case for ignorance with various examples (table 1) and then critiques that case. The side of knowledge is then built with specific cases (table 1) and then critiqued. We conclude with sociological theories to further frame our argument.

The Case for Ignorance:

Although there is limited in research supporting that ignorant happiness is better than knowledgeable happiness, the research studied showed key benefits of ignorance that increase overall happiness. First, people who are ignorant in negative situations are less likely to bear any responsibility when these situations occur. Generally, a lesser sense of responsibility equals less pressure, little burden, and lower stress- all arising from the idea that someone else will assume responsibility. This is at least true in the case of those who are ignorant about global warming. From the article "*Is Global Warming a Serious Problem? What do People Think?*" 57% of people worldwide acknowledge the seriousness of global warming but, only 50% of people worldwide believe that humans cause global warming. The other 50% believe that humans are not solely responsible, rather, natural changes in climate causes global warming. Only 42% of the people think governments around the world should reduce carbon dioxide emissions and other pollutants. These statistics show that people acknowledge the seriousness of the negative effects of global warming but only 42% of the people are want government involvement to improve the environment. This is caused by feeling of defeat, believing they cannot do anything to alleviate such problems individually. Thus, they conclude that they should just not worry about such negative factors. This research supports the notion that ignorance is bliss because of the lack of responsibility that comes with ignorance. This disassociation from impending doom evidently leads to happiness.

The feeling of being blissfully irresponsible in issues like global warming is shown to result in happiness. This can also be applied to other areas, such as having or

making choices. People blame themselves when they make bad choices, because they are held responsible for the choices that they make. This issue of having knowledge of available choices is examined in Barry Schwartz' lecture "Paradox of Choice". Schwartz talks about the incredible wealth of choice and how the seemingly unlimited amount of choice we have affects every single aspect of our lives both positively and negatively: the cell phones we could have, the kinds of salad dressings we can have, the kind of medical attention we receive, our identity (what kind of person we want to be everyday when we wake up), marriage, etc. Schwartz states that choice results in paralysis rather than liberation. With so many options to choose from, it is very difficult to choose confidently at all resulting in feelings of unhappiness or stress. One example is his story about his purchase of jeans one day. He went to a store and spent a long time finding a pair of jeans that fit him best. While he walked out of the store with the best fitting pair of jeans he's ever had, he felt absolutely worse because his expectation now had risen about the kinds of jeans he could have. He argues that more options increase expectations of results that people have because someone always has something better. They are always comparing their results to better results, even if their results might actually be very good, leaving them disappointed. As Schwartz says, "The secret to happiness is low expectations". Thus, having too much knowledge of what is out there and available for one to choose is not always best. Although some choice is better than no choice, it does *not* necessarily follow that more choice is better than some. The wealth of choice that society now tends to offer leads to less happiness. This is reflected in every aspect of our society, including media advertising.

We can look at the effect of media to see how an excess of knowledge can play a role in lessening one's happiness. The following is an excerpt from the "Media Group": "Many of these ads convince us that buying certain material goods, or looking and acting a certain way will guarantee happiness and lead to a life of perfection. The social comparison and symbolic interactionist theories can be applied to better explain how people oftentimes refer to advertisements to help them shape their identities and view of the world...Americans are known for their desire to acquire material goods and constant need for more. This desire has been nurtured by American culture because consumer expenditures help to sustain economic growth and provide many companies with profits each year (Richins 1995). This has raised Americans' standards of living, but also is associated with very negative consequences such envy and discontent (Richins 1995)." In other words, the more you are exposed to knowledge, the more you realize what people have that you do not, and thus you either envy those that have or are discontent with what you have. So, not only does higher levels of responsibility associated with making choices increase negative feelings, but the increased expectations that come with choice often result in disappointment and negative feelings as well. Overall, the increased expectations and feelings of responsibility that come with knowing all of the available options lead to more stress, disappointment, and unhappiness while ignorance leads to fewer choices, less stress and more happiness.

Finally, ignorance can be presented by way of political affiliation. By studying the beliefs and values of people from the conservative party, it can be argued that they are happier than the liberals because in general, liberals enjoy thinking more and

conservatives enjoy relatively more simple decisions. Liberals know more and are much more aware of social surroundings and societal ills so they look deeper and think more about why things are the way they are. Conservatives, on the other hand, tend to rationalize to justify everything.

As evidenced in the study "*Why are Conservatives Happier than Liberals?*" by Jaime Napier and John Jost, findings show that ignorance is better than knowledge. In an 2006 public-opinion survey, results showed that 47% of conservative Republicans described themselves as "very happy" while only 28% of liberal Democrats described themselves in the same way (Napier and Jost 2008: 565). This article differentiates conservatives and liberals by stating that liberals "enjoy thinking more" and conservatives prefer "relatively simple, unambiguous answers to life's questions" (Napier and Jost 2008: 565). Liberals are simply less happy because of the effects of looking into issues deeper than conservatives do. Conservatives also tend to rationalize actions based on a justification theory that uses satisfaction and increased positive affect and decreased negative effect (Napier and Jost 2008). Essentially, if an issue shows increased positive affects and decreased negative affects, that is enough to justify the issue. One example of this is that liberals tend to view equality as something desirable and just and would view inequality as a system out of equilibrium. So in a nation, if there is a increased inequality, liberals would report less happiness. However, conservatives are more likely to accept and justify the existence of inequality and more willing to rationalize it. Therefore, ignorant people are happier than people that know more because they can say with confidence, "it's not a big deal," rationalizing the situation when things don't go as

planned. This study would go as far to apply its findings from an economic stand point to suggesting that egalitarian women are less happy in the marriages than more traditional women because they see forms of domestic labor as problematic (Napier and Jost 2008). Overall, this study clearly supports the argument that knowing more does not contribute to a greater sense of happiness.

Critique of Ignorance Argument

Most of the research done on ignorance and happiness directly attacks how people with more knowledge are actually unhappy rather than building a case for ignorance. Furthermore, none of this research factors in other aspects of life. For example, what happens if you have a lot of money and you are ignorant? More money will inevitably lead to more choices and more options, so the argument that lack of choice often means happiness does not take this into account. Our study of liberals and conservatives may also lack in the factoring in these other aspects of life. The differences in the happiness levels of liberals versus conservatives may have to do also with other aspects such as family structure, type of occupation, or socioeconomic status.

We also can argue that for those who are in an ignorant state, they are likely to have a much more difficult time dealing with potentially bad or even devastating news, as opposed to those who are used to being informed of such negative news as soon as they occur. The longer a person waits to receive bad news the potential for the blow to be more devastating is greater. The argument is the same against those who disassociate themselves from impending doom. Even if you were knowledgeable and you weren't

comfortable with the added responsibility, you'd be able to manage that more as opposed to the opposite situation. In contrast, a person who is ignorant has a load of information dumped on them and is unable to deal with it properly.

The Case for Knowledge

The arguments for knowledge lead to a greater sense of happiness than happiness that comes from ignorance. Knowledge leads to empowerment. In a survey conducted by the United Nations Environment Program, 90% of young people around the world believe that global leaders should do whatever it takes to combat and global warming. A poll of individual countries indicates that concerns about global warming were highest in Brazil (96%) and South Africa (91%), followed by India (85%) and the U.S. (82%), while fewer youth seemed to be concerned in Russia (70%). These results clearly indicate the connection between the youth's preoccupation of climate change and its knowledge of the failed political leadership between the nations to tackle these problems. According to research, the United Nations Environment Program believes that more and more youth feel that they hold the power to change their government's policies on global warming. Overall, 89% of the sample population of the five different countries believes that they are able to make a difference. By correlating the youth's initiative to learn about the negative climate changes affecting our world with their urge to seek more information and get involved with different programs and organizations such as the United Nations, planning large-scale actions, creative lobbying, and more, our evidence supports that knowledge contributes to happiness. We see that when youth realize that they hold the

power to make changes in their own lives and in the lives of others, happiness and satisfaction ensues.

Feelings of understanding, or insight, can also contribute to a person's sense of subjective well-being. The ability to better comprehend one's situation or grasp the inner nature of things intuitively is beneficial to one's happiness. In Jennifer A. Lyke's article, *Insight, but not self-reflection, is related to subjective well-being*, the author explores the relationship of insight and self-reflection with happiness and satisfaction. The investigation tested the hypotheses that individuals with higher levels of insight would be both happier and more satisfied with their lives than those with lower levels and that an interaction between self-reflection and insight would affect both happiness and life satisfaction. A sample of 208 community members responded to a demographic questionnaire and four self-report psychometric measures related to subjective wellbeing. The results indicated that insight was significantly positively associated with the Satisfaction with Life and Subjective Happiness, but not with Self-reflection. The results also indicated that participants with the highest levels of insight were both significantly more satisfied with their lives and happier than participants with medium or low levels of insight, but the medium and low insight groups did not differ significantly from each other on either "Satisfaction with Life" or "Subjective Happiness". Therefore, this study supports the argument that increased insight into one's life contributes to happiness and life satisfaction.

Another study shows that understanding of a situation is preferable to being uninformed or ignorant, because the latter leads to feelings of anxiety and unease. This is

realized in the study, *When ignorance is not bliss: How feelings of discomfort promote the search for negative information* by Yaniv Shani. Shani explores the willingness of people to seek out potentially painful information. Previous research showed that the experience of regret leads to post-decision information search. The experiments were conducted using students from Tilburg University. In the first experiment, participants were asked to imagine that they had missed taking part in a lottery because they forgot to send in their lottery form. The results confirm that feeling discomfort is influenced by the initial probability of winning the lottery, while the amount of prize money had no significant effect on either feeling discomfort or the willingness to acquire information. The likelihood that an opportunity was missed was more important than the actual sum that was lost. In Experiment 2, participants were given a questionnaire containing a scenario where they had the opportunity to find out if their numbers would have won if they had participated in the lottery. The results provided strong support of the hypothesis regarding the willingness of individuals to acquire information, even when it has a high potential to be negative. The fact that knowing that one had missed an attractive opportunity is experienced as less negative than high probability uncertain knowledge. These results are consistent with the researcher's assumptions concerning the role of negative effect in motivating information search. People seek post-decision information because it feels better than being ignorant and suspecting that this information is negative. Therefore, people will choose to be more informed rather than being ignorant, even if the information has negative implications.

The actual process of obtaining knowledge and learning results in less anxiety as

well as greater positive emotions and happiness. Being more educated helps ease frustrations in the workplace as well as combating feelings of inadequacy. In her article *Exploring the Relationship Between Emotions and the Acquisition of Computer Knowledge*, Robin H. Kay (2008) writes about a study done to investigate the relationship between emotions the gaining of computer knowledge. In the study, a sample consisting of 184 teachers, ages 23-58 were taught various computer skills and programs over an 8-month period. All attended a 4-hour introductory workshop to learn basic operations of laptop computer and connecting to the internet. Other workshops throughout the year taught specific software skills in programs such as Dreamweaver, Word, and PowerPoint. A survey that focused on emotions and computer skills was used to assess the emotions of these teachers while learning software. The researchers looked at four specific emotions: anger, anxiety, happiness, and sadness, and this survey was administered once at the beginning of the 8-month period, and once at the end of the 8-month period. The results of the study showed that overall, happiness was the emotion that the participants reported feeling most while acquiring new computer knowledge, followed by anger, anxiety, and then sadness. On average, the participants felt happiness, in the form of curiosity, satisfaction, and excitement most of the time, and anger, anxiety, or sadness some of the time. After the 8-month period of learning was over, participants reported significantly less anxiety and anger while computer knowledge significantly increased. The researchers concluded that an increase in happiness and a decrease in anxiety were positively correlated with an increase in computer skills and knowledge. The findings in this study support the idea that ignorance is not always bliss, and that

people who gained knowledge were happier.

Finally, education leads to opportunities for decision-making, socialization, and greater opportunities for empowerment- all factors in potentially increasing life-satisfaction and happiness (Diener, Suh, Lucas and Smith 1999). In *Effect of Modernization on Kuwaiti Women*, Meleis (1982) explores the effects that rapid modernization has had on Kuwaiti women, who have been confronted with both the new educational and occupational opportunities that have come with modernization, and the conservative social rules of the traditional Middle Eastern cultural norms. A sample of 300 Kuwaiti women, ages 18-40, of differing educational, occupational, and socioeconomic backgrounds were interviewed. The researchers set to observe psychological symptoms and subjective evaluation of happiness in these women. The article describes how Kuwaiti women are faced with the conflicting views of traditional Middle Eastern gender roles and the new values intrinsic to modernization. The researchers found that the women who had obtained more education tended to participate significantly more in family decisions, tended to be happier, and manifested fewer psychosomatic symptoms and complaints. Meleis writes, "educated women perceive themselves as being happier, perhaps because with the available resources, greater involvement in decision making and wider opportunities for socialization are all prompted by educational mobility" (1982:969). So, the study showed that the women who had gained more knowledge through education ended up being happier, perhaps not directly, but due to the increased opportunities that came with increased knowledge. Campbell et al. (1976) found that intelligence was one of the strongest predictors of well-

being. According to Diener, it seems likely that the relation of intelligence to SWB will depend on the degree to which intelligent people excel in society and the degree to which intelligent people share higher expectations that counterbalance their advantages.

Evidence seems to support the idea that people who have more knowledge through education are happier

Critique of Knowledge Argument

There are several counter-arguments that can be brought against the argument that more knowledge leads to a greater sense of happiness. First, learning almost always inevitably leads to certain kinds of stress on a person which may take away from a person's overall sense of happiness. Although academic induced stresses can be a result of a highly competitive and individualized environment, we cannot ignore the fact that suicide rates are alarmingly high at elite universities in the United States such as Cornell University and MIT. We can say similar things about the effects of education on a person's future quality of life and sense of happiness. Studies of education argue that education provides more opportunities for success and empowerment, ultimately leading to greater life satisfaction and happiness. However, these studies do not take into account that other factors are included in contributing to one's quality of life. For example, factors such as a student's race, socioeconomic background and gender all can either be stepping stones for one kind of person while obstacles for another kind of person in the pursuit of greater happiness.

In regards to the argument for sense of accomplishment and social change

leading to happiness, there is no guarantee that social change will always be brought about. And with the inevitable failures that come along the way comes inevitable disappointment. Disappointment rarely leads to immediate happiness. Overall, we find that more knowledge usually leads to more choices, which means more time spent thinking and stressing. Although a greater sense of happiness may eventually result in the future, the time spent thinking and stressing most definitely will not contribute to happiness unless the person is incredibly learned and knows how to deal with this kind of stress.

Conclusion

First, our studies lead us to believe that it may appear rather presumptuous of us to be siding with either ignorance or knowledge given the limited amount of research that has been done. Still, we believe there is enough evidence supporting that knowledge is more favorable than ignorance. We acknowledge that ignorant people *can* be happy. However, our evidence leads us to believe that happiness is much more profound with knowledge than ignorance and the sadness with knowledge is still better than the top experience of ignorance; as a result knowledge is *true* bliss.

We look to Mill to frame our sociological thinking behind our conclusion. According to Mill, to be Socrates means you have higher capacities, or a much larger threshold. The higher pleasures in life are "qualitatively more enjoyable than lower pleasures" (Theo Todma 2007:5). With what some sociologists refer to as top experience, exposure to higher pleasures increases opportunities for happiness, but also

increases the risk for unhappiness. But for a fool, he has a limited experience of higher pleasures and has a much smaller threshold for happiness. Though easily made happy, some would argue that Socrates is happier because of his greater enjoyment of the higher pleasures in life. When Mill wrote "better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied" in *Utilitarianism* (Theo Todma 2007:1), he was arguing that though Socrates is dissatisfied, he can pleasurablely remember his past top experiences as well as anticipate those for future enjoyment. In this situation, those of us who are Socrates would pity the fool being content and happy with playing in a puddle unable to see the beach, or a scribbled drawing not knowing what a work of art is.

If we apply this to the idea of choice between having knowledge and being ignorant, then we are inclined to go with Mill and agree that those who are ignorant do not really know it is like to not be ignorant. They have no effective way of comparing the different ways in which their quality of life is affected because they simply don't know. Furthermore, the limited research studies done show that reality, there are more positive arguments for knowledge as opposed to arguments for knowledge as opposed to positive arguments for ignorance. The studies done show that arguments for ignorance are really arguments against too much knowledge with not so much focus on the positives of ignorance.

This theory itself presents one of the main limitations of our research topic. The question is, how do you judge someone who is ignorant? Someone who is ignorant can claim to be happy and they very well may be happy because they do not know better. Ignorant people will rarely admit that they are ignorant. Much of our conclusions have

been drawn on inferences. Ignorant people cannot really effectively argue for ignorance because they cannot say they have been on both sides. The reverse is not true.

Knowledgeable people can talk about both perspectives because one can be ignorant before becoming knowledgeable.

Our research is slightly biased because most studies about ignorance and happiness hold a perspective in favor of knowledge. The nature of ignorance is a difficult and abstract concept to measure and assess. It may appear rather presumptuous of us to be siding with either ignorance or knowledge given the limited amount of research that has been done. Still, we believe there is enough evidence to believe that the argument for knowledge is stronger.

Table 1

Cases	Knowledge Leads to Happiness	Ignorance Leads to Happiness
Education	✓	
Insight	✓	
Political Affiliation		✓
Wealth of Choice		✓
Social Change/Activism	✓	
Media		✓
Negative Information	✓	
Impending Disasters		✓

Table 2

Pro Knowledge	Pro Ignorance
Knowledge of ability for social change =	Lower level of responsibility/lower stress, less negative feelings
More general knowledge leads to more happiness	Conservatives think less = no stress, simplicity in thinking
Education leads to greater opportunities for improving ones quality of life	Ignorance of wealth of options and choice = fewer expectations and less disappointment
Insight/Self-Reflection contributes to person's subjective well-being	Disassociation from impending doom/less stress, happiness
Negative information leads to less anxiety and ultimately more happiness	

References

- Diener, Ed, Eunkook M Suh, Richard E. Lucas, and Heidi L. Smith. 1999. "Subjective Well-being: Three Decades of Progress." *Psychological Bulletin* 125:276-302.
- Ecological Problems. 2008. "Is global warming serious problem? What do people think?" Retrieved February 23, 2009 (<http://ecologicalproblems.blogspot.com/2008/03/is-global-warming-serious-problem-what.html>).
- Henn, Jamie. 2008. "Ninety Percent of Young People Want Action on Climate Change." Retrieved February 23, 2009 (<http://itsgettinghotinhere.org/2008/10/24/ninety-percent-of-young-people-want-action-on-climate-change/>).
- Kay, Robin H. 2008. "Exploring the relationship between emotions and the acquisition of computer knowledge." *Computers & Education* 50:1269.
- Lyke, J.A. 2009. Insight, but not self-reflection, is related to subjective well-being. *Personality and Individual Differences* 46:66-70.
- Meleis, Afaf I. 1982. "Effect of modernization on Kuwaiti women." *Social Science & Medicine* 16:965-970
- Napier, Jaime L and John Jost. 2008. "Why are conservatives happier than liberals?" *Psychological Science* 19:565-572
- Pertersen, Larry R., Anita Roy. 1985. "Religiosity, anxiety, and meaning and purpose: Religion's consequences for psychological well-being." *Review of Religious Research* 27:49-62.
- Schwartz, Barry. 2005. "The Paradox of Choice". *TED*, 2006.
http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/barry_schwartz_on_the_paradox_of_choice.h

tml

Shani, Y., O. Tykocinski, and M. Zeelenberg. 2008. "When ignorance is not bliss: How feelings of discomfort promote the search for negative information." *Journal of Economic Psychology*. 29:643-653.

Theo Todma. 2007. "Does Mill successfully explain why it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied?" *Ethics Essays*. 1-6.

Veenhoven, R. 2000. "The four qualities of life." *Journal of Happiness Studies*. 1:1-39.

-----, 2008. "Questions on happiness." *Happiness in nations, introductory text*. 1-13.