How do Reports on happiness serve the self? The declarative aspect of subjective well-being

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Background: The present study is based on a theoretical model that regards subjective well-being (SWB) as a dynamic system, intended to promote a favorable psychological environment in the face of a hostile world (Shmotkin, 2005). This system operates through several mental contexts, among them the declarative context, wherein reports on SWB promote central self-motives (declarative functions, such as self-presentation, or self-expression). The data for the present work were collected in two different studies, with the aim of validating and examining the concept of the declarative functions in self-reports of SWB, under different levels of self-exposure (anonymously versus publicly), and their connections with personality traits.

Method: The first study is based on three groups of participants who filled out questionnaires on declarative functions, SWB measures, and personality variables based on the five factor model, between the years 2000-2002 (N = 1698). The second study is based on four different groups, who filled out the same questionnaires, between the years 2007-2009 (N = 650), and were randomly assigned to one of two study conditions: an anonymous condition, versus a public condition under which participants gave identifying information and their self-reports were exposed to the research team.

Results: In the first study, the declarative functions revealed significant connections with SWB and with personality measures, and were found to mediate the links between personality and SWB. In the second study, no significant differences were found between the two conditions, as reporting on one’s SWB publicly did not have direct connections with participants’ self-reports. An interaction effect was however revealed between condition of self-report and personality measures, so that for participants who rated on conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extroversion (personality measures usually associated with high SWB), the public condition was associated with higher reports of SWB. People who scored high on neuroticism (usually associated with low SWB), reported lower SWB under the public condition.

Conclusions: The findings of the present study suggest that SWB is a dynamic and interpersonal process, associated with personality measures, and regulated by self-motives in the form of declarative functions. These declarative processes likely play a role in one’s ability to maintain positive levels of SWB even in the face of adverse life situations.

The Hostile-world scenario among gay men and lesbian women along the life span

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Background: Gay men and lesbian women may meet multiple life hardships by belonging to a minority that largely suffers from stigma, prejudice, and discrimination. Key perspectives on this context are Meyer's minority stress theory (2003) and Herek's sexual stigma theory (2009) which suggested a link between the mentioned difficulties among sexual minorities and psychological distress along with the adoption of avoidant standpoint to the world, which is perceived as discriminating and hostile. In a series of few studies, we have also offered a corresponding perspective, exploring the relevance of the hostile-world scenario (HWS) concept (images of actual or potential self-perceived threats to one’s life or more broadly, to one’s physical or mental integrity) to the lesbian and gay men population. First, we delineated the specific HWS items that were found more characteristic to the vulnerability of young gay men and lesbians that were individually matched with heterosexual controls. Secondly, we explored these items' associations with mental health indicators. While adopting a life-span developmental perspective, in the current study we explored the HWS among Israeli middle-aged and older gay men in comparison to heterosexual men, hypothesizing that HWS vulnerability among middle and older gay men would decrease in comparison to the HWS vulnerability that was detected among younger gay men populations. The rationale for this hypothesis relied on previous studies showing successful aging, adaptation and resiliency in the aging process of gay men and lesbians.

Method: We sampled 152 middle-aged and older gay men (Mean age 57) and 120 heterosexual men (Mean age 62) which filled questionnaires assessing the hostile world scenario, depressive symptoms, anxiety, subjective well-being, meaning in life, and personality.

Results: Gay men were more concerned with only 3 of the 25 distinguishing HWS items that were previously detected among young population. Also, no significant moderation effects by sexual orientation were found in the relationships of the HWS scale, adapted to gay population, with depression, anxiety, subjective well-being, meaning in life, and the Big Five traits.

Conclusions: Perceptions and expectations of adversities that gay men were likely to adopt in early adulthood, when emotionally charged in processes of sexual identity formation, may not necessarily preoccupy older gay men. It might be suggested that HWS-related vulnerability of early age within the gay population declines in older age. Explanations for the results are offered, leaning on successful aging processes among middle-aged and older gay population. The results may have clinical implications for mental health professionals who work with older gay population.

Aging is not simple, or is it? The association of psychological flexibility and the hostile-world scenario with physical and mental health along adulthood and old age

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Aims: The challenges of aging bring about intricate situations where positive and negative experiences co-occur. Therefore, the capacity to tolerate contradictory experiences is especially relevant for individuals along adulthood and old age (Carstensen et al., 2011). The current study examined the co-occurrence of positive and negative experiences, referred to as psychological flexibility, and its associations with physical and mental health among older adults in Israel.
Method: Two thousand and six hundred participants (aged 37-102, $M = 67.36$, $SD = 10.43$) were interviewed in an Israeli nationally-representative sample as part of the third wave of the SHARE project (Survey of Health, Aging and Retirement in Europe). These face-to-face interviews included measures of physical and mental health. The following statistical analyses controlled for socio-demographic variables.

Results: Psychological flexibility (measured as similar levels of positive and negative experiences, such as life satisfaction and depressive symptoms) associated with better physical and mental health (indicated by less functional limitations, lower comorbidity, anxiety, memory limitations and loneliness, and more socially-oriented activities). Moreover, the hostile-world scenario (HWS, images of existential threats to one’s integrity) associated with worse physical and mental health. Lastly, psychological flexibility associated with better physical and mental health in the presence of higher levels of the HWS. Therefore, in the face of adversity, psychological flexibility became more relevant to the physical and mental health of middle age and older adults.

Conclusions: Based on an Israeli nationally-representative sample of middle age and older adults, the results of the present study point to the adaptive role of psychological flexibility in the face of existential threats. The results expand the theoretical model of the pursuit of happiness in a hostile world (Shmotkin, 2005, 2011; Shmotkin & Shrira, 2012, 2013) that delineates the dialectical relationship between the happiness-promoting systems (subjective well-being and meaning in life) and the HWS. In light of these results, psychological flexibility may be seen as a link between the model’s components and health indicators vis-à-vis existential threats. These results may direct the attention of researchers, therapists and counselors to the adaptive qualities of psychological flexibility in the face of the challenges inherent in adulthood and old age.

A body of dialectics: The perspective of the dynamic-adaptational model of the pursuit of happiness in a hostile world in probing into physical self-integrity

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Aims: The current study seeks to advance the understanding of the complex process of adaptation to physical disabilities by expanding the dynamic-adaptational model of the pursuit of happiness in a hostile world (Shmotkin, 2005) with a new conception of physical self-integrity. Physical self-integrity incorporates an objective dimension, namely physical self-functioning (PSF), and a subjective dimension, namely physical self-concept (PSC). Both of these dimensions constitute an experience of wholeness in the individual’s identification with her or his physical body. This work extends studies of body image, relating to the manner in which we experience our body, and the thoughts, wishes, and feelings that the body arouses. The topic of body image among older adults has been little studied to date, especially among individuals with physical disabilities and mobility difficulties. Body image is highly relevant among those who use mobility aids, which make their physical disabilities visible and affect their subjective and social image. The model guiding this work is dialectical in nature and depicts two systems in the individual’s sense of happiness: subjective well-being (SWB) and meaning in life (MIL). Both systems serve as self-adaptive agents that moderate the complementary system of the hostile-world scenario (HWS), which integrates one’s perceived threats to one’s integrity. Thus, in situations of increased HWS, the moderation may take a form of joint activity in which SWB
and MIL are mutually amplified or show a form of compensation, whereby one system produces a stronger effect while the other system produces a weaker effect.

**Method**: Two hundred and twenty five participants, aged 50+, with physical disabilities were interviewed in 2015-17 (physical disabilities that had occurred during military service were not included). It was a convenience sample of Hebrew-speaking Israelis who were recruited all over the country. The selection criterion of adults with physical disabilities was the constant use of mobility aids such as wheelchair, crutches, walker, or walking stick. The data were collected by online self-report questionnaires enquiring about the participants' mental and physical health.

**Results**: After controlling for socio-demographic variables and the weighted effects of mobility aid type and reliance on it, the results showed that among the physically disabled, body image was positively correlated to *life satisfaction, positive affect, purpose in life, and personal growth*. Additionally, body image was negatively correlated to negative affect as well as to negative engagement with the HWS. Notably, the association between body image and MIL was positive — and grew stronger as the negative engagement with the HWS increased whereas the association between body image and SWB was also positive but grew weaker as the negative engagement with the HWS increased.

**Conclusions**: The results of this study point to the adaptive and dialectic role of body image in the face of existential threats, particularly among disadvantageous groups prone to unique adversities. These findings may allow researchers and therapists to examine and implement the concept of body image as an important tool for overcoming individual and social challenges through adulthood.

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**From disruption of core beliefs to shattering world assumptions: Reactions to terror attacks from an international perspective**

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**Introduction**: The purpose of the study was to examine how terrorist attacks are related to changes in core beliefs and worldviews. Are there common denominators and how they are related to mental health measures? This contemporary question is more relevant than ever. The world is not only a global village but also an arena for inflicting fear and terror by via large scale attacks. In a series of studies, we examined the impact of the terror attacks in France in 2015, United States in 2016, and the UK in 2017. These attacks lead to an inquiry whether it is possible to identify vulnerable risk group following terrorist attacks?

**Methods**: Data collected from four studies involving over 4000 subjects. These studies were conducted using intent panel surveys. The sampling approximated the general population based on age and gender. These epidemiological studies took place shortly after the terrorist attacks, in contrast to other studies that examined the population reactions months and years after the event.

**Findings**: One of the dominant risk factors found to be related to mental health indices is worldviews. This factor is a common thread throughout various studies and emphasizes the psychological importance of the individual's worldview.

**Conclusions**: The findings point to worldviews as being significantly associated with post-traumatic stress disorder and psychological distress. These studies are consistent with the theoretical perception of psychological trauma. They back up the clinical perception that elements strengthening and empowering worldviews should be part of the existing treatment for psychological trauma.
A matter of will: The moderating effects of subjective distance to death on the relationship between posttraumatic-stress-symptoms and the will-to-live

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**Background:** The present study examined how posttraumatic-stress-symptoms presented after prolonged traumatic exposure to rocket attacks are related to the perception of the worthiness of life among individuals in the second half of their lives. Additionally, it was questioned whether the subjective evaluation of the time one has left to live affects this relationship.

**Methods:** Using an in-region random digit dialing methodology, phone calls made to residents in the south of Israel, we sampled 339 community-dwelling older adults (age range 50-90; $M=65.44, SD=9.77$) in Wave 1, 170 of whom were interviewed again in Wave 2 about a year later. Participants completed a phone questionnaire on posttraumatic-stress-symptoms, subjective nearness-to-death, and will-to-live.

**Results:** The cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses results showed that higher levels of posttraumatic stress symptoms were positively related to higher will-to-live in both waves, among individuals who felt further away from death, while higher levels of posttraumatic stress symptoms were negatively related or unrelated to lower will-to-live among those who felt close to death in Waves 1 and 2, respectively.

**Conclusion:** The findings emphasize that perceptions regarding one's future perspective may affect the quality of the relationship between posttraumatic-stress-symptoms and will-to-live. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Intergenerational transmission of the Holocaust: Current issues and new insights

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**Aims:** Can traumatic event experienced by the previous generation affect the aging process of the next generation? This fascinating question is most relevant to many offspring of Holocaust survivors who are now beginning to face old age. There are hundreds of thousands of offspring of Holocaust survivors in Israel. Most of them present general resilience, but there is also evidence that some of them suffer from heightened physical and mental morbidity. Therefore, we need to understand who is affected by intergenerational transmission, under what conditions and which aspects of functioning and wellbeing are most affected.

**Methods:** Findings come from five studies that together included approximately 1,500 interviews: the Israeli component of the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe, two studies that focused on adult offspring of Holocaust survivors, and two more studies that assessed dyads of adult offspring and their aging parents.

**Results:** Parental exposure to the Holocaust per se was not related to less successful aging among offspring, indicating that in most cases, an impressive resilience continues across the generations in families of Holocaust survivors. Nevertheless, offspring of Holocaust
survivors suffer from higher physical morbidity, perceive their aging more negatively and experience higher filial anxiety when serving as caregivers to their parents under certain conditions. Among these conditions, one can enumerate offspring who (1) suffer from psychological distress and symptoms of secondary traumatization; (2) report that they experienced intrusive parental communication about the Holocaust; and (3) belong to families in which the parents suffered from an elevated level of posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms.

Conclusions: The findings suggest that most offspring manifest resilience while others are at a high risk of suffering from physical morbidity and mental distress at the second half of life. It is therefore possible to infer that under certain conditions the trauma of the Holocaust lingers across the lifespan of generations through psychological, biological and behavioral mechanisms. Therefore, there is a need to develop interdisciplinary theoretical models and therapeutic interventions in order to advance successful aging among offspring of Holocaust survivors who show vulnerability.

A bag full of happiness and sadness: A journey into the soul's domains

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The study of human happiness and human suffering has inescapable roots in philosophical considerations. Thus, most essential was the ancient philosophical distinction between happiness as a pleasant or hedonistic sentiment versus happiness as a virtue or self-fulfillment. This distinction was translated by modern psychology into the differential conceptions of subjective well-being versus meaning in life. The pursuit of happiness is constantly tested by undermining, and possibly devastating, experiences of misery and trauma. This clash is the basis of the model entitled, the pursuit of happiness in a hostile world (Shmotkin, 2005, 2011; Shmotkin & Shrira, 2012, 2013). Adopting a dynamic and dialectical viewpoints, this model asserts that people are constantly immersed in ever-active interactions between happiness-promoting systems and the hostile-world scenario (HWS). The HWS designates an image of actual or potential threats to one's life or, more broadly, to one's physical and mental integrity. The HWS is nurtured by apperceptions of possible catastrophes and inflictions, such as accidents, violence, natural disasters, wars, illnesses, abuse, breakup of close relationships, loss of beloved ones, aging, and death. Studies show differing patterns of results in various groups regarding negative engagement with HWS representations (when the encounter with existential threats decreases the individual's sense of competence) as well as regarding positive engagement with HWS representations (when the encounter with existential threats increases the individual's sense of competence). Thus, despite its threatening contents, the HWS – when adequately activated - has a basically adaptive function to monitor imminent dangers and to alert the individual into preparatory and self-enhancing steps in the face of adversity.

The pursuit of happiness in a hostile world becomes more challenging along aging. Old age is actually a paradigm for a universal state of life in which resilience and vulnerability are constantly juxtaposed and intertwined. While trying to sustain the happiness-promoting systems in this period of losses and decline, the old person's dilemma is sharpened: How can he or she wither and yet bloom? Old age is also a paradigm of the individual's attitude toward what he or she could no longer achieve in life. Authors and artists who understood this paradigmatic nature of old age have managed to produce, already at
young age, the finest works about old age. Such works indeed show that one does not have to be old in order to grasp the experience of old age.

The studies that attempted to validate the HWS model were based on two types of data: First, data from the Israeli branch of the Survey of Health, Aging and Retirement in Europe (SHARE-Israel), which present a nationwide representative sample of Israelis aged 50 and over; second, data from samples of unique target groups in the Israeli population. The participants completed questionnaires assessing the HWS as well as other variables related to particular life experiences and diverse physical and mental health outcomes. These target groups included, among others: Holocaust survivors, people living in poverty, people with physical disability, bereaved parents, Kibbutz members, volunteers in mental health hotlines, and members of sexual minorities (homosexuals and bisexuals) in adulthood and old age. All these groups represent various existentialist challenges of broad humanistic significance.

These studies have delineated certain psychological mechanisms by which the happiness-promoting systems and the HWS seek to reach an adaptive balance in volatile and irregular life conditions (as in acute situations of danger or distress). Thus, subjective well-being and meaning in life may act as complementary systems (amplifying each other by a higher-than-normal correlation between themselves) or compensatory systems (when either one is low, the other one takes a stronger role in relating to the individual's adaptive functioning). Such dynamic mechanisms ameliorate the apparent contradiction between the intimidating and merciless world represented by the HWS on the one hand, and people's efforts to sustain generally happy and meaningful lives on the other hand. In some of these studies, mental structures, such as time perspective and the individual life's narrative, had a prominent role in the adaptive balance of the happiness-promoting systems in the face of distress and agony. Notably, an adaptive balance between happiness and suffering is often not achieved, with data indicating depletion, rather than compensation, among the psychological systems. Overall, studies of this kind may address not only questions about promoting happiness in the face of present challenges, but also broader questions of whether individuals stay forever chained to the lingering impact of their past adversities.